

Ecological Aesthetics of Intimate Otherness in Swedish Trans Cinema

ABSTRACT

This article is an exploration of trans and non-binary representation in independent Swedish film productions. Two award-winning films, *Pojktanten* (*She Male Snails*, 2012) and *Nånting måste gå sönder* (*Something Must Break*, 2014), created by director Ester Martin Bergsmark (in collaboration with author Eli Levén), will be in focus and discussed through their ecological aesthetics that build on what I call intimate otherness. The two films represent not only a significant debut moment for Swedish trans cinema, but also offer a radical engagement with nature and the unnatural. While Bergsmark's films incite a vivid aestheticisation of environmental pollution, ranging from items of garbage in the forest to untidy rooms, unwashed clothes, and dirty bathing water, the films' ecological aesthetics, as I argue, imagine an enchanted space in which the trans body emerges as livable. Historically reduced to an "unnatural" and "contaminated" embodiment, trans bodies in the films form an intimate otherness with non-human objects and landscapes at the urban peripheries, at the margins of normativity and productivity. The films' ecological aesthetics shift gender non-conformity from "unnatural" into a possibility. These aesthetics, I suggest, unfold into a gender-dissident landscape of rebellious and poetic, intimate otherness.

Keywords: Intimate otherness, ecological aesthetics, non-binary/trans bodies, nature, pollution, ethics

Biologi skrämmer mig inte längre
Jag ser nu hur det spretar och växer
Hur en trädkrona inte kan läggas platt
Mellan glasskivor för att betraktas.
—Nino Mick¹

WHEN I WAS a kid, I thought that snails change shells. I thought it was a beautiful idea, changing your home, your exterior, the idea that your body wasn't linked to who you are. The voice-over at the beginning of *Pojktanten* offers a poetic opening. Its calmness is completed by the camera, which moves over dried leaves in the undergrowth, branches, and chalky, empty snail shells (Fig. 1). A quietly gloomy, instrumental soundtrack is woven through this opening sequence. ...*I actually believe that up to now.* The sequence ends with a shift to brighter colours, red blossoms on bright green moss, a yellow Chanterelle mushroom covered in dew and a small slug gliding over it.

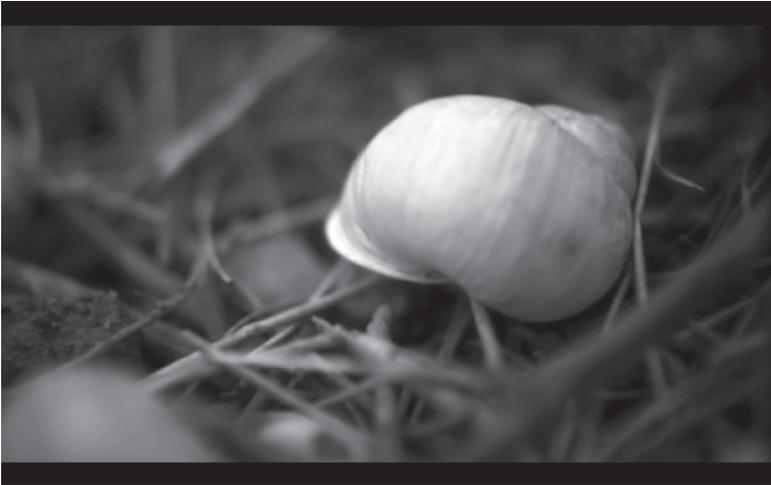


Figure 1. Pojktanten (2012). Ester Martin Bergsmark (director and script); Minka Jakerson (photography). Copyright Danish Upfront Films.

In this article, I explore the distinctive ecological aesthetics of two films by Ester Martin Bergsmark, *Pojktanten* (*She Male Snails*, directed by Ester Martin Bergsmark, co-written by Bergsmark and Eli Levén, 2012) and *Nånting måste gå sönder* (*Something Must Break*, directed by Bergsmark, co-written by Bergsmark and Levén, 2014). I will argue that through their ecological aesthetics, these two films offer a way to rethink intimate connections between different "others", such as nature, pollution, and trans and non-binary bodies. While mobilising images of an uncanny nature, as, for instance, the empty snail shells in the undergrowth, an overgrown and neglected amusement park, or a plastic bag behind moss-covered rocks, *Pojktanten* and *Nånting måste gå sönder* create an aesthetics which imagines the unruly world of complex entanglements between humans, animals, plants, objects and, literally, garbage as enchanted and full of potential. All of these beings and vibrant things are equally relevant in Bergsmark's films and, as I will discuss, decentre the human characters as main protagonists and gather them in an assemblage of what political theorist Stacy Alaimo calls the "more-than-human" (2008, 238). Jointly they create a polluted, sexually and gender-dissident landscape.

