

# Coming out differently

## *Making queer youth known in Scandinavian screen fiction*

ANDERS LYSNE

DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION SCIENCE AND MEDIA STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN, NORWAY

### ABSTRACT

Posing the question of how Scandinavian screen fiction makes queer adolescence known, this chapter provides an analysis of how young audiences are addressed with issues of queerness in Scandinavian screen media produced for youth. Combining queer theory and genre studies of youth fiction in film and television, the chapter analyses a key trope in queer youth narratives: the representation of the coming-out story. The chapter offers a close analysis of two ostensibly different youth screen media texts that nevertheless share some significant representational strategies: the hugely successful Swedish youth film *Fucking Åmål* [*Show Me Love*] and the lesser known small Danish youth drama series *Puls* [*Pulse*]. The analysis explores how Scandinavian youth screen media produce knowledge of queer youth by negotiating and challenging conventional narrative representations of coming out through thematic engagement with stifling normativity, characters that embody queer happiness, and open endings that accentuate potential and possibility.

**KEYWORDS:** Scandinavian youth fiction, youth films, youth drama series, queer representation, coming-out narrative, coming of age

---

Lysne, A. (2023). Coming out differently: Making queer youth known in Scandinavian screen fiction. In P. M. Jensen, E. N. Redvall, & C. L. Christensen (Eds.), *Audiovisual content for children and adolescents in Scandinavia: Production, distribution, and reception in a multiplatform era* (pp. 43–60). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855817-3>

## Introduction

In recent years, queer narratives have been experiencing a visibility surge in youth screen media (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015; Mitchell, 2015; Monaghan, 2016, 2021a, 2022). In 2016, the gay love story between Isak and Even in season three of the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK's teen online drama *SKAM* [*Shame*] turned the already successful drama into an "international cult phenomenon" (Sundet, 2019). With subsequent international adaptations of the series further proliferating its popular queer storyline, several representations of non-heteronormative adolescents have followed across youth screen media productions. In 2018, the high school comedy *Love, Simon* became the first same-sex teen romance produced by a major Hollywood studio, with queer youth coming-of-age stories being propagated in teen-targeting films like *Alex Strangelove*, *Booksmart*, *The Half of It*, and *Three Months* and in critically lauded art films like *Call Me By Your Name*, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, and *Moonlight*. Perhaps most pre-eminently, queer youth coming-of-age stories have been included in the streaming series format with shows like *Sex Education*; *Never Have I Ever*; *We Are Who We Are*; *Love, Victor*; *Genera+ion*; and *Heartstopper*, to name but a few. These titles evidently reflect the historical global stronghold the US has on youth culture (although *Sex Education* and *Heartstopper* are of course British productions). However, as the case of *Shame* exemplifies, the growing visibility of queer youth in contemporary screen media representations is not an Anglo-American phenomenon alone. Internationally, films like *The Wound* from South Africa, *Girl* from Belgium, *And Then We Danced* from Georgia, and *Summer of '85* from France all featured non-heteronormative youth and reached wide audiences via festivals, art cinemas, and streaming platforms. Simultaneously, teen dramas like Netflix's Spanish hit show *Elite*, the Russian series *Here I Come* (which was distributed on YouTube for 18+ audiences to bypass the country's anti-gay censorship), and the Swedish Netflix drama *Young Royals* have been lauded for their thematic engagement with queer adolescence (Peeters, 2021; Scott, 2021; Solari, 2018).

Visibility is important because it contributes to the formation of identities, affects values, and influences attitudes, perspectives, and views on life. But as Parsemain (2019: 20) has reminded us, visibility is no guarantee of progress, and although queer people are seen, "they are not necessarily *known*". Scholars have argued that the teen genre has particular significance for the young audiences they address, and the possibilities of the genre to influence processes of identity formation have been emphasised (Meyer & Wood, 2013; Monaghan, 2021b). Knowledge about sex, gender, and sexuality is crucial for young people trying to figure out who they are and coming to terms with their identity. For queer young people in particular, studies have shown how popular culture narratives and entertainment media representation can func-

tion as a pedagogical space of hope and resistance in cases where institutional contexts like school and home may falter (Dell & Boyer, 2015; Parsemain, 2019). This invariably highlights the need to move beyond the question of quantitative visibility and examine *how* queer youth are being made known in screen media narratives.

This chapter follows the call of recent studies of queer youth screen media (Clarke, 2017; Monaghan, 2021a, 2021b; Parsemain, 2019) to investigate how queer identity and sexuality are being represented in contemporary youth screen fiction. With the US generally remaining the focus of most studies of youth screen media, due in part to the vast global presence of American film and television, this chapter expands the geographical perspective to Scandinavia to analyse how contemporary Scandinavian screen media makes queer adolescence known. Pertaining to what is arguably one of the most significant representational tropes in queer youth screen media, namely the coming-out narrative, in this chapter, I analyse how the experience of coming out as a key aspect of growing up queer is constructed as a narrative trope in Scandinavian youth screen media. Beginning by recognising that scholarship on queer youth screen media has pertained mostly to an Anglo-America context, I first engage with recent literature to tease out some prevalent generic conventions of the coming-out narrative in screen media representations of queer youth. Secondly, through a close analysis of coming out in the immensely successful Swedish youth film *Fucking Åmål* [*Show Me Love*] (Moodysson, 1998), and the small Danish youth drama series *Puls* [*Pulse*] (Føns & Lundme, 2021), I explore how these two seemingly vastly disparate examples of Scandinavian youth screen media share similar representational strategies in making queer youth known. Through their thematic engagement with stifling normativity, depictions of main characters that embody queer happiness, and open narrative endings that accentuate potential and possibility rather than finality and conclusion, *Show Me Love* and *Pulse* are examples of how queer narratives in Scandinavian youth screen media negotiate and challenge conventional representations of coming out that have been popularised in an Anglo-American context.

