

## Voice-Under

A Taste of Warm Fear, Traumaturgy and Promiscuous Truths

### ABSTRACT

In this essay I introduce the term voice-under, a tool I use to explore and better understand the queer potential of film. My creative practice revolves around finding ways to depict a queer reality. If the superimposed voice narrating the story is the voice-over, then what I am exploring is the voice-under: a voice of other, parallel truths. I listen to the dump and the trauma, the rubbish and chewing gum, my friends and my little toe. I listen to the warm fear. What might a film look like that depicts trauma and injuries without holding on to them? What will we hear, if we stop listening to the loudest voice? Could it make visible to us small, crawling feelings, glimpses of another world? Instead of voice being used to stand for something essentialist, I see voice as a productive concept that looks at relations and its touches. Voice-under is a term developing through my ongoing doctoral research, in the dialogue that appears between writing and workshops with actors who are co-writers and other collaborators. In this essay I try to show what a voice-under can be, by examining the process of making my “hybrid film” *Sbe Male Snails*, titled *Pojktanten* in Swedish (2012). Further, I offer examples from my feature film *Nånting måste gå sönder* (*Something Must Break*, 2014) as well as from works by other queer film makers and trans artists like Wu Tsang, Sonja Nilsson, and Marcelo Caetano.

**Keywords:** voice-under, queer film, traumaturgy, pojktant

**THE FIRST TIME** I met Eli Levén I was 15 years old. I fell head over heels. He awakened my inner girl, or perhaps he just fed her; he touched me, and my heart ached. He made me think of everything that does not fit into reality.

I had bleach-blond hair and wore a little apron like a skirt over my pants. Eli was all I dreamed of being, of being with. I wanted to find sisters, I wanted to distance myself from the man that was laid over me. Eli had a name for his mode of resistance: he was a *pojktant*, from *pojke* for “boy”, and *tant*, a word for “old woman” with connotations of “auntie” and “hag”. Eli links the term to the power borne by someone like Tina Turner, or a cougar-type figure.

A decade later the two of us received a grant from Swedish Public Television to produce a cultural documentary about Eli, who is an author. I felt pressured to make a “real” documentary, even though no such demand had been made explicit. I shot hours and hours of film for this author portrait I could not make; I joined Eli at readings and filmed him writing. I tried to be the “fly” (?) on the wall.

But the documentary frame made it impossible to describe a non-binary experience. Images of gender are so closely tied to conventions, to the “reality” associated with the genre of documentary filmmaking. No matter what I tried to do, I still had to spend too much time relating to representations and stereotypes. Portraying non-binary experiences is not possible within a genre based on binary divisions.

How, then, could I tell the story of our memories, our lives?

### **Voice-Under**

My creative practice revolves around finding ways to depict a queer reality. If the superimposed voice narrating the story is the voice-over, then what I am exploring is the voice-under: a voice of other, parallel truths.

How can I use the language and imagery of film to reach beyond language and imagery? How can I activate a more capacious imagination? The unique potential of film exists in its dizzying ability to create other worlds. Film opens up to the sensuous. When film activates our memories and feelings, it also creates the possibility of other ways of being

with them. That is what is filmic about film, and this potential is a queer potential, because what is queer cannot be reduced to what is visible to the camera (Gosh cited in Schoonover and Galt 2014, 211–213). In this text I will present different filmic examples of how we can queer—open up—the world by making film that reaches beyond representation and beyond the binaries of body and mind, nature and culture. I am looking to give examples of queer filmic potential, where queer never stops at a formalized recipe. Where queer moves and shifts. Where various relations create a voice that becomes a rhythm. Where there is no essence, or soul.

In the text that follows I introduce the term *voice-under*, a tool I use to explore and better understand the queer potential of film. Filmmaker, author, and composer Trinh T. Minh-ha (1992, 183–184) distinguishes between political film and political filmmaking, a notion which, when applied to my practice could be framed as: instead of making queer film, making film queer.

A term like voice-under is a container, a carrier bag, a method for collecting and holding complexity beyond narrow concepts and categories that make queer and trans lives less livable, less breathable. I try to show what a voice-under can be by examining the process of making my “hybrid film” *She Male Snails*, titled *Pojktanten* in Swedish (2012). Further, I offer examples from my feature film *Something Must Break* (2014) as well as works by other queer filmmakers and trans artists like Wu Tsang, Sonja Nilsson, and Marcelo Caetano.

