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## **Dirty Waters: Urine, Waste, and the Shimmering Trans Body in *Nånting måste gå sönder* or *Something Must Break* (2014)**

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*This article examines genderqueer writer/director Ester Martin Bergsmark's film *Something Must Break* (2014) and the trans gaze created through the film's disjunctive imagery. I argue the film's aestheticization of polluted environments and trans bodies posits a queer alliance between transness and trash. Similarly, *Something Must Break's* repeated imagery of urination and body fluids representationally relates transness, waste, and transgressive sexuality to a politics of marginality, which Bergsmark employs in *Something Must Break* to express these relationalities as sites for creative difference and possibilities of being that exist outside of heterosexual norms. I use post-structuralist and queer interpretations of perversion to reimagine the film's polluted environments and abject fluids as sites/sights of creation and liveability for trans bodies. I find in the refractions of polluted waters, blood, saliva, and urine in *Something Must Break* the same cinematic fissures that Eliza Steinbock argues allows for a uniquely trans gaze in their theory of shimmering. In considering a cinematic transgender gaze, Steinbock describes a cinema that eschews the visual reveal and instead portrays a lived trans experience not defined by dualities, but by disjunctions; thus, the unsettled, the (un)becoming, the "shimmering" aesthetics of trans embodiment. I argue Bergsmark achieves a cinematic trans gaze in their imagining of a queer space where pollution, trash, urine, and blood are not symbols of abjection and shame, but embody an opening-up, a vulnerability: a becoming that molds new forms of relationships, new forms of love, and new forms of creation.*

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Sunbeams bounce off murky water – they shimmer and shine, just as spilled oil reflects iridescent rainbows. It is in the interstice, in that perfectly coordinated glimmer of light and perspective, where what we know to be toxic, wrong, out-of-place, can for an instant exist outside of language and logic, and be as we see it: beautiful. Through the camera lens, this act of looking at the dynamic dualities between rubbish and treasure posits a cinematic praxis of not reflections, but refractions: the image in the frame bends to expose a new way of seeing. What happens when the constraints placed on what is bad, dirty, corrupted are removed, and perspectives shift to see things differently, so that a flower and a plastic bag are one thing separately and something new

when met together in the imagination of the filmmaker? Genderqueer writer/director Ester Martin Bergsmark instrumentalizes this practice of aestheticizing abject imagery to create a cinematic world that they characterize as uniquely reflective of a trans embodiment. This article examines Bergsmark's film *Something Must Break* (*Nånting måste gå sönder*, 2014) and the trans gaze created through the film's disjunctive imagery. Building off Wibke Straube's work on Bergsmark's films' trans representation and the connection with aestheticized environmental pollution, I argue that *Something Must Break*'s repeated imagery of urination and body fluids is not only related to a reimagining of the polluted environment as a site of creation and livability for trans bodies, but that these abject fluids speak specifically to a politics of marginality reflected in Eliza Steinbock's concept of "shimmering" and a radical reclamation of perversion.

In the same way that the film's polluted landscapes form a kinship with the "historically 'unnatural' and 'contaminated' embodiment" of trans bodies, the inclusion of bodily fluids in public places, intimate interactions, and explicit sex acts similarly represents historically transgressive sexualities that remain marginalized within structures of normativity (Straube, "Ecological Aesthetics" 79). *Something Must Break* imagines a queer space where pollution, trash, urine, and blood are not symbols of abjection and shame, but embody an opening-up, a vulnerability, a becoming that molds new forms of relationships, new forms of love, and new forms of creation. Through this re-imagination of the abject, Bergsmark constructs a cinema of disjunctions that embraces the trans experience as "dirty-clean, a rose and a garbage"; a metaphor they use to describe a holistic vantage from which to view and voice queer realities by acknowledging the trauma often inflicted on gender non-conforming individuals, without residing too deeply in the painful recesses ("Voice-Under" 113). Even more than just acknowledging the complex lived experiences of non-binary and queer folk, "dirty-clean" suggests a framework for examining all experiences in a way that subverts homogeneity – it asks us to approach our foundational viewpoints with a sense of skepticism, to question how we attribute value and how we judge what is "right" and what is "wrong", or what is "dirty" and what is "clean".