The films' ecological aesthetics reimagine humans, garbage, plants, and landscapes in an intimate yet strange relationality that I call intimate otherness. This concept of intimate otherness is in conversation with philosopher and political theorist Jane Bennett's notion of "enchantment" (2002, 55) and embedded in the idea of an ethical engagement with the world, nature, and human and more-than-human diversity. In this sense, ecological aesthetics entail a world-making potential, as they envision an ethical engagement with other humans, animals, the city, the landscape, and nature itself.

In my further discussion and the close analysis of Bergsmark's films below, I will argue that the films' ecological aesthetics materialise nature, and especially polluted nature, not as a space of fear or bleak *Unheimlichkeit* but as one of wonder and enchantment, of connectedness and hope for future trans livabilities. I will discuss this by turning to the material and discursive intimacies between transness and pollutedness,

as well as by analysing the use of cinematic techniques such as camera movements, camera proximity, colour and the handling of sound. Drawing on feminist posthumanities and feminist environmental studies (see, e.g., Åsberg & Braidotti 2018) as well as transgender studies (Alm et al. 2016; Stryker 2006), the article explores the possibilities of more-than-human relationalities in cinema to engender future livabilities for trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming bodies.

Intimate otherness and trans materialities

In my analysis of the films' aesthetics, the concept of intimate otherness helps unpack and illuminate how these aesthetics operate politically, affectively as well as ethically. As I mention above, I developed this concept by drawing on Jane Bennett's material vitalism and her concept of "enchanted materialism" (Bennett 2001, 155) which she describes as an openness to the unusual, the captivating and the disturbing of everyday life. While it aesthetically endorses the unexpected, the strange and the wonderful, it affectively draws on the pleasurable and the uncanny, "a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness" (ibid., 5). Infused with Bennett's notion of enchantment, intimate otherness refers to the world's vibrant materialities through a spectrum of wonder as well as strangeness, with the hope that this, for humans, will lead to a more ethical engagement with the world and its inhabitants. However, in my definition, the concept of intimate otherness is not only guided by an ethical and aesthetic paradigm of enchantment but, in addition, characterised by entanglements of different, even contradictory materialities: a beautiful forest and its pollution, or a sexually charged scene between two gender non-conforming human beings immersed in the water of a dirty pond. This is an intimacy between different others, different subjects and objects at the peripheries of the urban and suburban landscapes, navigating tropes of the natural and the normative.

As an analytical concept within the social sciences, intimacy is most commonly applied to investigating notions of, for instance, partnership, family life, or sexuality, and thus mostly concerned with inter-human relations. When mobilised outside of a human-centred taxonomy, the

concept nonetheless carries implications of, for instance, vulnerability, or emotional or material contact. Here, however, it is extended towards new and maybe unexpected relationalities.³ The notion of intimate otherness focuses attention to the way in which different organic and inorganic materialities relate and mutually foster each other's existence in the films, and their openness towards each other. I propose that intimate otherness is an intimacy between subjugated materialities, of trans and non-binary bodies, racialised and poor bodies, plants, animals, nature, toxic matter, pollution and waste. Intimate otherness allows me to conceptualise the ecological aesthetics of Bergsmark's films as a world-making (Muñoz 2009), as an assemblage of those considered along taxonomies of pollution in search of "a space to breathe", as Bergsmark once put it.³

While I hope to address the co-existence and interdependence of different entities through the concept of intimate otherness and the aestheticisation of pollution in Bergsmark's films, I also want to emphasise that environmental pollution and toxicity often affect marginalised groups with material severity (Seymour 2020). Environmental toxicity and destruction have particular implications for poor, racialised and trans people who often live on the outskirts of cities, with potentially less access to non-contaminated water and clean air. My aim, however, in engaging more closely with the aesthetics of pollution in Bergsmark's films is to ask what happens to trans and other marginalised bodies when they are brought in contact with toxic materialities – can something emerge from pollution that is more than destruction and danger?

In Bergsmark's films, pollution and the unnatural become tropes that, against all odds, help envision a life for their protagonists, as they find refuge in discarded spaces: a hill on Stockholm's outskirts made of rubble, a dirty room, an old plastic bag hidden in the forest, carrying important items. This intimate otherness between dirty objects and trans and queer human bodies materialises in the films' sensual, ecological aesthetics, a politics of porosity and openness towards unexpected connections. Part of this sensual aesthetics arises from the affective proximity the films create, drawing in the viewer, and echoing phenom-

enological, embodied and multisensorial approaches to film (see, e.g., Sobchack 2004; Barker 2009; Koivunen 2015). The films extend a multi-dimensional invitation into the affective relationalities between nature, polluting items and human bodies.