Voice-under is a performative silence, an activity where new meaning can appear. A passive-active way to (re-)create the world. This voice appears in the relation, in the meeting of matter, space, language, and all that is beyond what cannot be encompassed within us.

With the concept of voice-under I hope to emphasize that multiplicity of expressions which in concert constitute the film. Sounds, words, that which is in the image, that which is behind it, around us, inside of us.

Voice-under is a term developing through my ongoing doctoral research, in the dialogue that appears between writing and workshops with actors who are co-writers and other collaborators.

## Voice-Over

Voice-under should not, and cannot, be reduced to voice-over's opposite. A voice-over can be, but is not necessarily, authoritarian. As a tool, it has been rightly criticized for appearing as a voice of God, i.e. a superimposed gaze which shapes and defines what the viewer sees in the film. Voice-over has historically been conceived of as a white cis man who explains what things are, making alternative readings of the image more difficult, as film theorist Sarah Kozloff (2008, 636–637), using the TV documentary and the so-called nature film as examples, has shown.

Kozloff (*ibid.*) distinguishes between the type of voice-over that is presented as an objective third-person truth-teller, i.e. a voice outside of the story itself, and voice-over as a subjective first-person narrator. The impact of the voice-over tool is determined not by the technique as such, but by factors like script and casting. I myself have used voice-over in all my films, including *She Male Snails*. Like Kozloff, it is my sense that the way the tool is employed makes all the difference: a voice-over can be a voice-under.

A beautiful (w-underful!) example of a queer voice-over that doubles as voice-under is the narrator voice in U.S. artist and filmmaker Wu Tsang's *Wildness* (2012). The film is a portrayal of the Silver Platter, a Los Angeles queer bar which serves as a meeting place for Latina trans women. The film shows the encounter, overlap, and friction between the different queer worlds at the bar; it is also about migration, gentrification, freedom, and class.

In order to find a way to describe this rich and diverse place, Wu Tsang and script writer Roya Rastegar chose to make the bar itself the narrator. In Tsang's words:

The writing also draws from oral histories that I collected from doing interviews with the clientele and owners of Silver Platter. So it is truly a composite of many things. It enabled us to say more, to give more depth, instead of having to rely on authoritative voice over. (Tsang 2013)

Something I frequently grapple with in filmmaking, particularly when making documentaries, is that the many layers of complexity do not fit within what is understood as authentic, and within the boundaries that conventionally define the documentary. Nuances are easily erased in a process that stays within these boundaries. To circumvent such issues, Tsang and Rastagar appropriate the major, or mainstream, way of telling a story by using a third-person voice-over. Here, though, the voice-over is no all-powerful god, but instead a nightclub spirit.

I think of this voice as a nightlife spirit who inhabits the Silver Platter, but who also exists in within geographies across time, whispering to young people and inspiring them to make space for themselves. (Ibid.)

This voice-over is a collective voice, read by Guatemalan actor and trans activist Mariana Marroquin. Tsang and Rastagar have created a voice-under-voice-over, at once a chorus and a million unique songs. The third-person narrator of *Wildness* is not an imposing god, but a collective spirit.

Narrative voice is a phenomenon linked to power and authority, but it is also viewed as a low-class “provisional” solution associated with bad television. Queer film can attempt to challenge such hierarchies of good and bad taste. One example of a first-person voice-over using precisely such “cheap” methods can be found in Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman’s *Je tu il elle* (1974). Having broken up with her girlfriend, the protagonist, played by Akerman herself, is lying in bed, eating sugar from a two-kilo package until there is nothing left, and the voice-over describes the scene matter-of-factly: she is eating sugar until there is nothing left. When she lies down on the mattress the voice-over explains: “on the fourth day I laid down on the mattress”. It’s claustrophobic, monotonous, and ingenious. The voice-over takes the emptiness of having left or having been left by someone to its extreme, sharpening the scene’s mundane features, like the crackling of the sugar, the resistance of the mattress, the children playing outside. It creates a vacuum.

A queer voice-over can re-create the banal, like in Akerman, or recode the godlike voice, like in Tsang.

## **The Truth is Always Promiscuous**

What does it mean to “find your voice”? The notion of a “voice” is often essentialist. But if we look closer at the way a voice develops, it soon becomes clear that voice is something perpetually re-created in the present, over and over again. Might finding one’s voice mean finding one’s vulnerability, one’s sensitivity? Finding that place where you and the world come together in perpetual remaking? Voice, from this perspective, means being curiously aware, and caring about each relationship, each moment, each frame.

