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# Visual Identity and the Queer Aesthetics of Passing

Gay Teen Body Politics in *Sebastian*, *Beautiful Thing*,  
and *Get Real*

*Abstract: The theatricality of passing as heterosexual in the face of legislative, medicalized, and stigmatized homophobia serves as the primary lens through which I analyse three European, gay coming-out films from the 1990s. In all three films – the Swedish-Norwegian film Sebastian (När alla vet, 1995), and two British films Beautiful Thing (1996) and Get Real (1998) – the physical bodies of the white protagonists complicate normative binaries and stereotypical queer aesthetics ascribed to homosexuals in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically, these three films serve as cultural artifacts about the time period, lending insight into how late 20<sup>th</sup>-century governments from the two regions treated the homosexual experience through the implementation of legislative, medicalized measures, specifically regarding HIV/AIDS.*

Keywords: visual identity, camp, passing, body politics, HIV/ AIDS, gay teens, 1990s European film, queer aesthetics, social welfare, homonormativity

The gay male body has historically served as a site of political inquiry, scrutiny, judgment, reflection, and subversion. Indeed, as Ken Plummer notes in his discussion about queer theory and bodies, “the body, surely, is both a central site of concern for both the symbolism and the practices of sex. We can see the body as both an erotically charged symbol harbouring a host of meanings and a series of material practices of embodiments” (526). For the gay male, this kind of queer “embodiment” can be dangerous when becoming semiotic shorthand for sociologically-attributed stigma and perversion. We consider “*queer* in its more traditional sense” as “a deviation from the ‘normal’” (Bruhm and Hurley x) to produce the broad binary: normal vs. deviants. This is a shorthand for the numerous systems, including heterosexual/homosexual, masculine/feminine, individual/community, sick/healthy, normal/pervert, passing/authentic, and legal/illegal, to which Fabio Cleto recognizes queer resistance (15). By analysing institutional evaluations of the gay male body as deviant, we may appreciate how queer individuals have struggled to remain invisible by “passing” to avoid stigmatisation.

An historical example from early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Sweden can help illuminate how some of these binaries have affected gay men’s bodies. Before the legalization of homosexuality in Sweden in 1944, the criminal prosecution of homosexuals had become complicatedly dependent on medicalized diagnoses and visual identification. As Jens Rydström explains, “Homosexual behaviour was still a crime, but in judicial practice it was increasingly dealt with as the consequence of a diagnosable illness” (“Sweden” 195). Rydström then articulates the quintessential quandary of queer identification guiding this article: how can one determine who is a *real* homosexual? Rydström elaborates on how the notion of “effeminacy” was deployed, with courts ordering physical examinations to establish whether a male individual was an authentic homosexual – as opposed to heterosexuals who dabbled in homosexual behaviours – through such characteristics as “wide hips, lack of hair on the body, a small penis, or femininely shaped pubic hair” (“Sweden” 195). For the Swedish government at that time, the physical body served as the best indicator of sexual orientation.

This Swedish example raises a larger discussion about queer aesthetics and identification in terms of diversity, authenticity, and passing. From a contemporary standpoint, we acknowledge the fallibility of such tests. While societal institutions often use physical bodies as a semiotic shorthand for indicators of visual identity, the phenomenon of passing exposes the permeable and unstable nature of this

interpretive system. More specifically, it exposes the importance of *camp* in conversations about bodies, visual identity, and passing. As Fabio Cleto notes, “*camp* and *queer* are cognate terms: *camp* is *queer* as a mode of being, as posturing a body” (30). Jack Babuscio divides *camp* into four different elements, one of which is “theatricality,” which he describes as “passing for straight” (123). This theatricality of passing as heterosexual in the face of legislative, medicalized, and stigmatized homophobia serves as the primary lens through which I analyse three European, gay coming-out films from the 1990s. In all three films – the Swedish-Norwegian film *Sebastian* (*När alla vet*, 1995), and two British films *Beautiful Thing* (1996) and *Get Real* (1998) – the physical bodies of the white protagonists complicate normative binaries and stereotypical queer aesthetics ascribed to homosexuals in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically, the films provide insight into how late 20<sup>th</sup>-century governments from the two regions treated the homosexual experience through the implementation of legislative, medicalized measures, specifically regarding HIV/AIDS.

During the 1990s, the devastating impact of AIDS on the gay community made the general public more aware of homosexuals and their (lack of) rights. The AIDS crisis “outed” many gay men in the public eye, challenging stereotypes of homosexual appearance. The politics surrounding gay rights and HIV played out very differently around the world. This paper contrasts the politics of visual identity and social welfare models of HIV testing evident in films about young gay men coming out in the 1990s from Sweden/Norway and from Britain. As an outsider to both regions, I acknowledge my cultural and linguistic limitations, but hope to leverage my insider knowledge of passing to connect the theatricality of passing as heterosexual in these films to the legislative and medicalized stigma implemented through institutional policies.