A second significant dimension of intimate otherness draws on the material and discursive proximities between trans bodies, trans pathologisation and notions of contamination which originated in the nineteenth and twentieth century. As material realities, non-binary, trans and queer bodies have historically been understood as “unnatural”, “polluted”, “inferior”. They have been positioned on the outskirts of the capitalist values of productivity, health and social mobility (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson 2010). Throughout the twentieth century, trans bodies have been medically pathologised as deviant and understood through a paradigm of mental illness (Linander et al. 2017; Krieg 2013; Spade 2006). The trans body is both rendered unnatural and considered potentially “contaminating” society and future generations.⁴ This has resulted in the practice of compulsory sterilisation of trans bodies in many parts of Europe and the world. Until recently, this practice has been ongoing in supposedly liberal countries such as Sweden, Denmark and Germany.⁵ The trans body is considered an “unhealthy” and impure body, in opposition to the ideal of the healthy citizen. It disrupts the rigid order of the naturalised gender binary as well as cisheteronormative and racialised ideologies of purity and pure nature (Mehrabi 2020).⁶ Consequently, the trans body, to follow philosopher Eva Hayward, unsettles not only a naturalised order but, in general, disrupts purification practices of race, species and space (Hayward 2008).

Tackling questions of pureness and pollutedness, naturalness and unnaturalness, is of great relevance for trans scholarship. “Nature matters”, to quote writer Oliver Baez Bendorf, “because of how we map (and are mapped) along boundaries of inside and out, natural and unnatural” (Bendorf 2014, 136). The complex proximities between pollution, purity and the historical, “toxic” discourses on trans bodies, as well as the echoes of affinity, care and love in the notion of “intimacy”, foreground my application of this concept in intimate otherness. I use it in this

article to take hold of the diverse relationalities emerging in the aesthetics of the two films *Pojktanten* and *Nånting måste gå sönder*.

While “trans” or “transgender” can be understood as very specific identities, I here consider trans as a processual practice, as a “practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces” (Stryker, Currah, & Moore 2008, 13). Trans is “not a thing or a being, it is rather the process through which beingness and thingness are constituted”, it is “the *with, through, of, in, and across* that make life possible” (Hayward & Weinstein 2015, 196–97; italics in the original). Trans and non-binary positions are here understood as movements away from what trans scholar and historian Susan Stryker calls, “an unchosen starting place” (Stryker 2008, 1).

Swedish trans cinema

In the past two decades, the Nordic context, and specifically Swedish cinema, has witnessed the emergence of trans narratives and trans-led productions (Wallenberg 2015). This development is part of what cultural and trans studies scholar Eliza Steinbock frames as “Trans New Wave” or “New Trans Cinema”, as “build[ing] on feminist, postcolonial, and queer film criticism to assert significant groupings of films, contemporary directors, and types of spectatorship” (Steinbock 2017, 396). The film *Pojktanten* (2012), by non-binary filmmaker Ester Martin Bergsmark, launched this new wave of trans cinema, in the Swedish context in particular (Horak 2017). It was the first time in Scandinavian feature films, as film scholar Laura Horak emphasises in her work on cross-dressing and trans representation in Swedish films, that trans and non-binary filmmakers and scriptwriters had been able to represent their own stories on screen (Horak 2017).

The first few ripples of this new wave of trans cinema productions in Sweden could be seen in short films and documentaries as far back as in the 1990s, and the trend continues today, represented, for example, in the documentary feature about the non-binary teenager Amber in *Alltid Amber* (*Always Amber*, directed by Hannah Reinikainen and Lia Hietala, 2020). Only in the last decade, however, have documentaries and short

films been joined by feature-length fiction films such as the semi-fictional documentary *Pojktanten* (*She Male Snails*, Bergsmark, 2012), the drama film *Nånting måste gå sönder* (*Something Must Break*, Bergsmark, 2014), the experimental feature film *Swedish Candy, Some Violence and a Bit of Cat* (Bergsmark, 2018, script co-written by Ester Martin Bergsmark, Dimen Abdulla, Eva Johansson and Louise Löwenberg) and the ironic action movie *Dyke Hard* (Bitte Andersson, 2014, with a script written by several people including trans scholar and performance artist Josephine Baird, formerly Krieg, and in collaboration with many trans and queer activists and artists). Lasse Långström directed the surrealist and transanarchist fairy tale semi-documentary *Vem ska knulla pappa?* (*Who Will Fuck Daddy?*, 2017), produced in collaboration with other Gothenburg-based queer and trans friends, artists and family members.⁷ Another film worth mentioning here is *Pojkarna* (“Girls Lost”; directed by Alexandra-Therese Keining, 2016), based on the novel by Jessica Schiefauer, which depicts the magical power of a plant that helps three teenagers to temporarily gender transition.