Voice-under is a non-essentialist essence. It is the spaghetti and the (soy) meat sauce-iness of the spaghetti and the meat sauce, where no one ingredient in and of itself constitutes the meal. The meal is a result of the relationship between these ingredients, how that relation of different matter comes into being through language and taste buds, digesting in my stomach, processed by the millions of bacteria in my body, feeding trillions of cells. Voice-under aims to turn all binary oppositions, from gender to life and death, inside out.

Voice-under is a temporal manifestation of a series of intimate encounters. You could say that the truth is always promiscuous, made up of temporary relations of different materialities and intensities. Voice-under is a result of the encounter. Of not just the different elements and parts of the film, but also the encounter that occurs in the movie theater, between those bodies who experience the film, and the screen itself. The space between our mental images and the images on the screen makes up one of those voices in the diverse chorus that constitutes a film.

Voice-under is at once a chorus and a million unique songs.

They are the voices sidled in you, and the world.

Which, though you try to deny them with all your schedules and your feeds,  
are in and of themselves your soft center.

If we listen, a swarm of insights awaits us.

From afar, beneath, inside.

Far away, and right here.

## The Voice of the *Pojktant*

The creative process for *She Male Snails* started just like this essay: *The first time I met Eli I was fifteen years old...* The film starts with a TV-style voice-over, observing the protagonist from the outside. I was trying to make a real documentary film and I was trying not to be a non-binary person; I was trying to hide the fact that my inside and my outside did not correspond. But I realized early on that the story I wanted to tell could not be contained by conventional documentary language.

The documentary tradition demands truth and authenticity. The genre wants to pass as “real”. Just like trans people, documentary films must relate to expectations of what a particular type of story looks like. Trans people’s experiences of the world are made suspicious, and instead, demands are made on them to present an “authentic” story; as we know, what is considered real is deeply associated with gender identity. Challenging such authenticity norms within the documentary genre has been important for me on several levels. It is bigger than just breaking with certain formal requirements. It is about life and death.

There was a strong voice-under in *She Male Snails*. There was an undercurrent of a queer appetite for life, which I had to give myself to. For no matter how much I sometimes wish to cut off pieces of myself to be able to move more smoothly through the world, in the end it is more painful for me to deny myself than being jumped or attacked.

It took five years to finish *She Male Snails*. The film includes scenes showing Eli and me in a steaming bathtub, in glowing candle light, images suffused with conversation, skin, touch. These scenes are interspersed with shots of a handful of people of different ages and gender expressions: all unspeaking, but staged in charged, disconcerting situations. The documentary aspects are interwoven with dreamlike scenes of fiction, personal voice-overs and scenes of landscapes between and beyond city and nature. Beauty collides with the raw and ugly; hidden folds emerge from city and personality.

At first, I sought to capture the unbounded, floating experience of some kind of freedom, one I had experienced in the tub with Eli. The

bathroom, a space where we were held by hot water, where I felt lighter. It was an enclosed, protected place. The longer we spend in the tub, the colder the water, and the colder our interaction. Temperature is one of those elements that determine the film's soundscape. The longer we spend in that bathroom, the more prevalent become the echo and the small, unpleasant sounds of friction against the enamel of the tub. The subtle, warm sounds of gas heaters and fires which have been crackling in the background fade. The soundscape becomes increasingly metallic. Finally, Eli says: I'm tired of sitting in this fucking tub.

Eli refused to stay shut inside the frame, inside the gaze of the audience, the director, the lover, and the strictures of the documentary format. His proclamation shocked me, scared me and delighted me, all at once ... Because Eli had finally emerged as himself. Perhaps he had tried to please me by going with it, trying to tell the story of something he no longer had a burning need to tell. And I had tried to find what I was looking for in him.

When he left me alone, I had to find my own non-binary way of being. Was I a *pojktant*? And it was when I added a voice-over that the film came together.

With the voice-over I dared to put myself in the frame, to be vulnerable myself. It meant that my own fantasy images could appear as a more complex inner world.