In this article, I read the evocations of a trans embodiment in *Something Must Break*'s aestheticized abjection through Eliza Steinbock's concept of shimmering. I find in the refractions of polluted waters, blood, spit, and urine the same cinematic fissures that Steinbock argues allows for a uniquely trans gaze. In the introduction of their seminal book *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*, Steinbock describes their search

within the trans cinema canon for films that circumvent the narrative device of “the reveal” – the moment of public unveiling of the trans body to expose the truth of their biological sex. Through the filmic reveal, Steinbock explains, “the cisgender spectator is made aware most of all of how the reveal feels, rather than how it feels to be trans,” thus maintaining a heteronormative gaze (4-5). Trans in the context of this article will align with Steinbock’s definition as an identity or way of being embodied that disconnects sets of “normative linkages” (2). These linkages can be understood as:

the assumed coincidence of one’s anatomy at birth with an assigned gender category, the psychological identifications with sexed body images and/or gendered subject positions, and the performance of gendered social, sexual, or kinship functions. (2)

In considering a cinematic transgender gaze, Steinbock describes a cinema that eschews the visual reveal and instead portrays a lived trans experience not defined by dualities, but by disjunctions; thus, the unsettled, the (un)becoming, the “shimmering” aesthetics of trans embodiment (6).

Bergsmark creates these shimmering disjunctions through a representative perversion of pollution, positioning queer bodies in spaces that visually deconstruct normative linkages between impurity and trash. I believe it is insightful to not only explore the visual perversion of polluted imagery in the film but also examine these feculent environments and liquid encounters through the lens of sexual perversion. Wibke Straub has written prolifically on the topic of the film’s tenderness towards its polluted, messy environments and its intimate relations with the “trans/ing” body, particularly in their chapter for the edited collection *Transecology* (2020) titled “Posthuman ecological intimacy, waste, and the trans body in *Nånting måste gå sönder* (2014)”. Our analysis shares a focus on the linkages between the film’s abject environment and the socially abject trans-body; but while Straub employs these connections through a framework of “posthuman ecological intimacy” to explore the transecological aesthetics of the film, this article investigates the queer alliance between trans embodiment and polluted environments (specifically polluted waters) through the lens of sexual perversion (54). Bergsmark does not only subvert (or pervert) expectations of nature and environment but further complicates and confronts these deconstructions by unapologetically portraying them alongside “transgressive” sexual acts, often involving body fluids. Straube’s corpus of work on the film aligns the ontological appropriation

and deconstruction of the queer body and waste as “unnatural” and “impure” with a radical ecological intimacy to and between nonhuman Others (58). This article investigates the linkages between waste, the trans body, and transgressive sexuality to explore how a politics of perversion can similarly make possible a radical vulnerability not just between humans and nonhuman Others, but between humans and human Others.

It is imperative to acknowledge, though, the damaging history of pathologizing non-gender conforming persons under the umbrella of sexual perversion. From the earliest moments of Western psychiatric taxonomy, trans-ness (or “transvestism”, as it appeared in the DSM-I and DSM-II) was categorized alongside homosexuality and pedophilia within the class of psychosexual disorders associated with sexual perversion (Wiggins 60). It was not until 2013 that gender identity disorder was removed from the DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) and replaced with “gender dysphoria”, a move that signals a shift away from the coded language of diagnosis that positions trans-ness as a psychiatric disorder that need not just be treated but erased and brought back into the social order. To address the knitted history of trans-ness and sexual perversion is to address how shifting taxonomies of gender identification “carried expansive ramifications, not only for the ideological production of transgender subjectivity but also for concrete everyday trans lives,” as Tobias Wiggins addresses in his own exploration of transgender people and clinical implications of perversion (61). This legacy of transness as psychosexual deviance lives on not only in medical and psychiatric diagnoses but in cultural diagnoses of the trans and non-binary individual as a perversion of Western ideals of gender normativity, which leaves them vulnerable to political movements seeking legislation that exploits the safety of children as a moral imperative to – for example – ban drag performances or gender-affirming care for minors.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the use of such terms allows for the kind of analysis that draws parallels between Steinbock’s concept of disjunction and other theories of sexuality. I believe such parallels are paramount to my analysis and its reconfigurations of the perceived “contaminations” of trans identities and embodiments. Additionally, the appropriation of perversion in context with queer identities has the potential to give power back to those who have been wrongfully pathologized and question the very status of a hetero and/or sexual “normalcy”. While the psychiatric labelling of transgender as a sexual perversion or deviation has been instrumental in the structural Othering of trans and gender non-conforming people, examining this tension can illuminate the

disjunctions and linkages between those who embody normativity and those who find themselves on the outside. In explicitly addressing the perverse aspects of trans embodiment, perversion acts as a horizontalizing mechanism, making apparent the inherent contradictions of perversion. As even Freud contended, “no healthy person . . . can fail to make some addition that might be called perverse to the normal sexual aim” (*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* 39).