These films were accompanied by different short film productions such as, in the last decade, *Undress Me* (written by trans feminine actress and writer Jana Bringlöv Ekspong, directed by Viktor Lindgren, 2012), *Push Me* (starring trans feminine journalist Aleksa Lundberg, directed by Tove Pils, 2014), the horror short *@janabringlove* by Jana Bringlöv Ekspong (2016), and the experimental short *Fuckgirls* (2017) by *Nånting måste gå sönder*'s Guldbagge award-winning main actress Saga Becker together with Christofer Nilsson (music composed by musician and indigenous Sámi activist Maxida Mäarak).

Some of these films explore trans becoming beyond the limits of gender (Hayward and Weinstein 2015). The much-acclaimed film *Gräns* (*Border*, directed by Ali Abbasi, 2018, an adaptation of a novel by John Ajvide Lindqvist) addresses species boundaries between human and animal and expands into a gloomy allegory of gendered as well as racial difference, the violence of kidnappings of indigenous children, assimilation, and the ambivalence of revenge. Ajvide Lindqvist is also the author of the novel *Låt den rätte komma in*, which was made into a film with the same

title (*Let the Right One In*, director Tomas Alfredson, 2008). The film *Låt den rätte komma in* is a romantic horror feature depicting the life of a vampire child (implying the vampire as a trans girl) and the child's friendship with a local boy of the same age in a lower middle-class housing block in suburban Stockholm. The short *On Animals and Cleaning* (directed by Zafire Vrba, 2019) is Zafire Vrba's problematisation of gendered eugenics, whiteness, Nordic ideals of purity and species boundaries.

The above-mentioned films all engage with the key tropes of Swedish cinema, such as the relationships between urbanity and ruralness, as well as the cultural discourses about "Swedishness". Many of these films evoke the uncanny aesthetics and nature tropes of Nordic noir.⁸ In many ways, they are framed by what film scholar Cael M. Keegan calls a "trans* aesthetics", identified by its ability to extend the senses and imagination beyond the limits of the given world (Keegan 2018). In these films, the trans-informed production context informs the narrative, the production ethics as well as the aesthetic choices.⁹ It also shows how trans cinema in general is strongly indebted to the political and ethical paradigm of the earlier sex- and gender-radical film movement, New Queer Cinema (Rich 1992, 2013; Aaron 2004).¹⁰

***Pojktanten*: a special moment in Swedish film history**

When *Pojktanten* was released, the film, for trans and non-binary audiences, created the Nordic version of what would two years later, following a headline in an issue of *Time* magazine featuring trans activist and actress Laverne Cox, be coined the representational "transgender tipping point" (Steinmetz 2014). This quiet and stunningly beautiful film, which went on to win several prestigious awards (among them the Gothenburg Film Festival Nordic Award and the Festival Award at Outfest Los Angeles), and was nominated for the Swedish Guldbagge Best Documentary award, created an initial moment of visibility for trans and non-binary filmmakers and characters in the Swedish context.¹¹

The film features three storylines, each exploring intimate otherness through different ecological aesthetics. The first storyline involves an

intimate conversation between Bergsmark and Levén, during a shared bath in an old, turquoise-tiled, misty bathroom tub, reflecting on their coming of age as gender non-conforming kids who did not fit in. The second storyline revolves around the preparations for Levén's twenty-fifth birthday party, and a conversation the two friends engage in while getting dressed and preparing for the festivities in Eli's living room. The third and perhaps most central storyline is the semi-fictional narrative of the *pojktant* – a word that can only with difficulty be translated into English, but literally means boyish old lady, or “boy hag”, without the negative connotations invoked in “hag”. The film's website describes it as “the story of a Boy Hag – a fantasy world that centres on a person caught between two genders who creates a third in order to survive.”¹² It is the story of the boy hag, portrayed at different ages, with non-linear temporality, mostly non-verbally, and played by a range of different actors. The jumps between the different experimental, semi-fictional scenes of the *pojktant's* coming of age and the bathtub sequences create a mesmerising spatio-temporality. Additionally, the sequences – framed by the *pojktant's* quietness and in a way similar to that in *Nånting måste gå sönder* – place a captivating emphasis on the sounds of the landscape, on voice-over and soundtrack as much as on the non-human aspects of nature, place and the *pojktant's* emotional experiences at different stages of life.

In the following paragraph I will discuss a scene where Eli is celebrating his twenty-fifth birthday with friends and performs a song for them. Eli's naked, taped upper body is decorated with a plastic snake skeleton and dry tree branches. *I feel like a [dead tree] sometimes ... I compare my life to pruning a tree. I have to cut off certain parts of myself to make it work*, Eli explains, while Ester helps him to get ready for his birthday party in his living room. This sequence, only minutes after the opening scene, starts with the intense noise of an electric shaver. Ester is removing the last remaining stubble from their chest, wearing only a bright blue bra shaped by small silicon pads. The film then cuts back to Ester helping Eli to tape long twigs to his upper body – the black tape forming a harness over Eli's naked chest and back. Bergsmark's voice-over, covering the sound of ripping tape, narrates their first encounter at

15, how impressed they were with the androgynous Eli, who dared be more than a boy or a girl, how stunned they were that Eli already then had a name for what he was: a *pojktant* – a “boy hag”.¹³ Voice-over is an essential element of Ester Martin Bergsmarks’ films. In their article in this issue, Bergsmark discusses this stylistic medium through the de-centering concept of “voice-under” (Bergsmark 2021). Voice-under, as they explain, turns “all binary oppositions, from gender to life and death, inside out.” It is a cinematic method for “collecting and holding complexity beyond narrow concepts and categories” which otherwise restrict the livability of queer and trans people’s lives.

