

‘Let’s pretend we are the only people in the universe’: Entangled Inequalities in Lukas Moodysson’s *Mammoth*

Elina Nilsson

Uppsala Universitet (Uppsala University)

Abstract

This article utilizes an intersectional approach to examine Lukas Moodysson’s film *Mammoth* (2009). When the film premiered it was by some criticized for its over-explicit critique of globalization and its portrayals of the female characters as scapegoats. My aim is to show how the film’s critique of globalization entails even more complexity. An intersectional reading of *Mammoth* reveals that the film employs a structure of pronounced narrative layers to illustrate how different axes of stratifications are entangled on a global level, such as how the situation of the characters are determined by an interplay of their gender, class and race. The film is thus a rich example of why a sensitivity to intersectionality when mapping processes of globalization is highly important. At the same time there is an ambivalence with regard to how the female characters are represented, as the film in some respects fails to acknowledge their agency.

Keywords

Lukas Moodysson, *Mammoth* (film), globalization, intersectionality, gendered labour

My first encounter with Lukas Moodysson's international film *Mammut* (*Mammoth*, 2009) was at a movie theatre in Uppsala, Sweden, just shortly after its premiere.¹ I remember stepping out of the theatre in the February cold feeling somewhat dispirited and sad, having read the film both as a critique of how contemporary parenthood (motherhood) fails to take care of children and as an over-explicit criticism of capitalist-driven globalization,² consumption and Western exploitation of the South. Even though it was received well by most Swedish critics, there were those who read it as 'one of the most misogynistic movies that's been made in Sweden', understanding the moral sense of the story as 'working women lead to unfaithful men and dead children at home as well as at work' (Gudmundson 2009). And, even though Gudmundson's reading may be a bit exaggerated, the plot of the film does invite an interpretation of it as explicit critique of globalization and of the position of women.

Mammoth, Moodysson's English language debut,³ is an international drama evolving around three stories that takes place in three different places: the United States, the Philippines and Thailand. Ellen (Michelle Williams), a devoted emergency surgeon, and Leo (Gael García Bernal), founder of an internet-gaming company on the rise, are a young married couple living with their precocious seven-year-old daughter Jackie (Sophie Nyweide) in a flashy penthouse in New York City. As both parents have demanding careers, Jackie spends a lot of time with the nanny Gloria (Marife Necesito), a Filipino woman who is trying to make ends meet so she can go back to and support her two sons at home in the Philippines. Both Ellen and Leo seem to be dissatisfied with their busy lives, finding it hard to put the puzzle pieces of life together. While Ellen works the night shift and tries to save a young boy who has been stabbed by his mother, Leo heads off on a private jet for a financial meeting in Thailand. There he meets Cookie (Run Srinikornchot), who works as a bar escort at a nightclub in order to make money to support her baby who seems to live with her parents somewhere else in Thailand. Sometime later, Gloria's eldest son is seriously injured and sexually abused by a sex tourist. Gloria then leaves to be with her family in the Philippines and Leo returns to New York. The movie ends with Ellen, Leo and Jackie reunited in the

penthouse, expressing their distress over Gloria's son, and coming to the realization that they need to find a new nanny. We can assume that the movie title comes from the expensive pen made of mammoth ivory Leo is given on the plane to Thailand, a pen worth \$3000. But also the word 'mammut' (mammoth) in the Swedish language is reminiscent of the word 'mother' (mamma), the film being about parenthood.

Based on the main events in the plot it is easy to read the film as a critique of globalization or, in Gudmundson's terms, as 'misogynistic'. In this article, my aim is to show that this reading is too simplistic and that the movie is more complex. An intersectional reading of the film can reveal its more nuanced and complex critique of globalization, but also that this critique is somewhat insufficient as it neglects the agency of migrant women. According to the feminist sociologist Joan Acker, when the process and phenomenon of globalization is discussed it is often portrayed as gender neutral and neglecting race and ethnicity, thus masking the many facets of power (Acker 2004: 19). In *Mammoth*, however, the intersections of race, class and gender⁴ are prominent and crucial to the conditions of existence of each character.