## Queer youth screen media: A note on terminology

To explore how youth screen media in Scandinavia address audiences with queer experiences of coming out, three key concepts should be elaborated. The first key term is “queer”, which refers to identities, desires, and practices outside of the heteronormative. As an intentionally ambiguous term, queerness is characterised by “its resistance to definition” (Jagose, 1996: 1) and emphasis on “the slipperiness of meaning and the transgression of categories and boundaries” (McCann & Monaghan, 2020: 1). Queer signifies a form of alterity that challenges the heteronormative belief in a natural alignment

between biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual desire (Parsemain, 2019). Emerging as a slogan in the 1980s activism around HIV and AIDS, and reclaiming what had up until then been used as a homophobic slur, the term's original connotation of strange, odd, abnormal, and perplexing also indicates different sexual practices and gender identifications that include, as well as extend beyond, the gender and sexual identities, expressions, and orientations captured by the umbrella term LGBTQIA+. Imagined as "a rallying cry against the regimes of the normal" (Love, 2007: 157), the conceptual emphasis of "queer" on challenging fixed boundaries and categories of gender and sexuality posits an inherently radical quality. However, employing the term queerness to denote the challenging, resisting, or transgressing of heteronormative identities and desires and practices shared by LGBTQIA+ youth also necessitates acknowledging their differences. As sociologist Mary Robinson (2019: 5) noted, same-sex and trans experiences are not things that all LGBTQIA+ youth have in common, even if queerness is. Settling on the term queer, I follow scholars like Driver (2007) and Monaghan (2016) in acknowledging how its conceptual slipperiness and indefinability can easily run the risk of reducing a diversity of sexual and gender identities to a bland cultural sameness that blinds us to the struggles of particular LGBTQIA+ youth (Driver, 2007; Monaghan, 2016), and to the fact that queerness always intersects with other identity aspects such as gender, race, class, and ability (Parsemain, 2019: 19). Despite these conceptual imperfections, however, "queer" is valuable because it offers a framework to explore how Scandinavian youth fiction makes non-heteronormative youth known.

Secondly, I opt specifically for "youth" and "adolescent" rather than "teen". Whereas these terms are frequently used interchangeably in scholarship, I align with scholars like Clarke (2017) and Driscoll (2011) in arguing that the terms youth and adolescence are more appropriate than the term teen for a genre whose preoccupation with themes of liminality and maturation necessarily extends beyond "an identity mapping onto the years thirteen to nineteen" (Driscoll, 2011: 2).

Finally, in employing "screen media", I follow Monaghan (2016) by including youth narratives on all forms of film and television screens, analogue or digital. Despite important medium-specific differences, such as television's arguable advantage in developing narratives and characterisation (Davis, 2004), contemporary youth culture, as noted by Driscoll, is characterised by an increasing "cross-media generic conversation" in that "teen film now far more dramatically speaks to and draws from other media forms" (as cited in Shary, 2014: 304–305) with the result that any screen media "reference to youth brings with it the capacity to 'become' or 'perform' teen film" (Driscoll, 2011: 139). Given that audiovisual youth fictions frequently target the same audience and deal with similar themes and narrative motifs about growing

up and coming of age across media forms, I have chosen two media texts as case examples that arguably represent the farthest ends of the spectrum in the landscape of contemporary Scandinavian youth screen media. Whereas the first, *Show Me Love*, is a critically and commercially successful Swedish youth film from the turn of the millennium, the second, *Pulse*, is a youth drama series from Denmark, released in 2020, and whose critical and popular success have remained miniscule. Considering these youth fictions alongside each other nevertheless highlights the central aim of this chapter, namely, to analyse how contemporary Scandinavian youth screen media have sought to make queer youth known through negotiating and challenging conventions that have governed screen media narratives of young people coming out queer on screen.

## The coming-out story in youth screen media

Many youth screen fictions can generically be defined by what may broadly be termed a “sexual coming of age narrative” (Smith, 2017), understood as stories that explore processes of self-discovery and acceptance in which love, sexuality, and romantic relationships play a significant part. For queer youth fictions, coming of age is predominantly a coming-out narrative (Davis, 2004; Mitchell, 2015; Monaghan, 2016, 2021a). According to television scholar Glyn Davis (2004: 131), coming out occupies a crucial position in most narrativisations of queer youth, because it represents the first experience of a queer character of self-consciously taking on a new, specific identity, and it is typically a moment that proves the most emotionally resonant with the character as well as the audience. As a process of claiming a distinct identity, coming out is never a singular act. Rather, it can entail a variety of meanings and actions, such as acknowledging same-sex desire, acting sexually on these desires, claiming non-heterosexuality in private, or publicly proclaiming it (Bronski, 2000: 20). However, in models of sexual development, coming out has historically been viewed as a sort of final stone to overturn, “occurring in the last stages that needs to be overcome before one settles happily on a homosexual or bisexual identity” (McLean, 2007: 151), and sketching a linear process from confusion to acceptance. Culturally, coming out became an explicitly political act during the Gay Liberation movement of 1960s and 1970s, during which it became as much about claiming an identity as an act of coming out on the streets to protest and advocate for fundamental rights (Monaghan, 2021a: 353). As such, the political function and the popular appeal of the coming-out narrative are intrinsically interweaved. As a representation of an individual moving out of a “normal” heterosexual subject position to inhabit a position of the “Other”, the coming-out story is always political. At the same time, it is the inherent celebration of liberation from societal oppression that constitutes the narrative’s main popular appeal (Monaghan, 2021a).