I think I’m in love, Bergsmark’s voice-under concludes at the end of this scene, summarising their impression of Eli at the time. The camera is hand-held and continues to show Eli adjusting the branches. Ester, while holding the camera, has just asked Eli to describe what the evening is about. Eli speaks into the camera and explains that he has reduced his intake of antidepressants, which always gives him “crazy ideas”. Eli wants a “gothic” party theme, and has decided to be a dead tree for the evening. Eli also explains that he never thought he would live this long, survive this long. *I am not dead yet, and I am really happy about that*. The scene continues with Eli making a short speech and singing a karaoke version of Shirley Bassey’s *This Is My Life* for his listening guests – his closest friends. *This is my life / And I don’t give a damn for lost emotions / I’ve such a lot of love I’ve got to give / Let me live / Let me live*. The party room is lit by candles, leaving most of the background too dark to see, keeping the camera image almost blurry. Once Eli starts singing, the occasional flash from somebody’s camera illuminates the room. From this scene, the film cuts to the quietness of the steamy bathtub, the old turquoise tiles and Eli’s and Ester’s naked bodies half submerged in the foamy water. This is followed by a sequence of short close-ups, each perhaps a second long, animated by a camera moving slowly over the different items, blending nature and the “unnatural”: bark flaring off a tree stump, bright pink chewing gum on dark soil, strips of plastic in bushes sheltered by half-melted snow. In my reading, the affective proximity of these items – evoked by the closeness of the lens and the grainy

image – creates a space of intimate otherness. Nature in this scene is captured as much by the tree branches taped to Eli's torso as by the pollution framed in the close-ups. Nature is never polarised and always considered entangled in these scenes. It is the enchanted sensibility of this co-existence and traversing of boundaries – a blossoming tree, dry branches, a tree stump, chewing gum, leaves and candy wrappers – that de-center the human protagonist and awaken a wondrous place of co-existence. Intimate otherness is evoked in this scene's contaminated, tender landscape of alternate livabilities.

Moving on to another scene in the film – one of the first featuring the *pojktant* – Ester quietly contemplates in the bathtub: *I was longing for a sister*. Slowly responding, Eli replies, *I can be your partner in crime, but maybe not your sister...* After a short pause for consideration, Ester answers: *I love you for all that you are*.

It is not easy to deliver such lines without sounding overly sentimental and it is only due to the film's tactile but wondrous aesthetics – the rough gloomy images, the graininess and the extremely measured and deep atmosphere of the conversation – that these words actually convey a graspable cinematic intensity.

In the following scene, the *pojktant* is a seven-year-old genderqueer child. They are hiding in the forest behind taller bushes, watching the beach of a lake, umbrellas, people chatting, children laughing. We see the beach from the child's perspective, blurred leaves from the bush in the outer limits of the frame: a secretive peek. The child assures themselves that they remain unobserved and are not followed, and as they head into the forest surrounding the lake, they pick up a plastic bag, hidden on a tree branch behind a moss-covered boulder. Holding the bag, they climb through the window of an empty cottage, not yet inhabited by its summer residents. Once inside, they dress up in front of a mirror in the living room, apply some lipstick and eyeshadow and put on the plastic pearl necklaces they had been carrying in the plastic bag. Their headphones on, their short, blonde hair pushed out of their face, they dance fully immersed, entirely happy to just be in this space on their own terms. This scene, with its application of lipstick and eyeshadow, could

easily become the stereotypical make-up trope of trans cinema (Serano 2007). Yet it becomes something different here. Instead of being used as an instrument for normalisation, or to create a grotesque moment of cinematic exploitation, make-up as an item of battle materialises a relationship of intimate otherness and a strategy of strength. The voice-over emphasises Eli's relationship to make-up: *In the past when things got overwhelming, you would take out your emergency lipstick and paint your lips red... and you could suddenly breathe again*. Make-up is here a combat attire and putting on make-up becomes a method of surviving a difficult moment. In this scene make-up signifies care as much as resilience rather than being a trope that propagates spectacularisation or voyeurism. After all, the story of the *pojktant* is also Levén's and Bergsmark's story.