Intersectionality as theoretical perspective and methodological approach has, during the last ten to twenty years, been highlighted in feminist and gender studies, as well as in the social sciences in general. Paulina de los Reyes, economic historian, and Diana Mulinari, researcher on gender, describe intersectionality as 'a theoretical perspective that highlights how different historical and power relations are created simultaneously by different axes of stratification, such as gender, race and class' (de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005: 24). Intersectionality acknowledges how different categories (e.g. gender, sexuality, age, citizenship, religion) are multidimensional. For example, class hierarchies are at the same time defined by other dimensions of inequality (or privileges, depending on the context), such as gender, race, sexuality, age, citizenship, religion, etc. These interplays of stratification, however, have different consequences and they manifest themselves in various ways depending on context, thus location and spatiality can be determining factors to consider in their level of impact. Applying an intersectional sensibility will help to develop a better understanding of globalization processes and their

consequences for men and women.

Leo and a Backpack of Privileges

I will now discuss the main male character in the film, Leo, and by using an intersectional approach show how his different axes of stratification together posit him in a privileged position, especially in relation to Cookie. Using this approach, we can also read the portrayal of him in *Mammoth* as a postcolonial and feminist critique.

The character Leo is to be understood as the individual who most benefits from globalization as his categories of identity intersect to provide him with many privileges. Back home in the USA, with his wealth, male gender, heterosexuality, lower middle age, functional and fit body and a coveted occupation, Leo represents a white hegemonic masculinity⁵ (albeit his Latino-sounding surname Vidales and his Latino appearance may be somewhat to his disadvantage). The trip from New York to Thailand enhances these privileges even more as his racial and cultural capital of whiteness becomes economically and politically privileged on a global level. As a white American and tourist and businessman in a poorer country he in many ways embodies the notion of a 'white rich man'. In this way Leo manifests how the spatial and historical aspects of intersectionality also become important and how different categorizations are differently enhanced depending on the context. But he also demonstrates how intersectionality is not only about stratifications of inequalities, but also (for some) of privileges.

Even if Leo would pass as a white rich businessman, he does not seem to be comfortable wearing a suit, going to meetings or sipping cocktails at clubs, but rather stays in his hotel room listening to music, taking baths and playing video games. And as Leo's business drags on he takes the opportunity to try out backpacking-life on a Thai island. He rents a cheap bungalow on the beach and buys himself a pair of Bermuda shorts and some t-shirts with prints on the front from a passing vendor. It is here that Leo meets Cookie, when he visits a night club together with some other backpackers. He is upset by Cookie's situation as an escort and pays her to go home to sleep by herself. To either show her gratitude for his kindness or maybe out of curiosity as

Leo differs from her regular customers, Cookie visits him the day after and offers him a guided tour in the neighborhood. They spend the day visiting a temple, eating fruit, riding a motorbike and swimming in the sea, and eventually Leo has sex with her (more or less without her consent). This encounter between Leo and Cookie addresses from an intersectional perspective unequal stratifications, for instance regarding their gender, income, access to mobility, citizenship. In one scene, as they lie in the bed together in Leo's bungalow after having had sex, he involves her in his daydreams about going to a faraway place where there are fewer tourists, like 'Africa or India'. He talks about sailing around the world and wants Cookie to go with him and they could 'pretend they are the only people in the universe'. Leo's privileges based on his socio-economic background, citizenship and income allow him to move through the world without encountering friction, thus these plans could very well be possible in practice (especially since he has a wife and Filipino nanny at home taking care of his daughter). Involving Cookie in his plans, Leo presumes that she has access to the same mobility without knowing her family situation and without taking into consideration that her gender, nationality and socio-economic background would limit her.