I turn my analysis of *Something Must Break* in the second section of this article to considerations of perversion inspired by Amber Jamilla Musser’s work *Sensational Flesh* and her assemblage of theories from Freud and Foucault to Bersani. Much like Musser’s work, this section envisions the practice of non-normative, transgressive sex in *Something Must Break* as a space where power structures and identities can be dislocated and interrogated, and where the dissolution of self and boundaries can lead to freedom, creativity, and new forms of embodiment. In the same way that Straube argues that the enchantment of polluted natural environments in the film creates “a space of world-making, to an intimacy with and among other Others,” I argue that bodily fluids such as urine in *Something Must Break* signify a radical vulnerability and celebration of corporeality that is uniquely trans and queer (“Ecological Aesthetics” 95).

### **Dirty/Clean – The Material Transmutability of Waste and the Trans-body**

*Something Must Break* is Bergsmark’s first foray into fiction after the success of their experimental documentary *She Male Snails* (2012), which presents a poetic portrait of Bergsmark’s collaborator and muse, transgender artist/author Eli Leven. Continuing their collaboration, Leven co-wrote the screenplay for *Something Must Break* with Bergsmark, which was inspired by their semi-autobiographical 2010 novel, *You Are the Roots that Sleep Beneath My Feet and Hold the Earth in Place* (Kampakis 2014). The film follows Sebastian/Ellie, a young genderqueer person living in the grimy suburbs outside Stockholm’s metropolis, through their passionate and ill-fated relationship with the straight-identifying Andreas.<sup>2</sup> Shot largely with a slightly shaky, somewhat grainy handheld camera, the film’s kinetic aesthetic matches the passionate but often uncomfortable experience of Sebastian and Andreas’s romance. The isolation and loneliness stemming from Sebastian’s gender non-conformity is reflected by their attempts to find connection through frequently risky late-night cruising and random sex. These encounters culminate in a variety of conclusions, some mutually gratifying, others more violent, which mirrors

the tumultuous relationship between Sebastian and Andreas as the latter grows increasingly troubled by the status of their heterosexuality.

Although the connection between the two seems genuine, Sebastian ultimately realizes that to move towards acceptance of their own identity (towards becoming Ellie), they must let Andreas go. One of the film's great successes is its circumvention of binaries. Although Sebastian's evolution towards Ellie positions them as a trans woman, Bergsmark refrains from placing gender-identity labels on the character, instead giving space to oscillation and ambiguity; thus, allowing the character to exist in the "indefinite period or moment," not with direction towards change as a resolution, but change as an endless process (Steinbock 12). Bergsmark has expressed their interest in exploring the queer potential of cinematic specificity through the use of "voice-under", a term they have developed to describe the shared gradations and glimmers of both film and queer reality. Voice-under is not the opposite of voice-over, but is "a voice of other, parallel truths [that] appears in the relation, in the meeting of matter, space, language, and all that is beyond what cannot be encompassed within us" (Bergsmark 107). Bergsmark's voice-under aligns with Steinbock's shimmering in many ways. Both concepts elucidate the encounter between different materialities and intensities as a site of creation and relation, where disjunction vibrates and exposes different layers of meaning and different ways of seeing. To Bergsmark, this looks like listening "to the dump and the trauma, the rubbish and chewing gum, my friends and my little toe" (105). The elevation of the discarded and unsightly is central to their imagining of the queer potential of film, of not "making queer film, but making film queer" (107). The collision of beauty and ugliness in *Something Must Break* creates something that exists outside of binary oppositions and relishes in the liminal.