The scene continues with the *pojktant* returning to the cottage a few days later, entering through a window. Another child is in the living room armchair, next to the window. Waiting. The child, around the same age, has long, dark hair and wears a formal suit and girly, black, patent leather shoes. The long-haired child asks the *pojktant* if they want to see their collection of large snails. Throughout the film, snails are a guiding visual trope. The film opens with a close-up of snails crawling on top of each other. Later on, the camera lingers on the empty snail shells that lay scattered around the bathtub, and snails become a reference in Bergsmark's voice-over when they recall the childhood moment when they first realised that their treasured snail shells were actually the remains of dead snails.

A moment later, the child inquires if the *pojktant* knows how snails fuck. Without waiting for an answer, the child orders the *pojktant* to take their clothes off. They end up lying on the couch, back to back, wearing only their trunks. Their knees are folded so that their feet can touch. This, the long-haired child explains, is how snails have sex. The camera captures their small toes folding around each other in close-up. The film then cuts to a long shot frame, showing the two children on the couch, the actual room now swapped for an abstract, colourless void around the couch (Fig. 2). The scene becomes a still image, timeless and floating.



Figure 2. *Pojktanten* (2012). Ester Martin Bergsmark (director and script); Minka Jakerson (photography).

The images of the two children together, but also of the *pojktant* alone in the house, connect to the images of the lake and forest, forming a togetherness. The lake and forest form a sanctuary, tainted only by the slight hint of a threat evoked by the film's colour scheme, but also carry a promise of secret hide-outs, of lush moss and vast space to simply be, without the constraints of parental control and most especially without gender norms. In this landscape where human bodies become snails, where a queer child finds safety in a forest, carrying their most important items in a plastic bag, intimate otherness emerges through the ecological aesthetics of the scene: the forest, the children, the animals, the children's play-sexual interaction, a plastic bag, the assembling of an enchanted, dirty geography.

***Nånting måste gå sönder*: embracing pollution**

Nånting måste gå sönder (2014) is Bergsmark's debut feature narrative film. It has been widely screened and adorned with a range of awards (and a long list of nominations). The film received awards at, for example, the Chicago International Film Festival and San Francisco's Frameline

Festival, as well as in Rotterdam, Madrid, Seville, and at the Gothenburg Film Festival. Saga Becker, the lead actress, was also the first trans person in Sweden to win the national award for Best Female Actress, the prestigious Guldbagge award, in 2015. The script was written by Ester Martin Bergsmark and their friend and co-author Eli Levén, and earned them the Guldbagge Best Screenplay award. Levén's semi-autobiographical book *Du är rötterna som sover vid mina fötter och håller jorden på plats* ("You are the roots that sleep beneath my feet and hold the earth in its place") is the original foundation for the film's script. As the Swedish title of the film, *Nånting måste gå sönder*, suggests, "something must break". In the beginning of the film, and her opening line, the main character (played by Saga Becker) refers to herself as Sebastian – as someone who is not quite Ellie yet – and says: *It's as if I'm destroying myself. To become her. My dream sister: Ellie.... Her name must fill my legs. Every step I take must be hers*. Throughout the film, Ellie suffers deeply from the transphobic rejections of her new boyfriend Andreas (played by Iggy Malmborg), until she eventually breaks up with him at the end of the film.

Similar to Bergsmark's previous film, *Pojktanten*, *Nånting måste gå sönder* emphasises sound – the rustling of leaves in the wind, the poetic voice-overs reflecting the main character's thoughts. Together with grainy close-ups of, for example, garbage items, dirt and leaves, and the dynamics of the hand-held camera, this technique invites the viewer to join the assemblage of intimate otherness.

The film is saturated with highly aestheticising scenes that repeatedly point out the connection between transness and contamination in a new way, based on the radical reappropriation of the historical approach to transness as "unnaturalness". In one of the film's many scenes that evoke a link between transness and contamination, the two main characters are out on a walk, strolling through Stockholm's suburbs until they end up sitting on the sidewalk in the parking lot of a mall, drinking coffee. The night before, they have had sex for the first time.

Ellie turns to Andreas with an idea: "You want to go for a swim?" She leads them across a highway ramp beside the parking lot and into

a small patch of forest. All the sounds are drowned out by the forest sounds. The camera stays far behind behind as they continue; in the distance we see the small figures of Ellie and Andreas disappear into the undergrowth. The enhanced sound of the wind in the trees almost completely overrides the previous sounds of traffic that accompanied their stop in the parking lot. The change in acoustics incites a sense of calmness and relaxation, invoking a freshness in the air of this mild Nordic summer day. As the camera captures the two distant figures vanishing in the trees, nothing is as close as the sound of the wind. Sound remains strongly present in all the following scenes as well.