*01:04:47 am*

*I just woke from a fever dream.*

*My makeup is all smeared and I have a headache.*

*I get up and*

*wash my silicone inserts in the sink.*

*My breasts.*

*I watch them bob in the lukewarm water.*

*For a while I cannot tell if they are part of me or not.*

*I wrap them in a towel to dry, then place them in my bra.*

*That is when I feel I have come home.*

*I think about how I'm seen.*



*I so badly want to be clear about not being a she or a he.  
I want to be clear about not knowing who I am  
and that it is just fine*

*She Male Snails* is a deeply personal film about loving, and the desire to come into being in the encounter with another. It is about the initial refusal to see that the person you are in love with is something else, or more, than you first saw. And then to dare to understand that we are so much more. The film serves as an example from my practice of what voice-under can look like, the different layers and shapes that came out of the process, together carrying the story. For example, people would ask me which of the film's characters was the Swedish title's Lady Boy, and which was the protagonist. But in my view, *She Male Snails* is the encounter of all these different parts; the film is their relation. It is a collective form of under-standing, a way of gathering and holding complexity beyond narrow concepts and categories that make queer and trans lives less livable, less breathable.

Queer truth cannot be undressed. It is always nude, it is dirty-clean, a rose and garbage at the same time.

### **The Voice of the Dump**

I grew up in the Stockholm suburb of Högdalen, near Högdalstippen, a landfill. That landscape held great importance to me: among garbage and trees I was able to find some kind of calm. Neither the water tower nor the tree stumps cared about my gender, or my name, or my memories.

During the 1960s, large parts of central Stockholm were torn down in the name of urban renewal and large compounds of low-income housing were erected on the city's outskirts. This construction resulted in huge volumes of landfill and this material was used to make artificial hills in several Stockholm locations, enormous sculptures intended to contrast with the surrounding landscape. The hills soon became a source of embarrassment, and they have still not been formally recognized as parks. These sites, not urban but not exactly rural either, have been used for skiing and been home to rave parties. The area around Högdals-

tippen in particular was one of the breeding grounds for Swedish punk. Myra Hird, professor of Environmental Studies who writes on trans theory and garbage, describes landfills as a twilight zone, “where no clear, ‘natural’ definition of [waste] can be given, within large margins of variation and uncertainty” (Hird 2016).

I read that Högdalstoppen is Stockholm’s “tallest non-natural peak”. The journalist Per Wirtén writes that he understands why these dumps have been so loathed: “Because here, the perspective of the city is changed. You see it from the ‘wrong’ direction and suddenly it looks different. (...) The new city is one that unites many differences, breaking up the idea of unity and homogeneity” (Wirtén 2010, 322–323).

The idea that there is one correct vantage point, the idea that there is a beginning and an end, a center and a periphery, brings to mind the common narrative of trans people as people born in the “wrong body”. But when you no longer take the given center as your starting point, when you no longer begin with right and wrong, new images and stories can emerge.

How and from where we look, as well as what we bring to our vantage point, shapes what we see. What we see is affected by what we bring, and we are standing on a pile of trash. It is one of the many foundations we begin with.

I found one of my narrators for *She Male Snails* on Vårbergstoppen, another landfill, and in my backyard in the Stockholm suburb Vårberg. I noticed I was drawn to onion peels, pink chewing gum, and tire tracks. Somewhere in there was a space for those experiments that could not be told with a binary conventional documentary language. I had no clear thought when I started spending time with the trash, with the refuse, alongside my camera. I found that it made me present. Seeing only colour and shape, light and darkness, not trying to separate things or see what the “true meaning” of things were. With my camera, in my backyard and on the dumps, trash and other forms of residue remained beautiful fragments, a dispersed rainbow in the middle of fall’s grays.

These landscapes eased something for me. I like playing with the established metaphor that posits “nature” as a symbol for freedom and

nationalism, so I photographed birches in this unnamable landscape, and in so doing I leaned into the national-romantic images at the same time as I was dissolving them. Instead of *symbols* of nationalism, they became *sites* for queer becomings. They became what film theorists Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt (2016) term “queer pastoral”:

Queer pastorals link cinema’s ability to imagine fantastical worlds, queer culture’s investment in creating counter-publics, and eco-criticism’s demand that we reimagine our human relationship to the natural environment. Queers upturn rhetorics of human dominance over nonhuman nature, often by refusing to take part in the nature–culture binary that has proved so destructive for both queer people and the world’s ecology. (247)

When nature is made into a symbol, we situate ourselves outside of it. We are not in that image. We are outside of the frame. It is the same thing with queerness, in the sense that films can position themselves on the outside of queerness by reducing their queerness to representations of queer persons. This might be done in opposition to the erasure of queer bodies, but these films end up transforming queer into a static concept.