With the growing visibility of queer characters and themes in youth screen media, scholars have increasingly considered coming out as a significant narrative trope in youth screen media (Bronski, 2000; Driver, 2007; McWilliam, 2021; Mitchell, 2015; Monaghan, 2016, 2021a). Given the dominant global presence of the US in youth screen media, the focus of these studies has remained significantly on a US or Anglo-American context, and as such, their insights may not be readily applied to queer narratives in youth screen media beyond this context. However, by surveying this literature, it is possible to tease out some significant shared conventions of the coming-out story that may serve as a blueprint. As I aim to show in this chapter, these may aid not only a general understanding of its generic form in and of itself, but also offer a framework to explore how youth narratives of coming out are negotiated in a different context, like Scandinavia.

## **Narrative conventions of coming out**

Drawing on narrative analysis of the coming-out storylines of queer characters Kurt in *Glee* and Rickie in *My So-Called Life* – the latter frequently cited as the first character to come out in youth-centric television (Davis, 2004) – Whitney Monaghan (2021a: 354) has argued that the classical coming-out narrative in youth screen media plays out in three stages. These stages, Monaghan argued, move along a linear narrative development, going from initial emotional confusion, through attempts to fit in, to the ultimate revelation of an authentic queer self. Typically beginning with a recognition of difference, the first stage sees the queer character generally understood as straight within the diegesis but coded as queer for the viewing audience. Most frequently, this coding of difference is achieved through strategies of *mise-en-scène*, such as costuming and performance. The second stage then develops from the initial narrative emphasis of difference with efforts by the character to fit in. Typically, the character's rejection of difference is achieved through attempts at "passing" as straight within the normative framework of the diegesis by entering a heterosexual relationship as a means of accessing an easier life (Monaghan, 2021a: 354). Thematically, this passing-as-straight strategy is employed to reflect belonging as the central existential and social concern for the queer character. Lastly, in the third and final stage of Monaghan's understanding of the classical coming-out narrative, the conflicts that ensue from the character's attempts to pass as straight inevitably lead to a resolution through an emotional saying-it-out-loud moment – whether in the form of a public declaration, an intimate confession, or as a disclosure by another character.

Surveying the coming-out narrative in Australian youth films, Kelly McWilliam (2021) noted how the introduction of homophobia frequently serves as a queer-specific rite of passage in coming-out narratives and functions as the main challenge to the maturation process that structures coming of age

for young queer characters. Screen media narratives generally rely on at least some externalisation of conflict. For coming out, which is primarily the result of a complex internal process, homophobia primarily tends to be represented as an external factor in the coming-out narrative, either as a feature of the peer group or a family member (see also Bronski, 2000: 20). Often, though, homophobia appears as both an external and internal antagonist. Whereas the internal struggle can serve as an important means of fostering empathy in audiences, the externalisation of homophobia through specific characters can provide a context for conveying what it means to grow up queer in a heteronormative society (McWilliam, 2021: 254). Further, McWilliam pointed out how coming-out narratives can be distinguished as queer coming-of-age stories in their thematic focus on the transition from one sexual identity to another. Even as sexuality remains a vital aspect in most screen representations of growing up, the coming-out narrative departs from the coming-of-age story's emphasis on identity formation in general by focusing on it specifically as a transition from one sexual identity to another. This distinction between coming of age as identity formation in general and as transition from one identity to another is important, because it highlights how coming out as a coming-of-age narrative may propagate the premise that "one should realize what one is to live one's true sexual identity" (McWilliam, 2021: 254). Thus, as Monaghan (2021a: 354) has added, coming-out narratives easily end up reproducing the very societal expectations of stable identity and settling into coherent gender and sexuality that queer theory and queer activists have actively sought to destabilise.

Finally, as the coming-out moment frequently serves as the main climax of the narrative, the very utterance or declaration of identity all too easily ends up "not only an end in itself, but *the* end to this singular narrative", as film scholar Michael Bronski (2000: 20) has phrased it. Expanding on Bronski's argument, scholars like Driver (2007) and Monaghan (2016) have noted how the conventionally repetitive equation of coming out and coming of age in teen fiction complicates the genre's ability to represent the complex aspects of queer adolescence as other than a simplified life-course linearly structured around coming out as the narrative climax. The temporality of coming of age inherently involves an orientation towards the future as a process of overcoming adolescence to become an adult. For Monaghan (2016: 53), this "routinely linking" coming out with coming of age in many queer teen fictions not only leads to the displacement of other possible storylines but also excludes other possible temporalities. Beyond coming out as "the brief moment of visible difference" (Driver, 2007: 58), queer adolescents are simply left with very little to do once the realisation and verbal enunciation of queerness has been completed.