Generally, *Nånting måste gå sönder* is invested in auditory incongruence. Often, what is said is not what is heard. This acoustic asynchrony disturbs the visual time and space conventions and centralises the sound. Moments of magic are created with this cinematic technique throughout the film, for example when the sound of wind in the trees overrides the noise of cars, thereby shifting the viewers' attention from the characters to the landscape. Sounds of nature – wind, rain, cracking branches, feet scraping over boulders – are alternated with the meticulously curated Indie rock and electronic soundtrack and Ellie's reflections in the voice-overs.

When Ellie and Andreas disappear into the forest, the hand-held camera stays close to them, their feet crunching branches on the ground, birds chirping, the enormous ferns lining the path brushing their legs and arms. They reach a small pond, right next to the highway, hidden among trees. They quickly undress, the camera now further away, framing blurred branches in the foreground. The sound of the rain that has just started drowns out the noise from the cars, and is joined by an instrumental soundtrack.

The pond is small and dirty - a far cry from the usual romantic imagery of Swedish nature and Sweden's big lakes. The pond is surrounded by all kinds of undergrowth, scattered with old car tires, and a discarded plastic bag lodged on the branch of a toppled juniper tree dipping into the water. In the background the pond is framed by a concrete wall and a massive cement drainage channel guiding a small rill of water under the highway and into the pond. The highway itself

remains nearly invisible behind the undergrowth. Ellie and Andreas playfully splash about in the water, moving closer to each other until they eventually kiss.

In this enchanted moment, which transforms the toxic pond into an enchanted world of co-existence, the historical stigma of “polluted” trans bodies is subverted. Instead, the trans body, submerged in dirty water, exposed to unclean air and noise, offers itself to the idea of pollution as a space of world-making, to an intimacy with and among other Others.¹⁴

In the closing scene of the film, Ellie has found refuge in her favourite spot in Stockholm, a remote park, a hill on the outskirts of the city. She is heartbroken. After leaving Andreas the evening before, she has spend the night sitting on a bench, overlooking Stockholm. The hill is both a sanctuary of calmness for her and a place where she sometimes goes cruising. In this final scene, dawn is rising and a passing dog walker, noticing her sadness, starts a conversation, telling her with an encouraging smile the hill is made of rubble: “All we’re standing on ... is made of waste. We are standing on a pile of *rubbish!*”

The dog walker is the only racialised character in the film, and her comforting words could easily be read as playing into racist tropes. Yet her Blackness, together with Ellie’s transness, is the embodiment of a structural dehumanisation of the dissident, non-normative body and its historical discursive links to pathology and abnormality (see Straube 2020; 2019). Thus, the meeting between the dog walker and Ellie, the dog and the hill, gives even further emphasis to the reading of the film as a re-appropriation of “impurity” across a range of different bodies and the disenfranchising meaning given to their bodily materialities.

The hill is a remote and forgotten city park project on the outskirts of suburban Stockholm, now used for cruising, and by dog walkers and other city people who appreciate the rare, urban wilderness. It is built from the rubble from the houses that were torn down during the modernisation projects of the 1950s (Bergsmark 2021). For Bergsmark, these hills are “spaces to breathe, and to build other types of life”. They are the “dirty outside in a world that otherwise looks so clean and functional”.¹⁵

In the film, nature is not only portrayed as gloomy and threatening or as an actual site of environmental desolation, but also as something else.

The film embraces – even elevates – pollution in its figurative and partly material form as a simple fact of life, something that can happen to a forest or a lake, but also to a human body, discursively as well as materially, with different harmful consequences, and it does so without ecological nostalgia or sentimentality.

The intimacies between these dirty geographies, discarded objects and human queer and trans bodies, stand in contrast to the usual dynamics whereby a society strives to keep such bodies and items, and otherness in general, at its periphery. This is where the film's protagonists, humans and all others, assemble a new community – an intimate otherness of human and “more-than-human” materialities (Alaimo 2008, 238).

Livability – the ethical dimension of aesthetics

Nature in *Nänting måste gå sönder* and *Pojktanten*, in all its complexities, becomes a space of livability, not despite of its pollution but with and through it. The films themselves create alternative imaginaries of livability through their ecological aesthetics, in the ways in which different protagonists interact with one another, and in how the protagonist is not always a human body, but sometimes a pond, a lake, a plastic bag, a forest or a hill. The historical dimension which frames trans bodies through notions of contamination and unnaturalness is subverted and reappropriated. Pollution is no longer an accusation made against such bodies but instead becomes a space of intimate, vibrant entanglements. Waste and pollution, in how they are aesthetically addressed in these films, form a space of connection with otherness, of proximity to other discarded beings and things, allowing their protagonists to find refuge. Out of this constellation emerges an intimacy with otherness, an affinity among those discarded materialities that are pushed to the margins while the films' aesthetics create enchanted and hopeful moments of survival for their trans and non-binary protagonists.