### Three Films on Passing and Coming Out

16-year-old Sebastian is the aloof protagonist of the Swedish-Norwegian film *Sebastian* (1995), directed by Svend Wam and based on the 1988 novel *Svart cayal* by Norwegian author Per Knutsen. Through film voiceovers, Sebastian narrates his growing self-awareness and queer desires, but also his frustration at the lack of privacy at home to fully discover and articulate these for himself. Sebastian realizes he is attracted to Ulf early in the film, but his attempts to initiate a relationship are rebuffed. Sebastian’s coming-out journey is prompted by his clearly loving parents and then his friends, in-

cluding Ulf, who doesn't think of himself as gay. The film ends on an upbeat turn as Sebastian verbalizes his identity to himself and to those around him.

Directed by Hettie MacDonald, *Beautiful Thing* (1996) is set on a council estate in London's East End. Jamie's mother, Sandra, tries to manage a pub whilst attempting to find out why Jamie keeps skipping P.E. class. Jamie's classmate, Ste, lives next door. On several occasions, Sandra invites Ste to share a room with Jamie after Ste's father beats him, and the two teens develop a secret physical relationship. Sandra discovers both the relationship and also that Jamie has been skipping class to avoid homophobic bullying. By the end of the film, Sandra has been offered a new job that will require her and Jamie to move, and Jamie and Ste come out together by publicly dancing in front of their housing development. This happy ending is offset by the viewers' knowledge of Ste's abusive home life, and consequently what might happen to him once Jamie and Sandra have moved away. Nevertheless, the film's ending shows that the teens have "the confidence to define themselves as gay and to commit themselves to each other" (Nowlan 143); perhaps part of this commitment involves Ste finding a way to live with Jamie and Sandra safely away from his abusive family.

Finally, *Get Real* (1998), directed by Simon Shore and filmed in and around Basingstoke near London, follows 16-year-old Steven's search for suitable outlets for his physical desires as well as his frustrations about the lack of support for gay students at school. Through a chance encounter, Steven forms a secret relationship with John, the popular school athlete, but realizes that John may not be ready to publicly commit to him. During an acceptance speech at the school awards ceremony, Steven reaches out to John for public support by coming out as gay to an audience of students and parents, explaining that others in the audience may feel too afraid to do the same, but John remains silent. Thereafter, Steven meets John to wish him well as they follow different paths. Unlike *Beautiful Thing*, the ending offers a more realistic portrayal of how terrifying coming out can be. The screenwriter, Patrick Wilde, wanted his play to serve as political commentary about legislative inequalities regarding gay teens in Britain.

## The Law and Visual Identities: The Bodies of Minors Passing as Heterosexual

The cinematic world of *Sebastian* marks a shift from the 1930s Sweden described at the beginning of this article, especially in terms of

visualising homosexual identity. Whilst the audience rapidly understands that Sebastian feels different about something, his sexual orientation is not directly referenced or queried until Ulf and Sebastian engage in playful wrestling whilst waiting for a train. The teens wind up on the ground, with Ulf straddling Sebastian, causing Sebastian to joke "People probably think we are gay." Ulf responds seriously, "Why does everybody have to make jokes about homosexuals all the time? I am sick of it."<sup>1</sup> The conversation quickly turns to Ulf's unhappy home life with an abusive, alcoholic, estranged father. Sebastian's joke may be a test to check Ulf's reaction, or perhaps Sebastian's attempt to pass as straight by telling a gay joke. Either way, this scene establishes Ulf as a valued, unashamed, sympathetic voice for the gay community, whilst positioning the gay community in an evolving legislative landscape of the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century in Norway and Sweden.

When Sebastian finally comes out to his parents, he fears their homophobic response will be to evict him, but while they do need time to process his revelation, they assure him that he can stay at home. The next day, Sebastian says in a voiceover, "Okay, that's it then. I'm gay. Lots of people are gay or so I've heard. Damn it all. Do you have to be gay just because you happened to kiss your best friend. I just happened to." But after coming out to Ulf, Sebastian asks "Homo? Hetero? What the hell does it all mean. Why me? Why not Ulf, or Janne?" Both voiceovers illustrate Sebastian's desire to better understand how his identity fits into his community.

Norway legalized homosexuality in 1972 with the age of consent set at 16, the same as for heterosexuals. In 1981, an Anti-discrimination clause was added to Norwegian law, followed by legislation allowing same-sex partnerships to be registered in 1993 (Rydström, "Introduction" 21). The trajectory was similar for Sweden, where homosexuality was legalized in 1944, but the age of consent was not made equal to heterosexuals, to 15, until 1978. Sweden's Anti-discrimination clause was effected in 1987, with registered partnership implemented in 1995 (Rydström, "Introduction" 21). Neither country modified their partnership laws until 2009 when they "introduced gender-neutral marriage laws" (Rydström, *Odd* 12-13).