Meanwhile, queer is radical untamed care and desire. I want to *do* trans, not represent it. Wu Tsang writes in an artist statement about visibility and representation that it can be challenging to be trans/gender nonconforming, since it is common to view these terms as group identities rather than malleable strategies for resistance. In Tsang’s words:

I dislike the word visibility, perhaps because for me it evokes the rhetoric of assimilation, as if the goal of trans movements were about being ‘seen’ and gaining acceptance from society—I don’t subscribe to that. (2012)

Making queer film is not just about human relationships, but about challenging transphobic binary language, a language which, moreover, leads us to abuse earth as we think that it is something outside of us,

when it is actually part of us, when we are ourselves earth, matter. “(T)he poetic language is necessary to depict problematics which are not content being cemented in binary oppositions,” writes author and poet Mara Lee in her dissertation *The Writing of Others* (2014, 15).

It is my belief that we need to find our way to those sites where language and ideas centered on binary concepts crumble and disintegrate. The dump is one such site. The non-binary body is another. Poetic language is one such site. Queer film is another.

Film that is queer, as opposed to film about queers, will not be reduced to one expression or one identity. The concept of voice-under is an attempt to indicate the relation which creates queer expression, the transgender effects of film, “those deconstructive moments when foreground and background seem to flip and reverse, and the spectacle of an unexpected gender phenomenon illuminates the production of gender normativity in a startling new way” (Stryker 2006, 13), depictions in between and in excess of language’s split between light and darkness, foreground and background, inside and outside, right body and wrong body. *She Male Snails* is made up of multiple parallel narrative components—the fiction, the shots of “garbage”, the different voice-overs, the interviews, the cinema direct, the soundscape and its various plays with sensations (like warmth), the bathtub as a site in between fiction and documentary, the references to art and commercials—which together create a communal expression, the film’s voice. All that which we have cut off from ourselves, which we have left on the dump. That terrain can be experienced through film that is queer.

Using different components is not unique in itself, the uniqueness lies in how we listen to the components and how the background(s) becomes the foreground(s); what emerges from that listening, and how these relationships sound. It is about emphasizing multiplicity, asking what carries the gathering. To understand it.

The strategy of *She Male Snails* was to *enter the image* rather than stand on its outside or simply create oppositional images. *Doing*, instead of representing I let shards of different images break like a sauce breaks, so that the various components of the images became visible—in paral-

lel to how the word *pojktant* has two parts, the aforementioned *pojke* and *tant*. Yet, there is a third something there, a glitch, a note of sorts – like when you hit a gong and time stops in the vibrations.

A pause. A room to breathe inside the body. An opening toward something else, something vaster.

An example. In the costume design we created something we named “the armor”. It was composed of cliché attributes of the nuclear family: wedding dress, hockey equipment, lottery tickets, and various strongly coded gender signifiers: scraps of idealized images.

A double symbolism came out of this. Firstly, the costume makes visible the attributes of the structures, enabling us to see them. Simultaneously, something new is created, something which gestures beyond the attempt to encapsulate the world represented by these attributes. In other words, in film there is always something invisible, something beyond.

What is visible in an image depends on what lies behind it, underneath it. Well, depends might in fact be the wrong term, because what is visible and what is invisible cannot be separated. It is all part of the same dump, the same soil. The non-binary experience can exist there, in that landscape, as can the experience of being made invisible. It is a space overlooked.

## **Traumaturgy**

It was a dark fall evening when I arrived with my suitcase in Berlin. I had traveled there since I needed space to express myself more freely, something I felt I could not do in Stockholm, a place I associated with restrictive norms. I had run aground in the editing process of *She Male Snails* and wanted to be in a place where I could be surrounded by queer and trans people, where I was not constantly curtailing myself by minimizing my own non-binary experience. I had internalized a transphobia which, I felt, Stockholm was feeding, since that city is one where every sidewalk, every corner, every rock, is arranged to have a particular function. Just like in conventional film dramaturgy.

Stockholm is a binary city where nothing is allowed to linger in the twilight zone, where every inch of uncertainty is built away. Perhaps

that is why those dumps felt so nourishing to me. Still, I longed to be surrounded by people, a collective.