Straube uses the term "intimate otherness" to describe these "entanglements of different, even contradictory materialities" portrayed in Bergsmark's films ("Ecological Aesthetics" 82). Of particular focus is the setting of the films, which heavily feature littered and polluted environments, natural, domestic, and urban alike. *Something Must Break* stages much of Sebastian and Andreas's budding romance amidst the polluted outskirts of Stockholm's suburbs. Bergsmark recalls growing up near the Högdalstippen landfill, artificial hills constructed with the waste materials from mass low-income housing projects. They found freedom in the dump, "among garbage and trees," where trash becomes shapes, colors, and textures that can be transformed into "beautiful fragments" (Bergsmark 113-114). This sentiment is reflected in the way the film relates nature, pollution, and

the body as converging entities, and, in this convergence, posits a way of perceiving outside of normative boundaries.

Natural purity is in close association with normativity; what society accepts as moral, good, and desirable. Straube points to the connection between impure, polluted environments and the historical pathologizing of trans bodies as contaminated: “As material realities, non-binary, trans and queer bodies have historically been understood as ‘unnatural’, ‘polluted’, ‘inferior’. They have been positioned on the outskirts of the capitalist values of productivity, health and social mobility” (“Ecological Aesthetics” 84). In their attention to the “unnatural” and “polluted” within the *mise-en-scene* of *Something Must Break*, Bergsmark forms an alliance between the genderqueer body and polluted environments. The dump and the trans body coexist at the peripheries of society, in what Myra Hird describes as “the twilight zone where no clear, ‘natural’ definition [...] can be given, within wide margins of uncertainty and variation” (“Knowing Waste” 454). Instead of positioning these environments as sites of disgust, their aesthetic elevation positions them as sites of creation and possibility. In the case of Bergsmark’s films, centering the “unnatural” trans body alongside the “unnatural” polluted environment breaks down these essentialist concepts and the boundaries between what constitutes the center and the periphery:

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. (Bergsmark 114)

The dump, the landfill, is where meaning is made, where society decides what is valuable and what is trash. In looking at trash we look at a mirror, a reflection that is not static but constantly in flux: “anything and everything can become waste, and things can simultaneously be and not be waste, depending on the perceiver” (Hird, “Knowing Waste” 454). Bergsmark leverages this transmutability to create the possibility of a different vantage point from which to perceive the world. Privileging the “wrong”, the “bad”, and the “dirty” dissolves binaries.

In their essay “Toxic Bodies”, Straube analyses the dissolution of binaries and boundaries through the symbolic presence of the tick, which initiates Ellie and Sebastian’s first sexual encounter. To Straube, the tick symbolizes a relationality between human and nonhuman “unloved



Others”; the toxic body of the tick and that of the trans body, which is “routinely dismissed, killed, and uncared for” in heteronormative society, share an alliance, a “queer sociality between two unloved Others,” that forms a site of engagement and examination (221). Similar to their idea of intimate otherness, this association between the tick and Sebastian and Andreas’s sexual exploration signals a dissolution of normative romantic tropes, thus imagining the dissident intimacy between “subjugated materialities” as a space of wonder and enchantment (“Ecological Aesthetics” 81-83).

This enchantment is continued as Sebastian and Andreas’s post-coital frolic guides the spectator through the semi-industrial wasteland of suburban Stockholm, along weed-infested highways to the car-filled parking lot of a shopping mall, where Sebastian suggests a swim. The immediate jump-cut from the barren asphalt lot to the profusely green shot of the pair descending into the forest signals a distinct shift. Presumably, the concrete desert of the previous scene is not far away, but the diegetic soundscape of the surrounding nature drowns out the sounds of the nearby urban sprawl. The two arrive at what most would consider a putrid, littered pond, fed by a concrete drainage pipe running beneath the adjacent highway; but through Bergsmark’s queer perspective, the polluted waterhole is transformed into an enchanted forest oasis. The scene unfolds not unlike one from any number of cliché romance films – the lovers strip naked, playfully romp around in the water, embrace, and tenderly kiss – but instead of an idyllic hidden grotto, the couple is surrounded by plastic bags strewn over felled trees, old car tires, and graffiti-ed concrete.