Much of the scholarship on queer representation in youth screen media has focused on the period from the 1990s until the mid 2010s. However, as

detailed in the introduction, recent years have seen a significant increase in depictions of queer youth characters and themes. Even as the coming-out narrative continues to be the dominant frame for narrating queer experiences and identities in youth screen media, as some critics have lamented (Giese, 2018; King, 2022), the recent increase in queer youth visibility has been accompanied by some significant representational changes in the genre. Firstly, with queer youth-centric fictions like *Sex Education*, *Genera+ion*, *We Are Who We Are*, and *Heartstopper* depicting a still wider range of queer youth characters, the genre's traditional "cisgender heteronormativity" has become increasingly challenged (Monaghan, 2021a: 356). Looking at how notions of stability have become "less alluring and more complex" in coming-out narratives, literary scholar Jennifer Mitchell (2015: 457) has argued that the representational tropes of coming out seem increasingly to be less about simply acknowledging the existence of queer subjectivities in a dominantly heteronormative world, and more "about negotiating various queer identities and experiences". Secondly, noting that the coming-out process remains affectively textured by negative emotions like fear and danger, Mitchell argued how recent narratives in young adult literature, as well as in youth screen media, highlight the role of a surrounding support network. Relying less on the trope of the singular queer character confronted with the fraught issue of difference, coming-out narratives increasingly choose instead to frame their young queer characters as existing within broader queer and allied communities, thus making room for an expansion of identities and experiences (Mitchell, 2015: 454).

However, if the enduring stability and stable construction of the coming-out narrative in Anglo-American youth screen media is being increasingly challenged in the recent surge of queer youth presentations, then it has long been anything but straightforward in Scandinavia. In the following section, I explore how the coming-out narrative has been negotiated in a Scandinavian context.

## Passing on straight: *Show Me Love*

Swedish director Lukas Moodyson's debut feature film, *Show Me Love* (Moodysson, 1998), is arguably the most successful and widely known coming-out narrative in Scandinavian cinema. The film centres on the complex friendship, love, and desire between two teenage girls, Agnes and Elin, growing up in a small, conformist Swedish town. Released in 1998, *Show Me Love* was Sweden's "first lesbian coming-out story" (Stenport, 2012: 31). The film was euphorically celebrated by critics, who lauded it as a milestone in Swedish cinema. The film sold more than 900,000 cinema tickets in Sweden, immediately elevating it to the status of a modern classic in Swedish film, and youth cinema at large. As a youth-centric narrative, it



represented a paradigmatic shift in Swedish youth films at the time, partly by signaling a shift in narrative focus from centring predominantly on young male protagonists, rough urban lifestyle, and gang crime, while at the same time announcing the beginning of a wave of Swedish films made for younger audiences by younger directors (Lysne, 2022). As a returning reference point for Swedish and Nordic youth filmmakers, as well as an important addition to the international canon of queer cinema, *Show Me Love* has been thoroughly examined in scholarship within Nordic cinema, queer cinema, and youth cinema, as detailed by Monaghan (2016). Through its unlikely combination of contemporary social realist concerns with issues of class, bullying, suicide, and loneliness; a visual style linking it to the contemporary Danish Dogme 95 movement; a fundamentally uplifting story of self-realisation and first love; and a character gallery and dramaturgical structure that borrows from the American teen genre, the film is characterised by ambiguity on several levels – a point frequently highlighted by scholars. Interrogating how “ambivalence” extends through the film’s production, reception, and thematic and aesthetic form, Anna Stenport (2012: 36) argued that this ambivalence carried all the way to its English title:

[The English title *Show me Love* is] on the one hand, vague and generic – a kind of whitewashing of the intensity of the Swedish title [*Fucking Åmål*]. On the other hand, the English title explicitly labels the film a love story and suggests that love can have a performative element – it can be enacted, demonstrated, and repeated: “shown”.

According to Henderson (2007: 262), the film is essentially an adaptation of the American teen movie, “incorporating the same settings, styles, and structures as those found in numerous Hollywood youth movies”. Yet, it also retains a crucial difference, not just by “shifting subject positions and setting” to Sweden, but most significantly in the sexuality of its protagonists. Henderson argued that the crucial difference “between this film and the sorts of films it borrows from is in the sexuality of the two main characters” (Henderson, 2007: 262). A similar argument that *Show Me Love* queers the teen genre through the inclusion of lesbian protagonists has also been made by Jenny Björklund (2010: 38), who stated that it “fulfills most of the genre expectations of the romantic comedy” but also “challenges and queers the genre”.

However, when viewed through the lens of the current youth screen media landscape, and the challenges and expansions of queer youth narratives in American teen media discussed by Mitchell (2015) and Monaghan (2021a, 2021b), it might be just as clear that the queerness of *Show Me Love* is as much located in its deployment of the coming-out narrative as in the sexuality of its protagonists. That is, what *Show Me Love* represents is not just a queering of the teen genre by focusing on same-sex love and desire between its teenage protagonists, but also just as much a queering of the coming-out narrative itself.