Luggage in hand, I went to locate the one-bedroom I was subletting. That is when someone yelled *schwuchtel*, a word I did not know (according to the thesaurus: “derogatory, mildly vulgar, male homosexual; faggot, fairy, fruit, poof, queen”). Nevertheless, I understood from the tone that it was an offensive word for something which I, in some way, experienced myself as being. I was lost, I was afraid. Under normal circumstances I have an excellent sense of location; I cannot read a map, but I navigate through visual memory. In my disorientation the city was homogenous, all its cross streets, trees, streetlights, and tobacconists looked the same.

Aside from the derogatory word, nothing else hit me that night, and at last I found the apartment. That night in Berlin I was walking with *ghosts*, to use director Marcelo Caetano’s term (email conversation 2019) for those hazy, abstract figures which terrifyingly exist around us, and which could take solid shape at any moment to perpetrate violence. I have learned through experience about their solid form (it was only a month earlier that I had been beaten up in a hate crime). I have also learned this from film. There are many popular dramaturgical models that use this threat of ghosts taking shape: films play with our expectations of violence, for example by showing a character being attacked while making their way home through a dark city.

That night in Berlin I was afraid. The ghosts caused my body to tense up, suffusing me with frozen fear, immobilizing fear. My body felt static, restricted, just like my range of motion in the public space. The world seemed smaller, the scope of reality felt smaller. The knot in my chest, that physical tension, restricted my breathing and therefore also the oxygenation of my blood. That evening in Berlin was a repetition of similar experiences, my own and collective ones.

It is obviously important to depict and display violence in film. The question is: how can we approach violence without adding to that dancing loop that exists between ghosts and real violence. The U.S. political scientist Wendy Brown (2015, 93–94) writes about holding on to injury

and trauma, arguing that making these stories the basis for an identity forecloses liberation. She asks how we might create new ways of relating, which do not neglect historical or ongoing violence, but which also do not centre on the wound as the only story about who we are. I have the same question when it comes to film and dramaturgy.

What might a film look like that depicts trauma and injuries without holding on to them? How could we thaw that frozen fear? Is there a way to expand into a broader register where we can listen to experiences, powers, and desires that are normally submerged in the noise? What will we hear, if we stop listening to the loudest voice? Could it make visible to us small, crawling feelings, glimpses of another world? Something warm, something different, waiting to crawl up and unravel all those knots in our chests.

### **Letting Ghosts Be Ghosts**

Marcelo Caetano's feature film *Corpo Elétrico* (2017) uses a dramaturgy that works with ghosts, in particular those ghosts which haunt queer people. The film is told through Elias, who spends his time with queer friends and colleagues at a clothing factory. They work, party, dress up, have sex.

After a long night out Elias stumbles into the apartment of his older, wealthy lover Arthur. They have not seen each other since Elias came to pick up his belongings after a breakup. Elias is drunk, maybe high, in need of help. Arthur has another guy over, but there is no jealousy. Nobody is taken advantage of. Instead, the scene is one of care, as Arthur helps Elias take a shower. Another scene: Elias' colleague Wellington, who has a more precarious job in the factory, is not caught when they steal cloth to make dresses. Later, they are able to joyously tear through the city on their motorbikes, and there is no accident. At a party with the colleagues someone walks in on Elias and Wellington having sex, but it is not a big deal. Elias and Wellington are even able to whistle and tease a group of soccer players ("let's fucking score!") from the sidelines of the field, without being driven away or threatened. The ghosts that beat up, shame, or exclude queer persons never take solid shape.

In an email to me (2019), Marcelo Caetano writes:

I was dealing all the time with our own morbid expectations about homophobia happening in scene. Will those characters be beaten? will they fight? will a car pass over them in the scene they get out after a long day working at the factory? I was dealing directly with all these ghosts we have in our minds!

It's crazy because I heard a lot of 'nothing happens!' 'where's the drama', but inside those people's minds everything was happening, dramatically. And they get frustrated, because the screen denied the space for these morbid fantasies to happen and opened space for these characters to get pleasure. And for some people it's hard to have pleasure in cinema.

I wanted to give the characters new possibilities of images and representation. And in fact, those characters don't need more oppression besides the work/factory oppression. It's already too brutal to work 10/12 hours in a production line.