Ultimately, intimate otherness is an intimate togetherness in world-

making, or finding livability in an otherwise discarded, impossible space of pollution in these films. The possibility of a livable safe life and questions revolving around livability are an ever-present issue in most trans or non-binary or otherwise queer people's lives. In a video manifesto on trans as a category of impossibility, critical law scholar Dean Spade remarks "[t]rans people have always been told that we are impossible, that we do not exist, that we are not who we say we are, that we are incomprehensible..." (Spade 2013). In the manifesto, Spade reclaims the space for what is usually considered impossible, a space for those on the social periphery, trans and all other humans and animals whose lives are considered less worthy, less understandable, and less recognisable. Inhabiting the space of impossibility is a demand for survival in violent circumstances, and the hope for a different existence, different societal conditions and different collective living possibilities. Aesthetically, this impossible space, the impossible beauty of the polluted geographies are the spaces where the ecological aesthetics of *Nånting måste gå sönder* and *Pojktanten* can also be read as deeply ethical. These polluted geographies create a space of livability for the peripheral subject, assembled alongside its intimate others. And it is not a sad, lifeless space, but one of wonder, tenderness, proximities, and the hope of finding a space of existence, of surviving and living in an uninhabitable place in connection with other intimate others.

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NOTES

1. Nino Mick is a Gothenburg-based poet and non-binary artist. The quote is from their lyric collection *Tjugofemtusen kilometer nertrådar* (2018) [translation: Biology doesn't scare me any longer / I see now how it spreads and grows / How a tree crown also doesn't fit / Under glass in order to be observed].
2. For a discussion on affective intimacies in the context of trans studies as well as animal studies, see e.g. the special issue in *Angelaki* by Steinbock, Szczygielska, and Wagner (2017).

3. In a conversation we had shortly after the release of *Nänting måste gå sönder*. We have been friends since we exchanged Ester's film copy and my doctoral thesis on exit scapes in trans cinema in late 2014, the year we both finished these big projects.
4. Philosopher and historian Julian Honkasalo, in his work on the history of eugenic sterilisation of gender non-conforming youth and adults in the US, argues that this has been applied as "a biopolitical means of regulating degenerate populations" (Honkasalo 2016, 272) in order to avoid assumed hereditary effects.
5. Transgender Europe offers valuable information on forced sterilisation practices in different European countries (<http://tgeu.org/24-countries-in-europe-still-require-sterilization-from-trans-people/>). Denmark discontinued forced sterilisation in 2014, Sweden in 2013, and the German law was abolished in 2011. Swedish trans activists ensured financial compensation in April 2016. The sterilisation requirement still remains in the Finnish law regarding legal gender recognition.
6. Feminist anthropologist Mary Douglas, well-known for her analysis of "purity" as an ordering theme for many societies, has written similarly about pollution as a force of disruption (Douglas [1966] 2002).
7. At the time of the film's release, Lasse Långström used the pseudonym Antiffa Vånsterfitta, which roughly translates as "Antifa Leftycunt".
8. Generally, what has been termed "Scandinavian sensibility" has become a worldwide imported aesthetics (Hill and Turnbull 2017). It has, for instance, been nicely integrated in the compelling Australian feminist crime investigation series *Top of the Lake* (directed by Jane Campion, 2013 and 2017) (see, e.g., Gondouin, Thapar-Björkert, and Ryberg 2018), but also extends beyond the crime genre into other international and European Nordic productions, with echoes in a small selection of trans films.
9. The selection of films here is made exclusively from the Swedish context. Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway have a smaller oeuvre, and contribute in similar ways to the formation of Nordic Trans Cinema. Particularly remarkable is the Danish fictional television series *Ondt i roven* (directed by Rikke Kolding, 2019). The documentary about the Finnish/Canadian stand-up comedian Jamie MacDonald, called *Manning Up* (2019), as well as the documentary about *Kelet*, a Finnish, Black trans woman who after having grown up in the UK moves back to Finland, *Kelet - Ole mitä haluat, honey!* (2020), are among the most successful trans films from Finland.
10. New Queer Cinema of the 1990s was marked by queer community-embedded filmmaking and was supported by the parallel rise of global queer film festivals (Dawson & Loist 2018).
11. Visibility, while almost a norm in LGBTIQ politics, is increasingly discussed as a highly ambivalent political aim. For a detailed intersectional discussion of visibility through questions of gender, sexuality, race and class, see the recent anthology *Trap Door* (Gossett, Stanley & Burton 2017).

12. Further information can be found in the Swedish Film Database: <http://www.svenskfilmdatabas.se/en/item/?type=film&itemid=72660#awards>.
13. “He” is the pronoun Eli Levén uses at the time of submission of this final version of the article.
14. Apart from Ellie’s transness, her working-class background is very interesting and of specific importance in the discursive connections between cleanness, class and race (Straube 2020).
15. Bergsmark explained this during a Q&A session after a film screening organised by Ulrika Engdahl at Linköping University. The quote is from that session (11 September 2015).