Leo is also portrayed as more nuanced than the other characters as he seems to be aware of these privileges to some extent. Jenny Björklund, researcher of comparative literature and gender, has in her article 'Arrogant Perceptors, World-Travellers, and World-Backpackers' (forthcoming) analyzed *Mammoth* with inspiration from María Lugones' concept of world-travelling. World-travelling, according to Lugones, is generally about how people have access to different 'worlds' and thus different experiences, and that we need to travel between these worlds to varying extents in order to understand one another better.⁶ Björklund further theorizes this concept, stressing that in our contemporary globalized world it also becomes necessary to talk about world-backpacking. This concept refers to a person who seems to be driven by a will to help and learn from less privileged people, but rather describes 'the process where privileged Westerners believe themselves to perceive the Other lovingly and create intimacy and bonds with her, but instead use her and/or violate her bodily

boundaries (as Leo winds up doing when he has sex with Cookie more or less against her will)' (Björklund forthcoming). The movie highlights how Leo is aware of the injustices in the world and to some extent tries to cope with this, but without being conscious of how he himself perpetuates these same structures. The sex tourism and the poverty upset Leo and he gives Cookie money to sleep instead of work for one night, something that does not change her life in the long run. He offers to get her 'a real job, at an office with a computer' in Bangkok. Being privileged with the comfort of having a wife and a Filipino nanny taking care of his daughter while escaping real life, Leo is unable to see the reality from Cookie's perspective. For example he does not know she has a baby daughter that her parents presumably take care of and for whom she sings to every night over the phone.

It becomes clear how Leo, besides using himself as reference, at the same time views Cookie as a victim, as someone that he could 'save'. For example by offering a 'real job', buying her a night 'off duty' or after having had sex leaves the \$3000 mammoth-pen and an expensive watch by her side (which she later on tries to sell but is told they are fake and gets almost nothing in return). This portrayal of Leo victimizing Cookie can thus be interpreted as a postcolonial feminist critique of a white westerner's notions of the third world woman as a poor, sexually oppressed, uneducated, homogenous entity (Mohanty 2003). As Björklund puts it: 'Leo turns the Third World into a monolithic subject in opposition to himself as embodying white privilege' (Björklund forthcoming).

Gloria's and Cookie's Contradictory Positions

Thus far I have by using an intersectional sensitivity shown how the male character in Mammoth is, given his combinations of positions, privileged. I have also suggested that one's possibilities or constraints in the context of globalization differ depending on the intersections of power categories. This intersectional sensibility is also important when discussing female migration, such as Gloria's and Cookie's, and how the labour market is organized according to principles of class, gender, race and ethnicity (de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005: 21). It is obvious that

Moodysson has done his research well when it comes to the portrayals of female migrant workers, and especially the representation of Gloria. She is in many ways portrayed as the typical international working migrant, being a woman from South East Asia, middle-aged, a mother of two and having left her home country for the USA hoping to give her children better economic conditions and a house of their own. In most research on feminized migration, this is the background of the average female migrant (Aragao-Lagergren 2010; Ghosh 2009; Yamanaka & Piper 2005).

What makes Gloria a typical female migrant is the intersection of her positions, such as her gender, race, class and nationality. The fact that she is a woman contributes to her seeking domestic and caring work, as gender roles often affect the choice of work, but also what type of person is demanded for a certain job. Most female migrants are in a reproductive occupation such as domestic work, the care sector, sex services and 'entertainment' (Ghosh 2009: 8). According to Yamanaka and Piper, '[t]he domestic work of migrant women is viewed as an extension of unpaid "service" naturally assigned to women according to traditional gender roles' (Yamanaka & Piper 2005:16). Even Gloria's nationality as a Filipino affects her migration, as the Philippines, like many other Asian countries, are undergoing transition, not at least economically, and have come to depend on female migrants' remittances (Ghosh 2009: 38). At the same time her national belonging and gender are a source of defiance, as her choice to migrate still can be stigmatized back home; Gloria challenges gendered notions of how a woman should act (not leaving her children at home to travel to the other side of the world, instead being present in the family life).