Watching *Corpo Elétrico* is incredibly freeing and joyous, as though the sites that create that feeling of tightness in me finally have been given more space. It is as though the film shines its spotlight on the images I bring to the theater, and in conversation with the other viewers after the film I understand that they feel the same way. The darkness of the theater becomes a place for collective transformation, where Caetano invites us to communally reconfigure our expectations. The fact that much of the critique revolved around the idea that nothing happens, when so much happens in us, a queer audience, shows the importance of storytelling that uses both the space within the film and the space in which we watch films.

### **Dissolved Impressions**

There are other figures of dramaturgy, figures that also repeat traumas but do so by building on prejudice and stereotype. Figures which reinscribe the story of who you are and who you can be. Being exposed to



such images over and over again can be traumatizing, as Swedish artist Sonja Nilsson points out when she recalls her own nightmare experience of watching *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) as a 14-year old at a confirmation camp. “Is that what I’ll be made into by my wish to be a girl?” she wondered, watching the character Buffalo Bill, a mass murderer and the film’s demonizing representation of a trans person, dance to Q Lazzarus’ *Goodbye Horses* (Nilsson 2008).

In her work *När lammen tystnar* (*The Silence of the Lambs*) Nilsson illustrates how such stories make an impression. She re-creates the scene of Buffalo Bill dancing. Then the viewer sees a flash, which affixes the dancer to the retina for several minutes. The piece shows how images turn into negatives inside our bodies and shape our imagination.

In Nilsson’s piece, I catch sight of the image being precisely that: an image, possible to distance myself from. It causes the image to fall apart, lose its potency. It dissolves. The image is revealed as one of the many ghosts Marcelo Caetano notes that we carry with us. Throughout our lives, we are trained to see certain sequences of events, and Nilsson’s piece, to me, uncovers that learning process. She short-circuits the image, and it stops haunting me.

I want to approach injuries and traumas carefully in order to loosen something.

### **A Warm Fear**

The sex scene is one site where the impressions and stereotypes we bring to the screen might, as Caetano says, turn the screen into a site of pleasure, just like Nilsson’s uncovering of the stereotyping of trans women. Because sex scenes are so charged, there is also a lot of space to re-create these images, and of finding glimpses of freedom in that reconfiguration.

*What if we’ve been bitten by ticks, Andreas says.*

*Whatever, they never bite me, Ellie says, confident, sbrugging.*

*It’s really dangerous, you can die.*

*Okay, why don’t you check me.*

So begins a fumbling, tender scene in my feature film *Something Has to Break* (2014). It is based on Eli Levén's debut novel *Du är rötterna som sover vid mina fötter och håller jorden på plats* (You Are the Roots that Sleep by My Feet and Hold the World in Place, 2010), and I was working on it in parallel with *She Male Snails*. The film is about the trans girl Ellie, who meets a straight guy named Andreas. They lack a language to reach each other. Ellie still uses her given name Sebastian. And Andreas, who is trained in normative concepts around gender and sexuality, is confused to discover the strong desire and love that exists between them. Even Ellie thinks it is never going to work out, that she is doomed to loneliness, since she does not believe someone like Andreas could love her. It is as though all the external conditions for them to approach each other are missing. There is no path, no link, between their emotions and the world and language in which they live.

Ellie and Andreas have been out all night, stolen alcohol and a kitchen machine from a bar; the sun has started to rise by the time they make it home and now they are splayed out on Andreas bed, painting. It has been a wild night. They have so many feelings for each other that they burn like two wildfires, and their mischief is a way of living out the blocked intimacy. In the midst of this euphoria they have ended up at Andreas' place, and their exhaustion leads them to let down their guard. They are jittery, drunk with each other and the adventure.

At this point, Andreas asks if they might have been bitten by ticks. As though a deeper desire spoke from his mouth, another way to say—I want to be near you. A moment of confusion, worry, perhaps even fear—the *warm fear, the one that gives desire, not the one that immobilizes*. Earlier in the film, Ellie's body language is reserved, but now she is sprawling, arms above her head. Fearless, present, and radiant with desire. Her quiet smile is an exploration with echoes of all those times a trans person's body (and other bodies) is examined, appraised, judged; but here, it comes from a place of curiosity. Not commenting on the stereotypes, it nevertheless comments through its silence.

The body is. The courage Ellie shows in baring her heart is blinding to the preconceived notions we all carry deep within ourselves.

They examine folds and earlobes with immense intimacy. Without having even kissed they find a tender, raw closeness. “Never has anal penetration been so romantic”, the Danish magazine *Soundvenue* (Astrup 2017) writes as part of a list of unique sex scenes.