Seemingly complying with conventions from the outset, the film begins with a typical recognition of difference. As the sounds of keys being pressed on a computer are heard, we see Agnes in front of a screen alone in a bedroom writing a secret wish list in her diary. In a familiar shot, or reverse shot structure, the camera focuses on Agnes's face and the computer screen as she writes her three secret wishes: first, to not have a birthday party; second, that Elin will look at her; and third, that Elin will fall in love with her – as she continues to type in capital letters, “I LOVE ELIN!!!!!!” The scene works to gain the viewer immediate intimacy with Agnes by offering insights to her subjectivity while immediately coding her as “different” by sharing her secret articulation of lesbian desire. For Monaghan (2016: 118), the film adheres to the classical coming-out narrative by representing Agnes and Elin as opposites who are drawn together by mutual feelings of dissatisfaction and a profound experience of boredom. However, despite clearly representing differences in socioeconomic backgrounds (Elin from a working-class lower-income home, Agnes with an affluent middle-class background) and personalities (Elin a brazen extrovert, Agnes a quiet introvert), both girls are discernibly coded as non-normative from the outset. And in ways, I would argue, that offset the conventional opposites-attract trope argued by Monaghan (2016), or what Stenport (2012: 33) termed a “paradigm of opposition”. This is signaled already at the beginning of the narrative, when, following Agnes's intimate confession on her computer, the film cuts to Elin having a heated argument with her big sister Jessica, ending with Elin erratically pouring a glass of chocolate milk over Jessica and throwing an empty box of cocoa at her. The scene, which is frantically shot and edited, retains a clear contrast to the lingering and intimate shot, or reverse shot structure, in Agnes's introduction. Crucially, these two scenes not only function to highlight differences between Elin and Agnes in class and demeanor, but they also set up an important connection between them and marking them both as non-normative. Despite the difference in modality, Elin's inarticulate and loud expression of unruly, overflowing emotion mirrors Agnes's articulate and quiet expression on the computer, in which equally unruly and overflowing emotion is expressed through the use of capital letters and exclamation marks, thus establishing a queer connection between them from the very beginning.

Whereas Agnes's desire for Elin renders her queer from the outset, the transitional aspect inherent in the coming-out narrative is instead structured around Elin. This is set up, among other things, by the film's emphasis on her interaction with complementary characters, primarily Jessica and her boyfriend Markus, and Markus's friend Johan, who, like Agnes, also has a crush on Elin. This interaction is another important connection to the American teen film genre (Stenport, 2012: 78). It is, however, also crucial to Elin's coming-out trajectory in that it establishes the baseline heter-

onormative ideology that structures the social world of the diegesis, from which Elin feels alienated. When, following a kiss in the backseat of a car as they attempt to hitchhike their way out of Åmål, Elin attempts to hide her feelings for Agnes from Jessica and gives in to Jessica's pressure – and social expectations – to pursue a relationship with Johan, thus initiating the “passing-as-straight” strategy. Johan is rendered as a sensitive but weak guy who can only echo the culturally constructed heteronormative attitudes and “sexist posturing” represented by Markus (Henderson, 2007: 265). After a disappointing sexual encounter shortly after they become a couple, Elin decides to break up with Johan when his inability to voice his own opinions and challenge Markus becomes all too evident. During a discussion in Elin's home while watching the entertainment show *Bingolotto* together with Jessica and Markus, Elin attempts to challenge Markus's sexist views on gender difference, but when Johan sheepishly appears to echo Markus, Elin promptly gets up, walks into the next room, and calls Johan to break up with him. As such, Elin's inability to pass as straight through her failed relationship with Johan serves a wider function than merely convincing the audience of the queer character's inauthentic straightness and thus of their need to pursue an authentic, queer self. It works as a cultural critique of the oppressive confines of the heteronormative expectations that underpin the lives of all the characters.

The final challenge to the coming-out narrative comes in the film's ending. Setting up the familiar final articulation of identity, the penultimate scene in *Show Me Love* shows Agnes and Elin having locked themselves inside a toilet booth to have a private conversation. Elin, seemingly having made up her mind about declaring her feelings for Agnes, grabs her by the arm and pulls her into a toilet stall to escape the social surveillant gaze of their peers. Inside the toilet stall, Elin finally confesses her feelings for Agnes, whose distrust and anger turns into happiness and relief. Outside, a jeering crowd has assembled and demands that Elin unlock the door and come out, assuming she has shut herself inside with a guy. Finally, she summons the courage and flings the door open. Walking through the flabbergasted crowd of pupils, hand in hand with Agnes, she defiantly proclaims, “Here I am. This is my girlfriend. We are going to go and fuck now”. The camera then follows the couple outside as they stride across the schoolyard with the wind in their hair and sunlight on their faces to a pulsating electro beat on the soundtrack.

However, rather than closing the film with this spectacular declaration of queer love in the school hallway that turns the conventional happy ending into a “brief moment of visible difference” (Driver, 2007: 58), *Show Me Love* concludes with a scene that renders coming out less an ending than an opening. Cutting to Elin's bedroom bathed in natural sunlight, the two girls are shown laughing innocently and awkwardly while enjoying a glass of

chocolate milk on Elin's bed. Revealing the brazen declaration of lesbian love and desire at school to be a performative gesture, the final scene stays with the girls during an improvised dialogue about "excess and lack" (Stenport, 2012) in finding the right amount of cocoa powder to put in the milk as the decidedly feel-good title song from Swedish pop singer Robyn begins to play in the background. For Monaghan (2016: 125), this image of Elin and Agnes evokes Sara Ahmed's (2010) notion of "the happily queer", a figure that insists on their own desire even if it takes them outside conventional parameters of happiness. The happily queer may still encounter a world governed by the stifling social norms of a small town like Åmål but will – like Elin and Agnes sitting on a bed drinking chocolate milk and laughing – "refuse to be made unhappy by this encounter" (Ahmed, 2010: 117). In narrative terms, the final scene in *Show Me Love* thus complicates the conventional linearity of the coming-out story by moving beyond the trope of coming out as an end in and of itself. Instead of a conventional happy ending through the promise of happiness by coming out, the film's open ending does not negate the oppressive confines of the social world that exists outside their window, but simply leaves its queer youth characters with the hopeful possibility of a new beginning.