The “unnaturalness” of the gender non-conforming body and Sebastian and Andreas’s confused relationship finds shelter in this space of discarded and contaminated things. The prominence of pollution in this environment highlights the relationality between waste and transness. Waste is “an ironic testimonial to a desire to forget,” as Hird puts it, of things that no longer have value or use (“Knowing Waste” 455). Western society goes to great lengths to hide garbage out of sight and remove the threat of toxic contamination, so the landfill becomes the endpoint where our trash can go through the imagined process of cleansing and disappearance. In the same way, the trans body, “framed as a threat to cis-heteronormative future generations via genetic contamination” or rendered invaluable for its lack of (re)productivity, is socially marginalized, dehumanized, and “unloved” (Straube, “Toxic Bodies” 219-220). By staging their lovers amidst the polluted wilderness, Bergsmark forces the viewer to confront waste, to see that, in fact, we are actually all “standing on a pile of trash” (114). Waste does not disappear, it “flows”

and becomes, it “mobilizes relations”; thus, this scene of queer intimacy is further queered by its intimacy to other objects that reject a static and submissive existence – of refuse that refuses to be forgotten (Hird, “Waste-World-Making” 2). The polluted waters of the littered grotto enable an intimacy to exist amongst Other-ed humans and Other-ed nonhumans, deconstructing normative structures that enable systematic marginalization and harm. By examining these flows of relationality through the lens of perversion, we can further question how other moments of transgressive intimacy in *Something Must Break* illuminate the way perversion acts as a similar twilight zone of meaning and uncertainty, exposing new vulnerabilities and relationalities between normative humans and human Others.

### **Perversions, Transgressions, and Fluid Encounters**

I argue that Bergmark’s process of queer world-making, through the intimate relations of contaminated bodies and things, is closely related to the concept of perversion in sexual theory. Paramount to perversion is the locating and obfuscating of boundaries of normativity. Of course, defining what constitutes normal versus abnormal is an impossible endeavor, as evidenced by the countless attempts by theorists over the years to construct a lasting paradigm for the “perverted” individual. In the introduction to his book *Perversion*, co-edited with Lisa Downing, Dany Nobus traces the contemporary understanding of perversion (as a synonym for “human sexual abnormality”) back to its appropriation in nineteenth-century medico-psychological discourse as, “an aberration of the sexual instinct, in which the reproductive purpose of the human sexual function is literally perverted...” (6-7). However, this definition becomes immediately problematic when applied to even the tamest of human sexual behaviors, further confusing distinctions between abnormal or “pathological perversions” and “perverse variations of the normal function” (7). If the meaning of perversion is locked within the negative definition of normality, then it is this inseparability that questions the objective existence of normative sexuality and consequentially engenders the insurrectionary nature of perversions. Jonathan Dollimore states in *Sexual Dissidence*: “Perversion is a refusal or attempted subversion of those organizing principles of culture...” (198). Similarly, Hastings Donnan and Fiona Magowan suggest that “sexual transgression operates at [the] edges of social boundary maintenance” and that exploring “the ambiguities of the transgressive sexual body lead to processes that may dissolve, transform and reconstitute senses of self, moral action and body politics”

(*Transgressive Sex 3*). Thus, perversion and subversion can be seen as working in tandem through Bergsmark's vision of queer cinematic specificity. *Something Must Break* works to both address and subvert the pathologizing of trans bodies as perverted or paraphilic through the sanctification and beautification of the abject (pollution, waste, urine, etc.). In so doing, the film signifies an acceptance of trans bodies and transgressive sex as sites of creativity and freedom, where normative boundaries are examined and broken down and new relationalities emerge.

Bergsmark playfully explores these inherent tensions between perversion and trans-ness in one of the film's final scenes: a highly stylized montage of Sebastian (now Ellie) surrounded by hyper-masculine men in an underground sex club, engaging in rough sex and piss play. This scene's aestheticized stylistic divergence from the handheld camerawork of the rest of the film marks a literal perverting of the film's formal style – a “turning upside down” or changing of something “so that it is not what it was” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Shot in ultra-slow motion with Renaissance-like chiaroscuro lighting, the bodies in frame barely move, highlighting the glistening trajectory of the urine against the deep, black background and Ellie's glowing pale skin. The muscular, tattooed bodies of the men dominate over Ellie's slim frame, figured strikingly feminine in its submissive position. Despite this submissiveness, the composition of the shot – in medium close-up, the men's faces out of frame and Ellie perfectly centered – visually foregrounds Ellie's pleasure and agency. Although the rough hands of the men choke, grasp, and pull at Ellie, the slow motion and composition of the frame accentuates the intimacy and tenderness of this transgressive sex act, underscoring the oscillation of sensations and identity, “agency and subjectlessness” (Musser 3). This “perverted” sensation of pleasure and pain is an essential element of Bergsmark's queer-world-making, and through the interplay of transgressive sex acts and bodily fluids, the film carves out a space for the untidy subjectivities of non-binary and non-normative bodies, identities, and sexualities that embody the very same fluidity and coded meanings of the urine and other liquids on display.

In explaining the scene's diversion from the narrative style of the rest of the film, Bergsmark says: “Melodrama meets naturalism. The time stops and pleasure and pain are feelings on the same string. Everything vibrates” (Salovaara). Amber Jamilla Musser points to Michel Foucault in exploring the dual edge of pain and pleasure in masochistic sexual practices, who sees transgressive sex as opening possibilities for thinking about boundaries and corporeality (8). Thinking about pleasure as a sensation “evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its

duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul,” offers a new lens for considering embodiment outside of normative disciplinary regimes (Foucault 57). This corporeal freedom ultimately leads to what Leo Bersani sees as sadomasochism’s ability to “connect pleasure, power, and self-annihilation... a jouissance in which the subject is momentarily undone,” leading to a dissolution of the ego’s boundaries and, ultimately, heteronormative social boundaries (Bersani 100). Specifically with queer subjectivity, social dictates of normativity are essentially foreclosed; thus, queerness possesses an inherent positioning towards the embodied freedom and vulnerability that Foucault and Bersani link to masochism and transgressive sexualities. Where Bersani “see[s] it as a way to resignify an already marginalized space,” Foucault “sees it as the creation of a new possibility for being” (Musser 18). Importantly, both theorists allude to a practice of sexual pleasure that exists outside of a fixed plane.

These theories possess a shared politics of marginality, which Bergsmark employs in *Something Must Break* to express the analogous relationship of transgressive sex, pollution, and trans embodiment as sites for creative difference and possibilities of being that exist outside of heterosexual norms. Relishing in perversion breaks down mechanisms behind normalcy: “What is “dominant” is placed under the microscope, and what could be considered perverse is no longer part of a binary but one end of a spectrum” (Musser 6). Bergsmark describes this scene as vibrating, bringing us back to Steinbock’s shimmering and their theoretical framework of transgender embodiment as an aesthetic practice of disjunction, of “change within degrees of stillness and motion, of action and passion, of clutter and emptiness, of light and dark...” (Steinbock 8). Bergsmark plays with this disjunction explicitly by strikingly beautifying what is often seen as transgressive and abject. Just as the abject, dirty waters of Sebastian and Andreas’s toxic pond posits pollution as a space of queer-world-making and intimacy, the “dirty waters” of body fluids in this scene transform the typical psychoanalytic association of piss play with power and humiliation into one of a radical vulnerability and celebration of corporeality that is central to the trans gaze of the film.

The aestheticized orgy scene is the most literal example of Bergsmark’s use of body fluids in *Something Must Break*, but the leakiness of the human body appears also in Sebastian/Ellie’s treasured tissue stained with Andreas’s blood, in the recurrence of the bathroom (specifically the urinal stall) as a site of cruising, in the vomit and spit that spew from bodies. The fluids Bergsmark showcases are not pure fluids, like tears, that symbolically cleanse the body, but polluting fluids

that mess up the body, that are located as sights/sites of abjection. In her book, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries*, Robyn Longhurst connects the liminality of fluids as a “borderline state” to Elizabeth Grosz’s assertion that the abjection of body fluids stems from the permeability of the body, its leakiness, and the “perilous divisions between the body’s inside and outside” (29). These divisions and boundaries demarcate the conditions under which the clean, decent, obedient, law-abiding body emerges, and the messy body – trans, queer, disabled, fat, etc. – is marginalized and Othered. Body fluids, then, become something that needs to be managed and deployed only when proper, in private and sterile environments, and the mismanagement of these fluids signifies perversion, insanity, or sickness, as Mary Douglas explores in *Purity and Danger*. Similarly, the dissolution of the division between the body’s inside and outside and one’s control over that division can quickly devolve into shame. Urine, as a foreign, non-sexual (non-reproductive) fluid associated with dirtiness and disgust, is often understood as being used as an instrument for expressing power and humiliation when “improperly deployed” (Thomas and Williams 142).