[...] it was a good fear, the fear that creates desire [...] I wanted to switch fears, I wanted the one they called the warmer fear, which has its center in the belly and radiates out. (Bouraoui 2012, 68, translated from Swedish into English by Kira Josefsson)

The words come from French-Algerian author Nina Bouraoui in her novel *Sauvage* (2012, in Swedish *Enstörig*). For Ellie and Andreas, the fear of being bitten by something alien becomes an entry point into a queer intimacy, and new ways of being in the world. A warm fear. Entirely different from the frozen fear.

Sitting, vibrating together. In a bathroom, in front of a screen. Finding a space which gives us room to breathe, despite the violence outside. A space that is communal, like the movie salon, where we breathe together, experience together, and where there is a possibility of glimpsing something more than ghosts. Of listening to a voice-under.

## **Acknowledgment**

This text is edited in collaboration with Rebecka Bülow. The text is translated from Swedish by Kira Josefsson. Thank you also to my academic supervisor Jenny Sundén for your engaged critique and care.

**ESTER MARTIN BERGSMARK** is a filmmaker and PhD candidate in artistic research at Stockholm university of the arts. Bergsmark works with different genres and formats (with a passion for seeing their interdependent relationships and manifestations) and in close collaboration with other artists. Films include the feature film *Something must break* (2014) and *She male snails* (2012), both in collaboration with Eli Levén. In 2009, Bergsmark made *Fruitcake* (with Sara Kaaman) as part of the experimental feminist porn suite *Dirty Diaries*. The

short film *Instinct* (2019), directed with Mad Kate, Marit Östberg and Adrienne Teicher, premiered at the Berlin Porn Film Festival. The doctoral project *Voice under* explores how desire, joy, liberation, movement are generating principles – in terms of inner, outer and collective change – as opposed to trauma, fear, frozenness, immobility.

## REFERENCES

### FILMOGRAPHY

- Corpo elétrico*. 2017. Directed by Marcelo Caetano, Brazil.
- Je tu il elle*. 1974. Directed by Chantal Akerman, Belgium, France.
- Nänting måste gå sönder (Something must break)*. 2014. Directed by Ester Martin Bergsmark, Sweden.
- Pojktanten (She male snails)*. 2014. Directed by Ester Martin Bergsmark, Sweden.
- The Silence of the Lambs*. 1991. Directed by Jonathan Demme, USA.
- Wildness*. 2012. Directed by Wu Tsang, USA.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Astrup, Annie Dahl. 2017. "De mest originale sexscener, del 4: 'Aldrig har en anal fingerpenetration været mere romantisk'." *Soundvenue*, July 16, 2017. <https://soundvenue.com/film/2017/07/de-mest-originale-sexscener-del-4-aldrig-har-en-anal-fingerpenetration-vaeret-mere-romantisk-264087>.
- Bouraoui, Nina. 2012. *Enstörig* (originally in French *Sauvage*). Translated by Maria Björkman. Stockholm: Grate.
- Brown, Wendy. 2005. *Edgework: critical essays on knowledge and politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hird, Myra J. 2016. "The Phenomenon of Waste-World-Making." *Rhizomes*, Issue 30, 2016.
- Kozloff, Sarah. 2008. "Voice-over narration." In *Routledge encyclopedia of narrative theory*, edited by David Herman, Manfred Jahn & Marie-Laure Ryan, 636–7. London: Routledge.
- Lee, Mara. 2014. "När Andra skriver: skrivande som motstånd, ansvar och tid." PhD diss., Göteborgs universitet.
- Minh-ha, Trinh T. 1992. *Framer Framed Film Scripts and Interviews*. London: Routledge.
- Nilsson, Sonja. *När lammen tystnar*. Installation. 2008. Alma Löv Museum, Sweden.
- Schoonover, Karl & Galt, Rosalind. 2016. *Queer Cinema in the World*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Wirtén, Per. 2010. *Där jag kommer från: kriget mot förorten*. Stockholm: Bonnier.
- Wu, Tsang. 2013. "Wu Tsang 'Wildness' Introduced by Andrew Berardini". Interview by Andrew Berardini. *Vdrome*, March 9–10, 2013. <https://www.vdrome.org/wu-tsang-wildness>.
- Wu, Tsang. 2012. "Artist statement." *Foundation for Contemporary Arts*, December 2012. <https://www.foundationforcontemporaryarts.org/recipients/wu-tsang>.