The character Cookie represents another typical portrayal of a female working migrant: a young woman who has migrated domestically to be involved in the sex industry in the South East Asian country of Thailand. In her work as a bar escort her gender, age and demographic background all interplay, as it is predominantly young women from the countryside that are drawn to this area of business (Bales 2002). As a bar escort, Cookie converts her gender, race, and age into erotic capital and tries to sell it to (western) men. What she can offer Leo is something different and more exotic than his relation with Ellen.

As Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russel Hochschild states in *Global Woman* (2002), a study of female migrant workers, erotic capital is often predicated on a kind of orientalism:

[e]ven as many wage-earning Western women assimilate to the competitive culture of “male” work and ask respect for making it in a man’s world, some men seek in the “exotic Orient” or “hot-blooded tropics” a woman from the imagined past’ (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2002: 10)

It is obvious in the film how Leo, in *Cookie*, seeks and ultimately misrecognizes something ‘authentic’ and ‘real’. At the end of the film we also find out that *Cookie*, just like *Gloria*, is a working single mother who has to spend time apart from her baby, underlining again how the same drivers for economic migration and the sale of labour are nuanced in terms of their outcome by gender, age and place.

Even though I want to credit Moodysson for the faithfulness with which the socio-economic backdrop is painted in *Mammoth*, the portrayals of *Gloria* and *Cookie* can be seen as somewhat stereotypical and one-dimensional with regard to female working migrants. As their motive for migrating seems to be exclusively financial need, their agency is undermined and they are represented as more or less victims of circumstances. The economist Jayati Ghosh, specialized in globalization, gender and development, describes how in popular culture female working migrants seldom have the role of protagonist, but tend to be characters with little or no agency at all (Ghosh 2009: 30). Rather than only understanding these women as dependent workers without much choice we could also elect to understand them as autonomous and subversive women who by migrating increases their ‘opportunity for paid employment’ and ‘equality in personal life’ (Acker 2004: 36). This illustrates how the process of migration can be understood as contradictory, on the one hand offering the women a chance for social mobility, but on the other hand also subjecting them to exploitation (Yamanaka & Piper 2005: iv). In the beginning of *Mammoth* both *Gloria* and *Cookie* demonstrate that they are their own agents, as they have both made calculated decisions in order to

gain better economical possibilities. Further, Cookie actively seeks out Leo and despite the factors that might constrain her (her gender and motherhood) it is to some extent obvious that she moves about freely, thus expressing the idea that she is in some way independent. Gloria, meanwhile, finds support in the weekly church services for Filipino migrants in New York where she prays, dines and exchanges experiences with other women. As Ghosh states, 'there is growing evidence of [...] mobilization among migrant women in different parts of the world' and this is to be read as creating 'potential for migration to be a source of women's empowerment' (Ghosh 2009: 36).

As the movie evolves, Cookie and Gloria are both punished for their choice. Gloria's son is seriously injured while she is on the other side of the globe and Cookie's subordination is enhanced as Leo 'pays' her with his pen and watch and leaves her after having had sex. Also, it is not only until in the very end of the film that we find out that Cookie has a daughter, a fact that clearly invites comparison of her and Gloria. It appears that both women have been forced into migration out of a need to care of their children. Absent in *Mammoth* is the sense that these women are conscious agents, as it only draws on the stereotype typical for Asian female migrants as passive victims of patriarchy and global capitalism. In contrast to these women stands the white western woman's self-notion of a modern, educated feminist in control of her own body (for example, in this film, Ellen), creating a discursive construction of developing world women as a monolithic entity (Mohanty 2003).

