

Queer utopias in coming-of-age films: Finding a place to breathe in contemporary European LGBTQ+ cinema

By Anna Upola

With breath comes imagination. With breath comes possibility. If queer politics is about freedom, it might simply mean the freedom to breathe. (Ahmed 2010, 120)

When I was young, I saw Lukas Moodysson's film *Fucking Åmål* (1998), and it affected me strongly. The story of two teenage girls reflecting on their identity seemed very relatable. The small Swedish town depicted in the film was like my hometown in Finland in the 1990s. The life depicted in the film could have been mine. Sometimes, in that life, it was difficult to breathe. Since then, I have learned to immerse myself in films and art, and it has been easier. I think there is something universal in my experience.

In my Master's thesis, I research queer autobiographical photography. One of my main interests in the field is queer lives as the subject of art. Perhaps that is the reason I have recently returned to watching queer coming-of-age films.

Last summer, I watched several recently released European LGBTQ+ films. The ones that stayed lingering in my mind were two coming-of-age stories: Valerie Bisscheroux's *Anne+* (2021) and Marta Karwowska's *Fanfik* (2023). I would like to highlight a few common features in them. I wonder if a film can be considered a place in which one can breathe in peace.

Films, like art in general, can strongly affect their viewers, make things visible, and even change the world. People go to the cinema for the same reason as they do for other arts. They want to feel emotions, get experiences, learn to see things differently, and just spend time. I believe there is a possibility of imagination in every piece of art.

In art, imagination can turn into utopias. The concept of utopia often refers to an ideal, even a perfect place or society (Jones 2013, 3). I see utopia as this imagined, anticipated queer future that is just about to happen. A bit like José Esteban Muñoz (2009, 1) has thought, queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality for another world.

Queer is an academic concept that can be understood as both being and doing. The aim of queer studies is to criticise identity categories that normalise sexualities and gender (Rossi 2015, 91). The purpose of queer theory is to emancipate and change ways of thinking (Vänskä 2006, 55). In that way, queer is liberation and separation from the normative.

In queer films, stories are told and viewed from other than normative perspectives. A queer film shows that existing outside the norm is possible. In the same way, a coming-of-age film is full of possibilities. Films in this genre usually revolve around a character who is on a journey of self-discovery and identity formation (Fox 2017, 5; Monaghan 2019, 99).

A story of growth is touching and relatable for the viewer. Everyone has been young once. Passing the age of adolescence reminds us of the possibilities of a future not yet formed. What may someday be is not here yet.

However, growing and finding one's identity does not happen on its own; it needs some kind of catalyst. In coming-of-age films, it is often a new student joining the main character's class, such as in *Fanfik*, or some other new person coming into the life of the protagonist, like in *Anne+*. That new person symbolises change and reflection.

So, the change begins. In *Anne+*, the protagonist records their memories in writing, but somewhere along the process, they begin to live the life they imagined. In *Fanfik*, the protagonist Tosiek writes too. Their imagination happens in fanfiction. And similarly, Tosiek finally starts to live the life of their imagination. Both Anne and Tosiek are actively making space for themselves to imagine. And breathe. It reminds me a bit of what Angela Jones has said about making queer utopias come true:

[...] *Queer futurity is not so much about crafting prescriptions for a utopian society—in which everyone is happy and life is ideal—but by making life more bearable in the present because in doing so we create the potential for a better future.* (Jones 2013, 2)

Life could become more bearable with imagination. Art can push imagination forward; it can help create places to breathe. Although I am no longer that youth who watched *Fucking Åmål* for the first time, I still remember what I felt. So, I'll go back to these queer films. So that I can imagine. So that I can breathe in peace. Just like Anne and Tosiek.

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Suggested citation:

Upola, A (2023): Queer utopias in coming-of-age films: Finding a place to breathe in contemporary European LGBTQ+ cinema, the REBOOT project, <https://thereboot-project.eu/>

Disclaimer: This blog post is part of the 'Dissemination, Outreach, and Engagement' activities organized under Work Package 7 of the REBOOT: Reviving, Boosting, Optimizing, and Transforming European Film Competitiveness project. This project has received funding from the Horizon Europe program of the European Union under the Grant Agreement No 101094769. It does not reflect the views of the European Union and is a publication encapsulated within the project.



Funded by the
European Union