### **Anything could happen: *Pulse***

In the Danish youth drama series *Pulse* (Føns & Lundme, 2020), characters continuously stare at each other intensely in tightly framed close-ups just long enough to suggest that anything could happen. Unlike *Show Me Love*, it is a densely dramatic, affectively high-strung, and theme-packed series, in which a lot does happen. Like Moodysson's film, however, the series explores the challenges of coming out in a small-town environment governed by stifling social norms in ways that offsets the conventional coming-out narrative. *Pulse* follows a group of seven friends in a sleepy, indeterminate suburb somewhere outside of Copenhagen, whose entangled lives unravel when secrets they carry unwantedly begin to emerge. Samir and Bastian are best friends, and both are on the school basketball team, together with Bastian's brother Adam and their classmate Erik. Bastian is dating Anna, who has just lost her mother, while her sister Sophia constantly returns from trips to Copenhagen with expensive new clothes. Samir, on the other hand, is dating Tenna, who is struggling to negotiate teenage life with social monitoring by her conservative Muslim sister. Samir is the star of the basketball team, and the girls adore him, much to the envy of Erik, who is harbouring feelings for Tenna. One day, when Erik accidentally discovers notifications from a dating app for men on Samir's mobile, he seizes the opportunity to disrupt Samir's social standing and assume a new position in the group by revealing Samir's secret to the whole gang of friends.

Compared with the major visibility and recognition of *Show Me Love*, *Pulse* is a small media text. Released on the streaming platform TV2 Play in two parts during 2020, with the first season premiering in July and the second in December, *Pulse* consists of 18 short episodes of approximately 15 minutes each and has thus far not been released outside of Denmark. The series is directed by Mette Føns, who co-wrote it with co-creator Tomas Lagermand Lundme and Christian Gamst Miller-Harris. Through themes and tone, *Pulse* clearly distinguishes itself from the “social utopia” characteristic of the themes and tone of *Shame* (Christensen, 2018). Instead, it gestures towards a kind of social dystopia characteristic of a show like *Euphoria* and the Norwegian series *Delete Me* through similar use of expressive formalism to highlight the characters’ intense emotional reality, as well as to the “starker realism” generally characteristic of the themes and tone in Danish youth films since the turn of the millennium (Christensen, 2021: 139). Upon its release, reviews were moderately enthusiastic, with critics generally praising the series for its aesthetic form, mood, and the acting performances (Damsgaard, 2020; Høgfeltdt, 2020) but also criticising it for being “overdramatic” (Høgfeltdt, 2020) and “unrealistic” (Damsgaard, 2020) in its representation of pervasive homophobia. Interestingly, in interviews ahead of its premiere, Føns detailed how the production had conducted extensive research on behaviours and attitudes towards homosexuality among members of the show’s target age group before the scriptwriting process began, including surveys, interviews, and video dairies, which laid bare the fact that “among young people, prejudices are alive and well [translated]” (as cited in Thomsen, 2020a). Similarly, the show’s main actors, who were roughly the same age as their characters during production, discussed the experience of an undeniable presence of homophobia in contemporary youth culture (Thomsen, 2020b).

In the coming-out narrative, homophobia functions to “contextualize queer coming of age within a heterosexist society” (McWilliam, 2021: 254); in *Pulse*, homophobia is initially embodied in the character of Erik. As an alpha male figure on the local basketball team, Erik propagates a culture of toxic masculinity in the locker room through constant posturing and derogatory speech. When his position on the team is threatened by Samir’s promotion as lead player, Erik employs homophobia to assert power over Samir by hurling hateful slurs in the locker room and endlessly distributing GIFs that mockingly insert Samir’s body or face in images of explicit gay pornography. The pervasive presence of GIFs throughout *Pulse* highlights a digital media culture including dating apps and messaging apps, which function ambivalently throughout the story as technologies of both intimacy and oppression. Most frequently, these are interconnected. As expressions of homophobia, the explicitly sexual GIFs work as a kind of “interpersonal panopticons” (Manning & Stern, 2018) used to monitor and control cul-

tural heteronormative norms and to punish deviance through the humiliation that the publication and distribution of the GIFs ensure. In the second season of the series, however, homophobia is gradually taken over by Erik's criminal big brother and his gang of thuggish friends, who assume the role of guardians of the heteronormative norm and are unequivocal antagonists, culminating in the penultimate episode when they lure Bastian and Samir into a deserted construction area and violently assault them. Thus, the stifling heteronormative attitudes expressed by Markus in *Show Me Love* can arguably be understood as having hardened into more explicitly violent homophobic forms in *Pulse*.