If we then are to understand Gloria and Cookie in relation to Ellen, a white upper-middle-class mother, we need to recognize their similarities due to their shared gender and motherhood. They all suffer from bad conscience due to spending a lot of time apart from their children, and Ellen, too, makes choices in her life for which she is more or less punished (e.g her devotion to work is weakening her relationship with Jackie). All three women are engaged in caring for other people, specifically a gendered form of labour involving deflection of care from their biological children: Gloria cares for Jackie, Cookie provides a form of care for Leo (and other men), and Ellen cares for her patients. It becomes obvious, however, that the three

women have different preconditions for their work. Ellen possesses a somewhat double and paradoxical position as both oppressed and privileged; she is not obliged to work the night shift in order to survive economically or give her daughter an adequate standard of living, due to their obvious wealth and Leo's career. Given their economic disparity, a straightforward equation of Ellen with Gloria and Cookie and a blanket inference that women in the film are portrayed in a misogynic way would ignore the fact that there are differences between the portrayed women. To quote Mohanty: '[i]f these particular gendered, classed, and racialized realities of globalization are unseen and under-theorized, even the most radical critiques of globalization effectively render Third World/South women and girls as absent' (Mohanty 2003: 515). This acknowledges that the gendered experiences of oppression are diverse.

Because women like Gloria exist, Ellen can continue her career working shifts and still (barely) keep her family intact, and Leo can continue with his life, thanks to women like Gloria and Ellen. This illustrates what Ehrenreich and Hochschild state: 'strictly speaking, the presence of immigrant nannies does not enable affluent women to enter the workforce; it enables affluent men to continue avoiding the second shift' (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2002: 9). In this way, Ellen's and Leo's positions differ; he is portrayed as less of a martyr to family life. While Ellen's relationship to Jackie suffers because she prioritizes her work, Leo appears to be the family-oriented one as he wishes to spend more time with his wife and child, including travelling with them. It seems that he has the freedom to 'soul search' because the women in his life take a share of his responsibilities, giving him some 'time off'. Either way, both Ellen and Leo benefit from Gloria's work; their lifestyle is enabled by transnational movements of services from the global south to the global north, with nannies such as Gloria offering their gendered labour of love.

Conclusion

By interlacing the story lines of three people, *Mammoth* illustrates how we are all interconnected with one and another, though on very

different terms. It provides a critical voice against the consequences of globalization, one of them being the plight of mothers as being pushed into both sacrificing and neglecting their children. What I have done in this article is try to demonstrate that, despite the somewhat over-explicit critique of globalization and the portrayals of the female characters which at first glance emphasize guilt as a postmodern condition, *Mammoth* employs a structure of pronounced narrative layers to illustrate how intersections of different axes of stratifications are entangled in a transnational context. The situations of Gloria, Cookie, Leo and Ellen are determined by an interplay of their gender, class and race; the film thus suggests that a sensitivity to intersectionality when mapping processes of globalization is highly important.

The conventional notion is that poorer countries are dependent on richer ones, but what we explore in *Mammoth* is that there is also a dependency of richer countries on labour from developing nations, a dependency of a more intimate kind, a dependence on caring labour. Indeed, in *Global Woman*, Ehrenreich and Hochschild use the metaphor of a traditional relationship between the sexes to describe the global relationship between the First World and the Third World: '[t]he First World takes on a role like that of the old-fashioned male in the family – pampered, entitled, unable to cook, clean, or find his socks. Poor countries take on a role like that of the traditional woman within the family – patient, nurturing, and self-denying' Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2002: 11).

By paying attention to and theorizing the experiences of women from the developing world we acknowledge that the process of globalization must be understood as gendered, racialized, classified and everything but neutral. In revealing this, *Mammoth* is also rendering postcolonial feminism visible (i.e. viewing the different circumstances for women depending on their race, class etc.). At the same time, the film fails to live up to this ambition, portraying Gloria and Cookie as one-dimensional and undermining their agency. The film fails to show how the processes of globalization both enable and control their movement in the world.