This brief review of Norway and Sweden's laws about homosexual identity reveals an important point to consider about *Sebastian*: by the time this film finished production in 1995, Norway and Sweden had only recently implemented legal same-sex partnership, and neither country had yet established a marriage law for gay couples. This might seem inconsequential in hindsight, but it does help con-

textualize several elements in the film: Sebastian's hesitancy to come out; Ulf's remark about how commonplace homophobic jokes are; and also Sebastian's fear of being thrown out. Teenagers living in this region in 1995 would have heard homophobic jokes; they would also have heard discussion about the governmental shift on marriage regulations. Sebastian's inner monologues produce self-acceptance but provoke questions about his changing world.

In comparison to the Swedish and Norwegian legislative actions to combat homophobia, the British films showcase legislative measures that reinforced homophobic ideologies during the same period. While homophobic school bullying serves as a major plot device in *Beautiful Thing*, prompting Sandra to discover Jamie's sexual orientation, the film incorporates few scenes of Jamie's experiences at school or with his schoolmates. The opening scene depicts Jamie being targeted by a group of boys (including Ste) who steal his backpack and throw it outside of school property. Mr. Bennett, a new student teacher, is told that Jamie's name is Hugh Janus, which leads Mr. Bennet to yell "Huge Anus" at Jamie when he cuts class. This prank on the student teacher may not represent the clearest example of homophobia at school because the bullies make no other homophobic slurs in this scene. Instead, the film spends most of its time focusing on Jamie's developing relationship with his mother and next-door neighbours, occasionally showing Sandra on the phone with the school to remind viewers of Jamie's school problems. One of these phone calls prompts Sandra to look through Jamie's backpack where she sees his notebook has been graffitied with blatant homophobic pictures and slurs such as "cocksucker," "bum boy," "bum fucker," and "queer bent bastard," thereby solidifying the opening scene's indication of homophobic bullying at school.

In contrast, *Get Real* spends a significant amount of screen time both at Steven's school and around his classmates. Like *Beautiful Thing*, the first school scene involves a group of bullies smacking his face and throwing his backpack on the roof. Thereafter, Wilde provides opportunities for the audience to see how the pupils would have benefited from positive education about homosexuality. For example, in one out-of-class scene, Steven and the other school magazine students discuss a scandal about a priest who has been arrested for exposing himself to young boys in the woods. Wendy remarks that the "police say the woods are full of pervs." Mark asks Steven to accompany him to the woods to take pictures for the magazine because "We want the magazine to be more radical this year, right? Well, what could be more radical than a gay story?" But Jessica cor-

rects him and says that the scandal is not a gay story but rather a pervert story. When Kevin, Steven's primary bully, asks what the difference is between a gay person and a pervert, Wendy responds, "Well, you're not gay and you're a pervert." Kevin, enraged, pushes Steven and calls him a "queer fuck." Later in the film, Steven and John meet in the aforementioned woods, but are interrupted by strange noises and separate, only for Steven to be found by the police and taken home in shame – but not the shame he expects. In a form of dramatic irony, the policeman suggests Steven was lucky he ran into the police, seconded by Steven's father who says, "He could have been molested by some dirty old queer!"

These scenes from *Beautiful Thing* and *Get Real* help to demonstrate how the road for homosexual equality in Britain took considerably longer than it did in Norway and Sweden. The Sexual Offences Act (1967) legalized homosexuality with a higher age of consent, 21, compared to heterosexuals, 16, but this "only applied to England and Wales" ("A Timeline"). In 1994, the age of consent for same-sex partnerships was lowered to 18 and was finally lowered to 16 (commensurate to heterosexual couples) in 2001. Though homosexual acts were legal for adults at the time the films were made, they were not legal for the teen protagonists and their partners. Moreover, Section 28 of the Local Government Act of 1988 greatly hindered any progress by banning homosexual content in schools ("Local"). As *The Independent* explains, the "clause meant in practice that teachers were prohibited from discussing even the possibility of same-sex relationships with students," nor could libraries carry books or film with homosexual topics (Sommerlad). This law was repealed in 2003. In 2002, gays were allowed to adopt, and in 2005, same-sex couples were given the same rights as heterosexual couples under the Civil Partnership Act. But it wasn't until 2014 that same-sex couples could legally marry in the United Kingdom outside of Northern Ireland, which finally allowed same-sex marriages in 2020.

While the influence of Section 28 is discernible from Jamie's overall negative school experiences in *Beautiful Thing*, *Get Real* more directly addresses its effects as well as the disparate age of consent laws. Patrick Wilde mentions both when discussing the history of the film as well as describing the political climate when he wrote the script (Wilde, "The History"). Wilde deliberately noted that his protagonist was 16 to clarify the disparity in British age of consent laws in the 1990s, which "causes unbelievable harm to [gay] people, because you are essentially a criminal by the way you are born. It doesn't give you a very good start in life" (Wilde, "Tom").



These related scenes from *Get Real* about the dangers of the woods reveal at least two important points about homosexual visual identity and passing as heterosexual in Britain in the 1990s. First, it demonstrates how, thanks to Section 28, schools both lacked sorely-needed educational information for and about gay people, and also restricted positive input from gay or straight-ally teachers. Later in the film, the school refuses to publish Steven's anonymous article about the challenges of being gay in school. Instead, Wendy and Jessica must voice the difference between being a pervert and a homosexual rather than the teachers. Mark and Kevin represent two different kinds of ignorance: one that is receptive to correction, the other that is repulsed by it. Second, these scenes also dispel the stereotype of homosexuals as child molesters while questioning the assumption that all minors are heterosexuals. Both the policeman and Steven's father reinforce the flawed sentiment behind the disparity of the age of consent laws while unwittingly disproving it. Rydström's observation that "the legal age of consent was [usually] set higher for homosexual than for heterosexual acts, for the purpose of protecting the young from being seduced by older homosexuals" also applies in the British context ("Introduction" 23, 25). By stereotyping gays as creepy old men cruising the woods for young boys, the real homosexual (and "criminal") in this scene is rendered invisible. Steven, a 16-year-old boy, passes by default as a heterosexual child in the eyes of the law. For the audience, this binary between normal and pervert has been exposed as flawed.

### **Resisting Remedicalisation: Passing as Heterosexual through Masculine, Healthy Bodies**

In the previous section, I discussed the legislative trajectory of both regions regarding homophobia, but a teen's world is informed by more than laws and ordinances on paper. Complicating this legal perspective is the popular music scene from both regions during the 1970s and 80s. The British music scene from this time was dominated by queer music through such figures as Jimmy Somerville, Queen, David Bowie, and Elton John, but these figures were assumed to be straight until the HIV/AIDS era complicated mainstream responses to homosexual stereotypes. Similarly, the glam rock style from ABBA in 1970s Sweden demonstrated how heterosexual artists could perform more fluid forms of expression without stigma. Although none of the films showcase music from these artists, teens watching these films would have inherited a generalized media culture that



may have complicated their questions about gay visual identities. Moreover, the gay male body of the era had been remedicalised in response to the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. By showcasing healthy, masculine, fit bodies, these films combat the stereotype of the diseased, AIDS-ridden gay male body. This section discusses examples of gay teens passing (with varying success) by performing masculinity with healthy, fit bodies as a way of rejecting medical stigma based on visual identity.

Sebastian is conventionally attractive, tan, and physically fit. Both he and Ulf often appear shirtless or in tank-tops that display their athletic bodies. They perform stereotypical masculinity in both public and private settings through “rough-housing” or wrestling. During one scene, the camera devotes approximately two minutes to showing Sebastian, Ulf, and Janne in various states of physical activity: first performing athletic moves with a ball on the beach; second by being zany inside and outside a photobooth. Ulf’s visit to Sebastian’s house furthers this mix of masculine athleticism when Svend Wam reveals their fit bodies through a range of sensual, homosocial, physical activities. After Sebastian’s parents leave, Sebastian and Ulf play a game involving drawing in eyeliner on the other’s body in Sebastian’s dimly lit bedroom. At one point, with Ulf still standing, Sebastian gets on his knees, his eyes level with Ulf’s crotch to draw on Ulf’s navel area. Ulf whispers that Sebastian is tickling him, and then the scene transitions to the pair dancing to heavy metal music, shirtless, head banging, and building up a sweat, which then leads them to the bathroom where they engage in naked wrestling and water spraying. During this bathtub scene, the audience receives an extended view of the athletic/skinny upper torsos of both Sebastian and Ulf. Wam blurs the lines between homosocial play and sensuality as the boys fight over the hand-held water sprayer and splash water everywhere, a blurring that helps the audience understand both Sebastian’s attraction towards Ulf and how Sebastian ultimately misinterpreted the masculine interaction between two healthy, attractive physical bodies.

Santiago Fouz-Hernández notes that “[t]he actors that played Jamie and Ste in *Beautiful Thing* had known each other for a long time as they were often cast as tough teenage thugs in television serials” (146). This background information suggests that the actors may have been chosen to convey a masculine, working-class perspective and dispel the effeminate stereotype. The camera angles, however, complicate this by offering viewers opportunities to experience the gay gaze. The camera shows Ste’s bare buttocks in two different scenes:

first when he is changing clothes at Jamie's place, with the camera panning up from his bare bottom to his back, which is covered in bruises evidencing his abusive home environment. The second time, Ste wakes up the morning after they have first been intimate and quietly puts his shirt on and stands up, allowing the audience to first see his bruised back and then glimpse his bare bottom. Both scenes situate the body as a complex site of desire, violence, and abuse.

Before the two become intimate, Jamie offers Ste a back rub, which leads to their first kiss. This kiss prompts Ste to ask Jamie, "Do you think I'm queer?" He seems to be concerned about how others perceive his visual identity. Jamie says, "It don't matter what I think" as a way of calming him, but Jamie's own experience with homophobic bullying shows that he is also the victim of stereotypical visual identity, despite his tough exterior. Fouz-Hernández notes the demarcation between the masculine and feminine interests of Ste and Jamie: "Ste's room is decorated with football posters and even an Arsenal Football Club duvet cover. He wears 'sporty' clothing and laddish shirts and his main ambition is to work at a sports centre. In contrast, Jamie's room is decorated with photos of classic Hollywood divas and cute kittens" (150). Furthermore, Jamie conforms to queer stereotypes by being emotionally sensitive, sharing a close, complicated bond with his mother.

Like Jamie, Steven in *Get Real* arguably conforms to several gay stereotypes: he is interested in the arts (photography and writing) and emotionally sensitive; his voice is the most feminized of all the main teen characters discussed in this essay; and his extremely thin body frame could be categorized as gay "twink," a feminised persona considered desirable for certain mainstream gay audiences. Camera angles also provide gay gaze, the most memorable being when the camera shows John's naked bottom getting out of bed after being intimate with Steven. But instead of being burdened with physical scars, John is weighed down by emotional expectations of his family, although he hides this struggle well. John is stereotypically masculine. When Steven's classmate Jessica, who briefly fancies Steven, discovers he wrote the anonymous magazine article about being gay at school, she struggles to guess who his boyfriend could be, and only solves the mystery after she sees the two of them together. John's masculinity and social position as an athlete do not fit the profile of what she – and a British audience informed by Section 28 – had been trained to look for.

While British legislation for homosexual rights generally trailed behind those of Scandinavian countries, both regions disseminated

similar messages in the 20<sup>th</sup> century about homosexuality being a pathological illness which could be diagnosed and treated. Sarah Carr and Alfonso Pezzella note that homosexuals were subjected to aversion therapy in the British National Health System in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, specifically in psychiatric hospitals, both before and after homosexuality was decriminalized (555). Needless to say, the status of homosexuals in both European regions for at least the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was fraught with the stigma of medicalized illness as an identity. By the early 1980s, the emergence of the HIV/AIDS pandemic introduced a different stereotypical visual identity linked to white gay men's bodies – extreme weight loss and Kaposi's sarcoma lesions, an image which entered mainstream consciousness with the help of the 1993 American film, *Philadelphia*, which received major attention and prizes at the American Academy Awards ceremony. If HIV/AIDS became closely associated with homosexuality, the converse was just as true: gay men were assumed to have disease-stricken bodies.

A gay teen coming of age in the mid-to-late 1990s would have internalized this reciprocal affiliation between homosexuals and HIV/AIDS and the consequential cautionary tale this relationship implied. This grim life-expectancy forecast might have influenced films targeting gay teens to represent more conventionally and aesthetically pleasing physical bodies to inspire optimism and deflect a medicalized visual identity. However, my analysis of *Sebastian*, *Beautiful Thing*, and *Get Real* does not argue for an erasure of effeminate or HIV positive bodies. Rather, my investigation offers examples of gay characters who do not conform to these prevailing visual identities, thereby encouraging audiences to recognize that orientation cannot be determined solely by appearance. Instead, the gay characters in these three movies perform masculinity, exhibit physically fit bodies, or do both.

### **Coming Out During the Pandemic: Strategies Reflected by Social Welfare and HIV Testing**

Since assuming a gay identity also meant embracing a socialized affiliation with HIV/AIDS, the act of coming out in the 1990s required considerable courage. Sebastian, Jamie, Ste, and Steven all find the courage to eventually come out, while John does not. This section contextualizes these teens' decisions within their region's social welfare structure regarding HIV testing. I am not arguing for a clear analogy between "successfully" coming out and HIV testing; rather,

I situate these films in their respective regions' ideologies about social welfare and HIV testing to shed light on the complexities of both passing and coming out for these characters. As Ella Kotze and Brett Bowman point out, "coming out is confession – a means through which power gains access to the homosexual body, producing the homosexual as an object to be known, assessed, measured, diagnosed, and treated" (3–4). Coming out can be extremely therapeutic and socially progressive for the individual and community, but it can also be dangerous for the individual facing homophobia.

Sebastian's coming-out journey differs markedly from the two British films. One of the more noticeable differences is that *Sebastian* does not involve his school environment, as it is set during the summer holidays. Sebastian's community comprises his parents and close friends. His parents, like the parents in the other films, are naturally concerned about their son, but this concern receives considerably more screen time in *Sebastian* than the British films. Sebastian's mother asks why he stays in his room alone for hours, or why he no longer listens to Madonna. She even bluntly asks if he is using drugs. In a later scene, his father asks, "Why do you have that strange look on your face?" and follows this by asking, "Is it a girl?" Sebastian responds with disgust both times. But his mother persists, saying, "We want an open atmosphere in this house, Sebastian," before taking him out for lunch for a "serious talk" on "neutral ground." However, Sebastian goes to extraordinary lengths to avoid this conversation: he excuses himself to go to the bathroom, only to jump out the second story window and hide in the nearby woods. From this, the audience understands just how averse he is to opening up to his parents. His friends also comment that Sebastian has changed. Ulf even uses the same language as his parents, noting that Sebastian has "become so strange" as though "you aren't really here." But the audience understands through Sebastian's occasional voiceover narration that he cannot share his struggles with his friends or family.

Ultimately, Sebastian's coming out is prompted and encouraged by his community. This process is precipitated by Ulf's visit to his home. Up until this point, Sebastian's parents do not appear to realise that Sebastian's "strangeness" stems from his need to process his sexuality. However, Ulf's arrival prompts gushing responses, which could be construed as relief that Sebastian is making healthy social friendships, but the manner in which his parents leave to see a film is presented to the audience as a way of giving the teens privacy. The parents seem to be encouraging the budding romance. Indeed, with the parents gone, the two develop a bond through their extreme,

playful messing about, but that bond sours when Sebastian kisses Ulf. When the parents return, they confront Sebastian about the condition of the house. His father sarcastically remarks, "The whole place looks like a battlefield. Is your boyfriend a violent criminal?" Sebastian's responses lead them to finally ask him if he is gay. Sebastian says yes and asks whether they will kick him out to which his father replies, "You watch far too many rotten movies." Their interest in finding out about his sexual identity is not to disrupt the family unit community, but to better understand their son.

This same assertion is repeated by Sebastian's friends Ulf and Lisbeth on separate occasions. Both directly ask Sebastian whether he is gay, and both times, he deflects until his friends press him for an answer. When he does finally admit to them that he thinks he is gay, he is affirmed in both his identity and in his place within the community. Lisbeth responds, "You can't fool your friends. If they really are your friends, they'll understand. We don't find it strange or wrong. You can relax." At the end of the film, Sebastian's voiceover remarks, "Now everyone knows. It actually feels quite good. At last I dare. Now life can really begin." Through the direct involvement and encouragement of his community, Sebastian finds self-value and legitimacy in coming out for the greater good of the community. As his father tells him during his agonizing coming-out process, "Our so-called 'normal' and decent family need you."

In *Beautiful Thing*, Jamie steals an issue of *Gay Times* magazine and uses it as a valuable educational resource, learning not only about gay pubs, but also about HIV transmission. Before they visit the gay pub listed in the magazine, Ste reads the advice column from the magazine out loud: "You cannot transmit HIV virus via frottage." Neither of them is quite sure what "frottage" means, but the scene shows how Jamie seeks information independently. The *Gay Times* serves as his only form of educational material about gay culture, including HIV awareness, which dispels myths and gives proper medical information, while reinforcing what Virginia Berridge says about the British social welfare model as "leaving responsibility for a healthy life with the individual" (142).

This theme of individual responsibility continues after their visit to the gay pub, as they play tag to the soundtrack of Mama Cass singing about making "your own kind of music." When Jamie returns home, Sandra confronts him because she has discovered the secret behind his skipping classes. Jamie admits that he is gay and tells Sandra, "You think I'm too young. You think it's just a phase. You think I'm going to catch AIDS and everything." His response

not only addresses issues of age of consent and childhood sexualities, but also the interlinked association between homosexuality and HIV/AIDS. Like Sebastian's parents, Sandra is sympathetic and tells him she won't kick him out of the house; she also comforts Ste when Jamie tells him that she knows about them. After Jamie finds acceptance from his mother, he invites her and another neighbour to go with him and Ste to the gay pub. Before they leave, Jamie invites Ste to dance with him in the public courtyard of their housing development. Naturally, Ste hesitates for a moment before giving him his hand, an act of individual choice which creates an optimistic closing scene.

*Get Real* also highlights the theme of individual agency as Steven looks for acceptance in his school and social community. His parents want him to show ambition through an article he is writing for a newspaper contest. His father even submits the draft that Steven has thrown in the trash. When Steven discovers that he won the contest for an article he wrote but did not submit, he becomes angry at his father, who is puzzled because he thought Steven wrote a good article about "how a young person sees life." This frustrates Steven even more because his parents do not understand his actual life experiences, causing him to say, "Life? What do you know about my life?" His lack of gratitude for receiving the award and his parents' adulation may seem jarring for the viewer, but given Wilde's previously-mentioned interviews about how Section 28 invalidated gay life at school, we can better appreciate Steven's response, knowing that his award-winning article did not accurately convey his authentic life but instead perpetuated his camp theatricality in passing as straight.

After he is brought home by the police for being in the woods at night, Steven writes an anonymous article, titled "Get Real," that catalogues his frustrations as a gay teen. By submitting it to the school magazine, Steven takes individual responsibility for finding his own happiness and his first step towards coming out. Just before the school awards ceremony, Steven's bullies prompt John to physically beat him. With this most recent incident of bullying fresh in his mind, Steven accepts his award with a compelling speech that admits the real article he wanted to write was the one that was censored by his school. He comes out to the entire audience of students and parents, including his own. While his speech receives applause, Steven does not receive the response he was looking for, namely for John to stand with him.

After the ceremony, Kevin tells Steven's friends to watch out because "you don't know what you might catch," which the audience



could interpret to mean STIs, if not HIV specifically. This is the only homophobic mention of disease in the film, but its harmful intent is ineffectual at this point in the plot because both his friends and his mother side with him. Steven's proactive, individual articulation of coming out takes a stand against his bullies and promotes both self-acceptance and acceptance in his school and family communities. The same cannot be said for John. When Steven approaches John alone after the ceremony, John attempts to explain how guilty he felt for physically hurting Steven: "all I could think of doing was holding you to make it all right. And I knew - I really knew - that I'd never loved anyone so much." Nevertheless, Steven realizes John cannot come out publicly, possibly because of his controlling parents or his own internalized homophobia. Steven's maturity (and maternal support) allows him to appreciate John's difficult position, and they part as friends: John is not the villain, just another gay teen facing his own set of challenges.

These coming-out movies from two different regions offer a compelling approach to understanding the complexities of their respective social welfare and HIV testing systems as reported in the late 1990s. Ida Blom's investigation of laws related to venereal diseases from 1870 to 1995 in northern European countries contrasts Sweden and Norway's "social-democratic welfare state" with Britain's "liberal welfare state" (10). She distinguishes between the two by noting how Sweden and Norway "promoted welfare policies that rest on the principles of equality, universality, and public funding" (11), whereas Britain's liberal welfare states "offer a basic safety net" (11). Britain's response to the AIDS pandemic prioritized the individual, while Sweden's prioritized the community. In 1999, Renee Danziger noted that in Britain,

The HIV test is put across chiefly as a medical tool, which is available for individuals who want or need to find out their HIV status. [. . .] This approach contrasts markedly with other European countries, such as Sweden, Italy, France and Norway which have popularised the HIV test as a prevention strategy by promoting it through public information campaigns. (Danziger 294)

In other words, Danziger's scholarship points to Britain's decision to prevent the spread of HIV by providing information, but primarily only in medical settings like clinics for individuals who voluntarily seek the test. In contrast, Sweden and Norway provided information to the general public, suggesting that testing is for the best interests of both the individual and the community.



To reiterate, my interpretive lens in no way endorses the conflation of gay and HIV/AIDS identities; I simply recognise the widespread assumptions about this connection in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gay individuals coming out in the 1990s ran the risk of being associated with a viral disease in addition to other potential dangers, such as the “nets of self and social surveillance” (Kotze and Bowman 4). Instead of falling into the dangers of that kind of dehumanizing conflation, we should consider the manner in which the protagonists come out. By comparing the fictive teens’ coming out with their respective region’s welfare state strategies regarding HIV testing, I want to underscore the imperfect differences in ideology of prizing the consideration of the community or the individual. While HIV testing is not explicitly thematised in the films, the audience would have been aware of broader concerns about the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

*Sebastian’s* coming-out narrative is structured differently from the British ones because this story lacks an external individual or administrative antagonist. Instead, the protagonist must negotiate with an inner struggle. Set shortly after a period of intense public debate that led the government to endorse same-sex partnerships, as well as the remedicalisation of the gay body following the HIV/AIDS pandemic, *Sebastian’s* reluctance to out himself within his community is easily understood. Fortunately, his community proactively helps him identify and remedy his situation, which indirectly connects with the social welfare ideology of caring for the greater good of its diverse community. On a broader scale, *Sebastian* cannot effectively contribute to his community until he can come out to himself and to others. However, even though his story ends on a happy note, the constant prodding of his family and friends combined with his voice-over questions about homosexual identity could make the audience wonder if he came out before he was ready.

In contrast, the protagonists in the British films face both internal and external conflict. The external conflicts include bullying features and homophobic slurs related to HIV infection, as well as the legal disparity in the age of consent and the lack of information arising from Section 28. In each case, the protagonist faces the system alone. He may have supportive friends or family, but he is still expected to take individual steps to answer his own questions, such as what Jamie did with the *Gay Times*. The title, *Get Real*, is also the title of Steven’s anonymous article. It resonates as a commentary about life in Britain both regarding the social welfare system and also about the level of verisimilitude in coming-out narratives in the late 1990s. On

both accounts, we can ascertain that not all decisions or relationships will be affirming or sustainable: in reality, some people cannot risk coming out. While all three films certainly convey how incredibly difficult the decision for an individual to come out can be, we can also recognize differences in how the two regions' social welfare systems are reflected in the personal decisions of individuals.