Despite being an ensemble drama, the main storyline in *Pulse* revolves around the relationship between Samir and Bastian. And like Elin and Agnes, they are both marked for the viewer as different from the outset. In the opening scene, the camera follows the two characters as they spend a lazy summer day skating in the sun. As they laugh, play fight, and occasionally pause to lie down on the ground and look up at the sky, the camera lingers unhurriedly on them in slow-paced and reverse shots to register an atmosphere of indeterminate intensity that, as in *Show Me Love*, “infuses the mundane with erotic implications” (Stenport, 2012: 71). Like Elin in *Show Me Love*, the focus of the coming-out narrative in *Pulse* is Bastian, who reluctantly tries to come to terms with a budding homosexual identity. His narrative arc thus chiefly aligns with the conventional coming-out narrative, as he spends most of the plot time attempting to pass as straight and make sure his feelings for Samir remain hidden from the rest of the group. Even so, the general emphasis on the characters' emotional reality makes room for several scenes that explore Bastian's secret queer desire in ways that disrupt the otherwise suspense-driven forward movement of the narrative. In one scene early in the first season, the camera lingers on Bastian's eyes, mouth, and hands as he curiously installs and, quietly aroused, flips through explicit images on the show's fictional hook-up app Boydate. Later, when Samir and Bastian finally give in to their desire and have sex for the first time, the camera cuts slowly back and forth between backlit shots of their intertwined bodies and ultra-close-up shots of their ecstatic faces being stroked by the daylight from the window above.

Contrary to Bastian, Samir, like Agnes in *Show Me Love*, can articulate his queer desire from the very beginning, even if it is done in secrecy. Already in the opening episode he is shown communicating on the Boydate app. And by episode four, his sexual identity has been disclosed to the entire group, as well as to his understanding mother. Crucially, however, Samir is never seen struggling with his queer identity beyond his coming out. Even when the disclosure of his sexuality leads to his social exclusion from the friend group, he is depicted as maintaining strength of character by refusing to internalise Erik's homophobic bullying. As a queer representation, Samir is coded as

“happily queer” (Ahmed, 2010). Whereas Elin and Agnes are rendered happily queer only in the final scene of *Show Me Love* (Monaghan, 2016), Samir takes this position almost from the outset. Strong-willed, articulate, and with a stable sense of self, he insists on partaking in queer culture, as illustrated by his repeated use of Boydate, and he effortlessly engages in queer kinship that also extends beyond sex, most notably in the depiction of his friendship with an older guy, the mentor figure Kevin. As a happily queer figure, Samir “does not borrow from the conventional repertoire of images” (Ahmed, 2010: 115), refusing to give up his desires and to be made unhappy even as he encounters a world that is unhappy with queer love.

In the end, *Pulse*, like *Show Me Love*, subverts the finality of the conventional coming-out narrative through an open ending. Jumping to a month following the violent outcome of Erik’s homophobic revenge plan, Bastian attempts to make things right with Samir, who has withdrawn from the group. In the final scene, Samir is shown lying in the grass as a point-of-view shot shows us Bastian’s feet approaching. The camera lingers as they look at each other intensely, before the scene fades to black. It’s an ending that keeps with the decidedly darker tone and themes of the series. Rather than a promise of romantic relationship or clear articulation of sexual identity, it’s an open ending that merely nods to the possibility of a new beginning, keeping the queer promise established in the series’ opening scene that anything can happen.

## Conclusion

As queer characters and themes become increasingly visible in youth screen media, so does the need to explore just *how* these texts make queer youth known. This chapter expands the dominant Anglo-American perspective in scholarship on youth screen fiction to explore coming out as a key narrative trope in two Scandinavian youth screen media narratives. Focusing on two ostensibly different case examples that, despite their obvious disparities, nevertheless share significant narrative similarities in their representations of coming out – the critically and commercially successful Swedish youth film *Show Me Love* and the less-known small Danish youth drama series *Pulse* – I analyse how narrative conventions of youth coming out on screen have been negotiated and challenged in a Scandinavian context. The conventional coming-out narrative in youth screen fiction, primarily forged in Anglo-American media, has generally emphasised coming out as the ultimate narrative climax in queer coming-of-age stories. Within this narrative script, coming out has predominantly been rendered as the transition from one sexual identity to another. A plot that has generally been presented in conventionally linear, forward-moving transformation narratives that develop from an initial recognition of difference through an intermediate

phase of denial before concluding in an inevitable, final articulation of the authentic self. In *Show Me Love* and *Pulse*, this premise – that the process of queer identity formation may fit within a tight linear narrative frame – is negotiated and challenged through shared representational strategies. By employing critical engagement with themes of oppressive gender norms and homophobia, by offering representations of happily queer figures, and by narrating endings that do not eradicate challenges and oppression faced by the queer youth protagonists, *Show Me Love* and *Pulse* instead gesture towards new beginnings rather than finite endings. As such, they are examples of how queer youth can be made known by coming out differently.



## References

- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Duke University Press
- Björklund, J. (2010). Queering the small town: Lukas Moodysson's film *Show Me Love*. *Women's Studies*, 39(1), 37–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870903368906>
- Bronski, M. (2000). Positive images and the coming out film: The art and politics of gay and lesbian cinema. *Cineaste*, 26(1), 20–26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41689314>
- Christensen, C. L. (2018). Skam som social utopi [Skam as social utopia]. *K & K*, 46(125), 139–156. <https://doi.org/10.7146/kok.v46i125.105554>
- Christensen, C. L. (2021). Making a life of your own: Danish children's and youth film in the 1970s and the 1980s. In C. Thomson, P.-S. Chow, & I. Thorsen (Eds.), *A history of Danish cinema* (pp. 128–139). Edinburgh University Press.
- Clarke, K. (2017). *Affective sexual pedagogies in film and television*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315651682>
- Damsgaard, F. M. (2020, July 18). *Puls [Pulse]*. Ekko. <https://www.ekkofilm.dk/anmeldelser/puls/>
- Davis, G. (2004). Saying it out loud: Revealing television's queer teens. In G. Davis, & K. Dickinson (Eds.), *Teen TV: Genre, consumption and identity* (pp. 127–140). British Film Institute.
- Dell, E. B., & Boyer, S. (2015). Radical love in a time of heteronormativity: Glee, Gaga and getting better. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 5(1), 99–114. <http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/view/236/773>
- Driscoll, C. (2011). *Teen film: A critical introduction*. Bloomsbury.
- Driver, S. (2007). *Queer girls and popular culture*. Peter Lang.
- Føns, M., & Lundme, T. L. (Creators). (2021). *Puls [Pulse]* [TV series]. TV2; Toolbox Film.
- Giese, R. (2018). Lose the plot: Why there's more than one queer narrative. *The Globe and Mail*. <https://tinyurl.com/bderrjdc>
- Henderson, S. (2007). Youth, sexuality, and the nation: Beautiful thing and show me love. In T. Shary, & A. Seibel (Eds.), *Youth culture in global cinema* (pp. 256–270). University of Texas Press.
- Hilton-Morrow, W., & Battles, K. (2015). *Sexual identities and the media: An introduction*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203114513>
- Høgføldt, J. (2020, July 19). 'Puls': Intens ungdomsserie om maskulinitet og seksualitet ender med at tale ned til sit publikum ['Puls': Intense youth series about masculinity and sexuality ends up talking down to its audience]. *Soundvenue*. <https://tinyurl.com/2p9zwp3x>
- Jagose, A. (1996). *Queer theory*. Melbourne University Press.
- King, J. (2022). *Heartstopper: Is it time we moved on from the coming out drama?* GQ. <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/culture/article/heartstopper-netflix-coming-out-drama>
- Love, H. (2007). *Feeling backward: Loss and the politics of queer history*. Harvard University Press.
- Lysne, A. (2022). Growing up on Scandinavian screens. In N. Brown (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of children's film*, (pp. 283–304). Oxford University Press.
- Manning, J., & Stern, D. M. (2018). Heteronormative bodies, queer futures: Toward a theory of interpersonal panopticism. *Information, Communication & Society*, 21(2), 208–223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1271901>
- McCann, H., & Monaghan, W. (2020). *Queer theory now: From foundations to futures*. Red Globe Press.
- McLean, K. (2007). Hiding in the closet? Bisexuals, coming out and the disclosure imperative. *Journal of Sociology*, 43(2), 151–166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783307076893>
- McWilliam, K. (2021). 'Growing up was never easy': Coming of age in the teen film. In K. McWilliam, & M. D. Ryan (Eds.), *Australian genre film* (pp. 244–265). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429469121>
- Meyer, M. D. E., & Wood, M. M. (2013). Sexuality and teen television: Emerging adults respond to representations of queer identity on Glee. *Sexuality and Culture*, 17, 434–448. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-013-9185-2>
- Mitchell, J. (2015). The best lesbian show ever! The contemporary evolution of teen coming-out narratives. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 19(4), 454–469. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2015.1057078>

- Monaghan, W. (2016). *Queer girls, temporality & screen media*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Monaghan, W. (2021a). Coming out in a 'faux-lesbian comedy': Authenticity and queer identity in MTV's *Faking It*. *Continuum*, 36(3), 352–363.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2021.1988903>
- Monaghan, W. (2021b). Post-gay television: LGBTQ representation and the negotiation of 'normal' in MTV's *Faking It*. *Media, Culture & Society*, 43(3), 428–443.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720957553>
- Moodysson, L. (Director). (1998). *Fucking Åmål* [*Show Me Love*] [Film]. Memphis Film.
- Parsemain, A. L. (2019). *The pedagogy of queer TV*. Palgrave Macmillan.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14872-0>
- Peeters, L. (2021). The queer TV show bypassing Russia's homophobic laws. *Vice*.  
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/93wgn/here-i-come-queer-series-russia>
- Robinson, M. (2019). *Growing up queer*. New York University Press.
- Scott, S. (2021, July 4). 'Young Royals': New Netflix teen series about a young Swedish prince. *Forbes*. <https://tinyurl.com/58t66fpw>
- Shary, T. (2014). *Generation multiplex: The image of youth in American cinema since 1980* (rev. ed.). University of Texas Press.
- Smith, F. (2017). *Rethinking the Hollywood teen movie*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Solari, B. (2018, October 10). Netflix's 'Elite' is a hidden queer gem. *Out Magazine*.  
<https://www.out.com/popnography/2018/10/10/netflixs-elite-hidden-queer-gem>
- Stenport, A. W. (2012). *Lukas Moodysson's Show Me Love*. University of Washington Press; Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Sundet, V. S. (2019). From 'secret' online teen drama to international cult phenomenon: The global expansion of SKAM and its public service mission. *Critical Studies in Television*, 15(1), 69–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749602019879856>
- Thomsen, A. M. (2020a, July 19). "Fordomme lever i bedste velgående" ["The old days are alive and well"]. *EKKO*. <https://www.ekko.dk/artikler/mette-fons/>
- Thomsen, A. M. (2020b, December 5). "Der findes stadig had til homoseksuelle" ["There is still hatred towards homosexuals"]. *EKKO*.  
<https://www.ekko.dk/artikler/der-finde-stadig-had-til-homoseksuelle/>