As the movie *Mammoth* illustrates the 'increasing interconnectedness of the world' (Björklund forthcoming), while also acknowledging the

different intersecting dimensions of globalization, it envisions an entangled mutual dependency between people. In other words, despite Leo's wish, we cannot pretend we are the only ones in the universe, as our lives and lifestyles have impact on the lives of others - some more than others.

Notes

¹ The author would like to thank Jenny Björklund for her invaluable comments, support and encouragement that helped shape this article.

² I here refer to globalization as a process that refers to the increasing pace and movements of capital, production, and people across boundaries on a global level (Acker 2004: 18).

³ The film is predominantly in English but also features Thai and Tagalog.

⁴ As race, class and gender are contentious concepts I find it necessary to define my understanding and use of them. Race is here referred to as a mean for social categorization of people and thus is socially constructed around definitions of skin color and other physiological characteristics (Brah 2001: 177, Acker 2006: 6). Class is to be understood as a concept that locates groups and individuals hierarchal within an ongoing capitalistic process (Acker 2006: 2). Gender as used here is defined as a process, socially produced and constructed and highly variable. The term acknowledges the predominant subordination of women within gender relations. Inequalities and divisions constructed around assumed qualities of men and women (Acker 2004: 20).

⁵ For a more detailed discussion on white hegemonic masculinity', see Connell 1995.

⁶ For a more detailed discussion on 'world-travelling', see Lugones 1987.

References

Acker, J. (2004). 'Gender, Capitalism and Globalization'. *Critical Sociology* 30(1), pp.17-40.

Acker, J. (2006). *Class Questions: Feminist Answers*. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Aragao-Lagergren, A. (2010). 'Children left behind. A study in children of migrant women in Sri Lanka', in *Women and Migration in South Asia: Health and Social Consequences: workshop proceedings*, 9th to 11th February, 2009, Colombo, Sri Lanka - Uppsala: Department of Women's and Children's Health, Uppsala University, pp.114-126.

Bales, K. (2002). 'Because She Looks like a Child', in Ehrenreich, B. & Hochschild, A. R. (eds.), *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Holt Paperback, pp.207-229.

Brah, A. (2001). 'Att inrama Europa på nytt: Genuskonstruerade rasismer, etniciteter och nationalism i dagens Västeuropa'. In: Landström, Catharina (ed.), *Postkoloniala texter*. Stockholm: Federativs, pp.173-200.

Björklund, J. (forthcoming). 'Arrogant Perceptors, World-Travellers, and World-Backpackers: Rethinking María Lugones' Theoretical Framework through Lukas Moodysson's *Mammoth*', in Käll, L. F. (ed.), *Vulnerable Bodies/Embodied Boundaries*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Connell, R.W (1995). *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ehrenreich, B. and Hochschild, A. R. (eds.) (2002). *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Holt Paperback.

Ghosh, J. (2009). 'Migration and Gender Empowerment: Recent Trends in Emerging Issues'. Human Development Research Paper 2009/4, UNDP.

Gudmundson, P. (2009). 'Inte är väl Lukas Moodysson kvinnofientlig?' Svenska Dagbladet, 6 February 2009. http://www.svd.se/opinion/ledarsidan/inte-ar-val-lukas-moodysson-kvinnofientlig_2430341.svd (Accessed: 10 June 2014).

Lugones, M. (1987). 'Playfulness, "World"-travelling and Loving Perception'. *Hypatia* 2(2), pp.3-19.

Mohanty, C. T. (2003). "'Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles'. *Signs* 28(2), pp.499-535.

de los Reyes, P. and Mulinari, D. (2005). *Interseksjonalitet: Kritiska reflektioner över (o)jämlighetens landskap*. Malmö: Liber.

Yamanaka, K. and Piper, N. (2005). 'Feminized Migration in East and Southeast Asia: Policies, Actions and Empowerment'. Occasional Paper 11. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD).