

# I am... which kind of Love?

## Love and Desire in Luca Guadagnino's "I Am Love"

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### Abstract

*This essay evolves around the film „I Am Love“ from Luca Guadagnino. The essay connects literature from the course “The Politics and Philosophy of Desire” with the film. It will focus on dimensions of love and desire from a critical and feminist viewpoint. First, there will be a look to spatial categories with gender studies expert Jorunn Økland. The core of the essay will show what kind of love the film presents. These thoughts relate to a text from ancient Greece, from the philosopher Plato, a text from Russian revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai from one hundred years ago and a contemporary text from the American philosopher Michael Hardt. Throughout the essay thoughts about love and desire from American culture theorist Lauren Berlant will flow in and combine with the author’s states about the topics.*

### Introduction

This essay will evolve around the film „I Am Love“ from Luca Guadagnino which aired in 2009. The film takes place in Italy, mostly in Milano and around Sanremo. The protagonists are members of the industrial Recchi family who owns a textile factory. The story mainly develops around Emma, who is Russian by birth, and has three adult children with her husband Tancredi. Later in the film, Emma begins an affair with the cook Antonio. After a painful loss Emma leaves her husband.

In this essay I want to connect literature from the course “The Politics and Philosophy of Desire” with the film. The connection of the course to the sphere of educational studies is that – as the course description says – “in the history of philosophy and education, desire is a significant concept for analyzing [sic!] the construction of the past as history and the future as a

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desirable narrative” (Website ufind). I will focus on dimensions of love and desire from a critical and feminist viewpoint, which is another relation to the field of educational studies, because a critical socio-analytical perspective is one approach that an educational scientist can choose (Dausien/Walgenbach 2015).

First, I will have a look to spatial categories with gender studies expert Jorunn Økland. After that I will move on to the core of the essay and show what kind of love the film presents. These thoughts I will connect with a text from ancient Greece, from the philosopher Plato, a text from Russian revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai from one hundred years ago and a contemporary text from the American philosopher Michael Hardt. Throughout the essay thoughts about love and desire from American culture theorist Lauren Berlant will flow in and combine with my states about the topics.

### **Finding sacred space**

Agendas in the Recchi family are traditionally divided. Tancredi and his sons work at the family business. The daughter Elisabetta studies art in London and Emma is mostly seen at home. In the very first scene of the film, we see Emma and her employees in the house of the Recchis, planning a party. The place is full of antiques and art in tall halls, makes it look like a museum. We see that Emma’s place is the traditional space for women, the private, or as Økland (2023) notes the *domestic* space. The division of responsibilities among the Recchis can be seen as an example for “the interrelation between space, activity and gender” like Hirdman (as cited from Økland 2023: 300) states. The two dynamics the author (ibid.) describes are *separation* and *hierarchy*, there are also power relations visible (Økland 2023: 302). While the male family members owning the factory and act at the *public space*, they are divided and hierarchically over the females (ibid.) at home in a museum like house or in training to become a wife with artistic knowledge. Hirdman (ibid., 301) also shows how these circumstances form character and gender in that the actions someone takes, interact with the place in which they take them. In the scene we can also see the front door of the house, which is made of glass. The view can always reach outside and shows us, that the door is open and outside of the private is possible.

Soon there is change in Emma’s uniform and predictable life, when she meets Antonio, or better said, Antonio’s food. He, a friend of Emma’s son Edoardo, is a young passionate cook and wants to start a restaurant in the hills behind Sanremo. When Emma tastes Antonio’s food, she finds deep pleasure. Food plays an important role throughout the film, but it becomes more colourful and passionate, when Antonio appears. Only from then on does it become the goal of Emma’s desire. Subsequent we will learn that food always played an important role in her life. It reminds her of her home Russia, and her love for cooking. So maybe food reminds Emma of her true self she somewhere lost. As Berlant (2012: 6) describes, desire is a “state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object’s specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it.” So, desire comes from some kind of outside meeting something inside you, as shown in Emma and the passionately cooked

food. It is also always out of reach (Berlant 2012: 10), which can be seen in the transient sensual pleasure of eating.

Some day in spring, Emma finds out, that her daughter Elisabetta is in love with a girl. Later Elisabetta who comes home from London has made an optical change. She no longer has long, blond hair, she now wears it short. Later Betta shows her mother pictures of the woman she is in love with. This scene, and a few others where Emma supports her children in making changes and find their way, shows us, that Emma has kept her openness for different ways of living.

Some scenes lead to Emma accidentally meeting Antonio in Sanremo who immediately invites her to come with him and see where he wants to open the restaurant. The two drive outside the city, it's a long, winding road up the hills. The surrounding nature gets wilder the longer they drive. When they arrive, Emma walks around. We hear birds singing, see a stunning view in the surrounding hills, the sun is shining. Emma smells the leaves of an olive tree. Then we see it blurred: Antonio and Emma kiss each other. From now on, Emma's desire spreads from just a single sense to all senses. We now can have a look to thoughts of ancient Greece. When in Plato's Symposium Socrates speaks about the eros-concept of Diotima where the way of love begins with spontaneous desire to a beautiful body – in Emma's case food and the sense of taste – and ends with the most graceful goal, the perception of *Beauty Itself*, Emma climbs from the love of beauty in one body, or sense, to the beauty of everybody, or every sensual pleasure (Plato 1993: 154f.).

After a few scenes in Milano, we see the two lovers be intimate with one another, in the old, small house in the hills of Sanremo. After they had sex, they speak about a Russian dish and begin to cook it. The two get to know each other, they fall in love. Let's think again on what Berlant (2012) says about desire, when it comes to love she states it “is the embracing dream in which desire is reciprocated (...)” It expands the self (Berlant 2012: 6f.). In this scene Emma tells Antonio, that she stopped being Russian – and not just this, she stopped being herself, which we will see in a few lines – when she came to Milano. When she was homesick, she cooked.

After this scene we see Antonio cutting Emma's hair outside on the sunny terrace. Again, we see that a woman who gets nearer to herself, like Elisabetta in the first place, let her hair cut. Maybe it can be interpreted as a symbol with cutting traditions and expectations of others. Betta is first, she is an example for her mother.

The place in the hills is imbedded in vibrant nature with wonderful views and save for the two to be themselves. There are flowers, insects, the two lovers kissing each other, the two lying naked in the sun loving “the beautiful in its multitude” (Plato 1933, 155) another step on Diotima's ladder.

It is a *sacred space* like Winkler (as cited in Økland 2023: 307) says, because a function of them is to “transgress the boundaries of proper behaviour in public and domestic spaces”, throughout history, sacred spaces behold room for women to do and say things, that weren't possible neither in public nor private space (ibid.). So, Økland (2023: 309) notes that gender categories work differently in sacred spaces. Public and private are “a historically conditioned

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distinction” (ibid., 313). “Sacred space can be discursively constructed through either speech, ritual action, or through architecture” (ibid., 310). For Emma – an upper-class woman – in the hills of Sanremo it is possible to be totally different than in Milano. She can speak, act and feel differently, and can be observed taking back power over her own life. Desire also plays a role in that because it is able to transform and reorganizes worlds, and “collapses distinctions between public and private” (Berlant 2012: 14). The function of sacred space can also be found when it comes to Elisabetta. The university far away from her family allows her to find her way of living far from the family’s predetermined path.

## **I AM ... which kind of LOVE?**

The magic of the new doesn’t last long, when Edoardo finds out that his mother has an affair with his friend Antonio. He confronts her and says that she is not existing from now on. By accident he falls into the pool, hits his head and dies the same night. When it comes to the funeral, we can see the showdown.

In a previous scene Emma tells Antonio how she met Tancredi. He came to Russia because he wanted to collect art. The two grew closer and Tancredi took her to Italy. There Emma got her name: In Russia her name was Kitjesh, in Italy Tancredi named her Emma. It appears to me that Tancredi came to Russia to take some art with him, and he did. He stored Emma in his museum-like house and named her. It’s no wonder her individuality faded in this new area, and she had to find herself back.

After the funeral of their son, we see Emma and Tancredi in the entrance hall of the Famedio, which is a famous mausoleum in Milano. Emma is wet from the rain, Tancredi lovingly puts his blazer on her. He cares for his piece of Russian art. As Kollontai (as cited from Hardt 2020: 782) states, property is a form of “logic and a mode of relation that spans all realms of life”. She says that intimate bonds are built *on the logic* of property relations (ibid., 784). Something very similar to Kollontai’s thoughts is said by Barrett and McIntosh (1982, as cited from Hardt 2020: 787). The couple becomes “the antisocial family” an isolated unit, which is highly connected to the capitalist society. There is the place for love *of the same*. Because when two different people meet, the one firstly is *the other*, but when they form a couple, they become *the same*. We can find this where Emma tells Antonio that she stopped being Russian and merged into Tancredi’s life. Also, the authors write, that this property relations in the sense of ownership of one another comes with responsibility. We can see that Tancredi cares for Emma, he finds himself responsible for her. But what happens if someone breaks the rules of being property of the other?

In the mausoleum, Emma says to Tancredi that he doesn’t know her anymore, pushes him away and states that she loves Antonio. Tancredi rudely rips his blazer from her shoulders and while he leaves, he says without looking at her again: “You are not existing.”. Again, a male family member wants to erase her existence when she no longer appears in socially normed ways. Also, this scene shows us, that breaking the rule that Emma’s love has to stay inside the family, the contract of responsibility breaks.

We can see that when it comes to love, families are never private, always political (Kollontai 2019: 164). For Kollontai (ibid: 169) there is *winged eros*, which is an attempt to explain a new form of love, which she wants to replace property love in the socialist society of Russia after the October Revolution. Sexual attraction is the beginning too, but *winged eros* comes with other qualities like “sensitivity, responsiveness and the desire to help others” (ibid: 169) which are important when it comes to building a new culture.

The political dimension of love is also found with Berlant (2012: 7) when she writes that it is a “political question about the ways norms produce attachments to living through certain fantasies.”

## **A new love**

After the break-up with Tancredi, Emma runs back to the family estate and packs her clothes. We see her putting off her jewellery and dress, putting on sportswear. She then leaves downstairs and finds the whole family in the hall. Betta encourages her with her eyes and nodding. The glass front door of the house is wide open. We now see a golden background where the end credits of the film appear. We now get to see a cave with a ray of light on the stone where water mirrors. Inside the cave, Emma and Antonio are hugging and looking outside the cave. End.

Maybe their love stays between them and will soon transform in property as well. Emma was attracted to Antonio because of his cooking, which she loved by herself a long time ago. So, we can find more love of the same, even the two differ greatly depending on their class situation. If we think about Økland and the sacred space, it is also a possibility that the formerly sacred space in the hills of Sanremo becomes another domestic place for Emma, when Antonio and her relationship becomes more institutionalized under social norms or as Økland (2023: 313) says “integrated into the general public.”

But we don't get to see Emma and Antonio living an everyday life. We see them sitting in a cave. They are above a normal life of lovers. To think about Plato and the ladder of love, maybe they arrived at the end of the ladder: “in contemplating the Beautiful itself” (Plato 1993: 156).

But maybe it's the origin of, what Kollontai writes, a new love, where one understands the other comradely and accepts his or her freedom (Hardt 2020: 790). Maybe it's just the beginning in this cave, from where they look outside in a world where they want to increase their power to connect to and be connected with others, as Barrett and McIntosh (1982, as cited from Hardt 2020: 792) wish.

## **Conclusion**

Emma became a piece of caged art in Milano. But like art, she beholds a spark of openness – as shown in the support she gives her children – and desire which is lighted by Antonio's food and fed by their shared time in their sacred space. All this remembers Emma of her deepest self and that she desires to be seen as that, which is shown when she throws “You don't know me anymore” at Tancredi. We never see Emma's first bite of Antonio's food. We never see their first kiss clearly. In my interpretation, the film is not – like so many others – about the special,

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monogamous love between Antonio and Emma. Like it is said by Berlant (2012: 95) “romantic love might ... serve as a placeholder for a less eloquent or institutionally proper longing.”

Instead of romantic property love, the film is about desire and finding yourself back through it, made possible, among other things, by sacred space. And maybe this is the first step before forming bonds with others, or as Kollontai writes, to develop many bonds of love and friendship where the attachment varies (Hardt 2020: 792), to pave the way for a new love of *winged eros*, which can also be desired for societies today.

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