Through voiceover narration and moments of isolation, Sebastian convincingly represents a struggling individual prompted by his community to come out. He has the support of his community, but he still has questions, too. Conversely, the contextualized, cinematic world of the British films underscore a social welfare system that privileges the individual to make important decisions about visual identity and passing. Jamie and Ste, encouraged by Sandra's acceptance, take their public stand, but they do so together. Steven's coming out through a public speech represents the quintessentially dramatic way for an individual to transition from passing to authenticity through his own decision, alone on the stage in front of a massive crowd, just as John's decision of passing while remaining silent as a member of that crowd is the result of his individual choice that Steven learns to respect. The social welfare models mirror the complexities of these teens' lives. Some utilize their individual agency to come out, some remain passing, and others follow the guidance of their community. The decision is as personal as it is difficult to evaluate as a universal standard.

## **Conclusion: Homonormative Reservations about the White Gay Male Body**

Passing is not limited solely to visual identity and sexualities. In their article for this *Barnboken* theme, Lydia Kokkola and Sara Van den Bossche mention the Swedish State Institute for Racial Biology, which operated during the first half of the 20th century. This institution implemented the same practices for determining race as Rydström's example does about determining sexuality. In both cases, the body served as a site of inquiry to detect diversity or deviancy. Passing institutional benchmarks about race or ethnicity can be just as harrowing and tenuous as those about sexuality. This article covers the politics of white gay bodies and visual identities, but the intersectional dynamics of queerness affects race, too. In her chapter about this topic, Nikki Sullivan acknowledges the "benefit from an ongoing rigorous examination of the ways in which whiteness structures queer political perceptions and practices" (78). In other

words, whiteness in Western culture has long been established as the default perspective, even in conversations within and about the marginalized queer community. My focus on white bodies in these three coming-out films reinforces this narrative by examining the queer aesthetics of the characters' white physical bodies.

Yet, for all the enriched analysis we can take away from these films about such important themes as bullying, working-class sensibilities, and domestic violence, these films also reinforce certain forms of homonormativity, which Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth and Caitlin L. Ryan explain as "heteronormative constructs [that] are assimilated and applied within LGBT communities," especially for those "who manage to remain politically acceptable through race, class, gender, and other types of privilege" (849). In this context, these three films consistently represent one specific kind of privileged gay teen: the conventionally attractive, white, masculine, physically fit, able-bodied male. This contrasts with those who do not benefit from homonormativity, whom Heather Love describes as "the nonwhite and the nonmonogamous, the poor and the genderdeviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected, and a host of unmentionable others" (10). Though *Beautiful Thing* boasts a diverse group of students, teachers, and residents, Michael Bronski critiques *Get Real* and *Beautiful Thing* because they problematically highlight teen leads who "are unrelentingly attractive" (24). He believes this is a "re-inscription of idealized physical beauty" that counters acceptance of other body types in the coming-out/teen romance genre (24). Bronski's statement could easily be applied to *Sebastian*; Sebastian and Ulf also conform to this profile. Though these films provide a voice for a sexual minority, they reinforce a monolithic representation of that same group.

Bob Nowlan recognizes the difficulty of balancing minority representation in gay romance films, saying these "contradictions involve the unity and struggle of tendencies toward gay assimilation versus gay separation, gay normalization versus gay differentiation, and gay integration versus gay dissidence" (148). As a result, Nowlan believes films like *Beautiful Thing* and *Get Real* – and we could add *Sebastian* – "attempt to construct an ultimately impossible space" because "gay liberation" has not been fully realized (148). By situating the films within this struggle in their respective regions during the 1990s, we can appreciate Nowlan's explanation as to why it was so difficult to provide more diverse representations of the gay teens. Overcoming the medicalisation of visual identities – first through effeminate bodies, and second through disease-stricken ones – was dif-

difficult enough. Playing it “safe” with white, healthy, attractive bodies was as far as the medium could go at that time.

It has been almost a hundred years since the Swedish 1930s medical diagnostic test. Since then, we have advanced our understanding of sexual identities as well as biological and psychological sciences. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, determining who is an authentic homosexual based on visual identity has evolved for a mainstream audience into a comedic game of guessing if a man is “Gay or European” (“Legally”), or an interactive sketch with the studio audience on an episode of *The Graham Norton Show* (“John”). Also, thanks to advances in epidemiology, virology, and immunology, we have antiretroviral therapy that has helped diminish certain stigmas attached to these visual identities. We can see similar positive changes reflected in film.

*Philadelphia* received Academy Awards for mainstream, affirming representation of white homosexuality in the 1990s, for pushing back against discrimination of the diseased body. In 2016, *Moonlight* received similar accolades at the Academy Awards for black, queer representation, including winning Best Picture. *Moonlight* could also arguably be considered a coming-out film that queers the genre itself in that it bypasses a verbal coming-out moment, which Robert Jones, Jr. notes is a good thing because “some queer identities can be as constricting and confining as straight ones.” Hopefully, this next decade will provide more opportunities, accolades, and proper recognition for queer diversities of all kinds.

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## Notes

1 All quotes from *Sebastian* are taken from the English subtitles of the film.