The representation of body fluids in *Something Must Break*, however, more closely aligns with a reinterpretation of the leakiness of bodies not as a locus of shame, but as a locus of vulnerability and new relationalities. The aestheticization of piss play in the aforementioned scene “illuminates the essential role that power and humiliation can have in willfully violating the sterility of our modern sexual interactions,” as Jeremy N. Thomas and DJ Williams explain, leading to possibilities of resistance, creativity, “and the alternative ways in which we may come to more truly understand our minds and bodies” (*Radical Sex Between Men* 149). In their scatological photographic series, *The Naked Shit Pictures* (1994), *The Fundamental Pictures* (1996), and *The Rudimentary Pictures* (1999), queer art duo Gilbert & George produced an assemblage of microscopic images of bodily discharge (urine, saliva, blood, feces, ejaculate) alongside their own naked bodies in highly exposed positions. In the enlarged, aestheticized images of body fluids, Gilbert & George romanticize and humanize the abject, emphasizing the universality of body fluids while simultaneously rejecting notions of shame in their vulnerability. In his analysis of the works, Cüneyt Çakırlar argues “the artists’ abject art develops around the drive to celebrate the body as an embodiment of vital flows” and sees “not a traumatic but a celebratory excess in bodily depth and fuckability which is deliteralized and degenitalized through a naïve discourse of hypervital corporeality” (95; 98). In the artists’ own words, incorporating the abject in their work was vital to making themselves “more vulnerable and opening up what is

inside us” (97). The words of Gilbert & George strikingly resemble those of Bergsmark two decades later, who describes the oppositional imagery in their film as creating “A pause. A room to breathe inside the body. An opening toward something else, something vaster.” (“Voice-Under” 117). The echoed sentiments of these artists emphasize their shared queer vision of an instrumentalized abject affect, one that highlights not just the fluidity of the body, but of social boundaries and mores. Through their lens, the abject becomes a kaleidoscopic landscape of vulnerabilities, positing new worlds of understanding, meaning-making, and kinship.

### **Conclusion**

This sensibility of embracing the abject and transgressive, the polluted and discarded, as a new way of looking at and being in the world is an essential element of the queer, trans gaze of *Something Must Break*. Bergsmark’s commitment to portraying the “undressed” truth of trans reality as “always nude, dirty-clean, a rose and garbage at the same time,” is apparent in their aestheticized vision of polluted environments and body fluids (“Voice-Under” 113). Dirty waters – in, on, or around the trans body – become a site of transformation, where the disjunction of the beautiful and the ugly shimmer and refract, and different visions of the self and world flicker depending on the angle from which you view it. Bergsmark’s quest to make film queer echoes Steinbock’s desire to “leave open how the gaze adjusted to a trans angle might also open up a nuanced space that subtly modifies vision” (Steinbock 10). Transgressive intimacies between systemically marginalized nonhuman Others and human Others expose the fluidity of taxonomies of meaning and value. Appropriating the perverse and abject paradoxically dissolves the social boundaries from which perversion draws its meaning. In this way, *Something Must Break* changes the cinematic vantage point, so that right, wrong, trash, and treasure lose meaning, and the pile of garbage we are all standing on becomes a site of new possibilities.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As of July 2023, the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) was tracking 491 anti-LGBTQ bills filed in over 40 US states, many directly targeting trans lives and freedoms. The ACLU reported [77 of these bills had passed into law](#) at the time of publication.

<sup>2</sup> The script for *Something Must Break* uses both names, “Ellie/Sebastian”, to refer to its main character. Although other critics have chosen to use “Ellie/Sebastian” and “Ellie” in scholarship on the film, this article will predominantly use the name “Sebastian” which is the name the character most



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frequently utilizes throughout the film. It is important to note, however, that the film implies a shift towards acceptance of "Ellie" as the more authentic representation of the character's identity towards the end of the film. This article at times uses "Ellie/Sebastian" and "Ellie" in referring to the character, demonstrating the fluid nature of the character and their sense of self throughout the film. Similarly, this article uses "they/them" pronouns when addressing Sebastian/Ellie, but the film predominantly uses "he/him" pronouns, moving towards "she/her" as the film reaches its conclusion.