

Lilya 4-ever.

Post-Soviet Neoliberal Angels and Nordic Intellectual Secularism

Anna Westerståhl Stenport

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract

Like many of Lukas Moodysson's films, *Lilja 4-ever* (*Lilya 4-Ever*, 2002) centres on a complex female protagonist on the verge of adulthood. Lilya is based on a documented case of suicide by a trafficked young woman from the former USSR, whose eventual redemption, or at least her dream of escape, is self-consciously visualized in sequences featuring Lilya and her friend as winged angels. This tension in registers, between fantasy and social realism and between melodrama and societal critique, opens up interpretive venues that paradoxically signal both the film's protest against, and implication within, ideologies and practices of neoliberalism and globalization. Moodysson's questioning of neoliberalism and globalization within a double framework of gender and religiosity point to his desire to find alternate (political) discourses outside the dominant ones. This ambition, however, figures Lilya as a victim of abuse on multiple levels: as trafficked girl, as didactic vehicle for a political message and, arguably, also as part of a postmodernist experiment that reinserts a redemptive spirituality into a context marked by capitalist and political secularism.

Keywords

Lukas Moodysson, *Lilya-4-ever* (film), neoliberalism, secularism, globalization

Lukas Moodysson's *Lilya 4-ever* (*Lilja 4-Ever*, 2002) is, on the one hand, a conventional melodrama built on a rigid opposition between a young woman betrayed by her mother and victimized by patriarchal and geopolitical circumstances beyond her control. On the other hand, the film involves an attempt at recuperation of religious humanism in contemporary secular and neoliberal Europe. This religious recuperation is set against a larger frame, as Europe itself goes through a process of profound transformation through both European economic and political integration in the form of the EU, and the conflicted and tension-riddled re-union of the former Soviet bloc and Russia within a re-emergent pan-European identity. In its depiction of trafficking, transnational migration, and immigration, the film illustrates how northern Europe and post-Soviet Baltic countries have changed from being perceived as unproblematically homogenous to ones that are deeply conflicted about cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. Through this process, gender (figured as the abuse of an adolescent woman) becomes a pawn for both supranationalism and neoliberalism, with a re-imagined vision of Christianity holding out an answer beyond those typically propagated by secular Europe. This marks *Lilya 4-ever* both as a moralizing spectacle and as an intriguing postmodernist religious exercise.

Like many of Moodysson's feature films, *Lilya 4-ever* features a main female character straddling childhood and adulthood. Like the girls and young women of *Show Me Love* (*Fucking Åmål*, 1998) and *We are the Best!* (*Vi är bäst!*, 2013), Lilya is a complex protagonist. This dedication to portraying ambiguity and ambivalence as essential to girlhood and adolescence distinguishes Moodysson as a director within European and North American cinema, as I have argued elsewhere (Stenport 2012). Focusing on a child's point of view is also a hallmark of his varied feature oeuvre, spanning films such as *Together* (*Tillsammans*, 2000) and *Mammoth* (*Mammut*, 2008). As Moodysson deploys this particular perspective in *Lilya 4-ever*, the horrors of child prostitution and international trafficking emerge in heart-wrenching detail, as the debate and political interventions surrounding the release of the film makes evident (see Hedling 2004 for a comprehensive review). A fictional account of a young woman

trafficked to Malmö, Sweden for prostitution, from an unnamed part of the former Soviet Union, the plot is based on media accounts of a Lithuanian woman's suicide; she, like Lilya, had been held captive and sexually brutalized (Florin et. al 2004: 7). Despite the fact that the film engages explicit registers of fantasy, *Lilya 4-ever* was received as a statement of social realism and adopted by Swedish authorities as an anti-prostitution policy implementation tool, subsequently mobilized as a mouthpiece for international interventions against trafficking (see Hedling 2004: 326-328; Sparrman 2006; Lundqvist and Viklund 2005). This tension in registers, between fantasy and social realism and between melodrama and societal critique, opens up interpretive venues that paradoxically signal both the film's protest against, and implication within, ideologies and practices of neoliberalism and globalization. Specifically, Moodysson's questioning of neoliberalism and globalization within a framework of both gender and religiosity point to his desire to find alternate (political) discourses outside the dominant ones.

An Angelic Figuration Among the Debris of the Nation State

Lilya 4-ever investigates how the political is intimately intertwined with both the personal and the religious, and how these aspects of identity are themselves framed and determined by gender and sexuality. The first three sequences of the film, culminating in a figuration of Lilya as an angel, articulate these tensions. In the opening sequence, we follow as she runs through what appears to be a modern European suburban landscape of anonymous apartment buildings. She is a young woman alone in a desolate landscape, her face covered with bruises. We know something is not right. The camera moves erratically; it skips and swirls as if its lens were replicating what Lilya sees as she runs. As a film about trafficking, it appropriately 'makes movement one of its central motifs', as Emma Wilson argues (Wilson 2005: 334). Director of photography Ulf Brantås establishes Lilya as the subjective center in this opening sequence, a strategy which is largely maintained throughout the film.¹ The non-diegetic sound-track blasts German metal band Rammstein's song with the symbolic title 'Mein Hertz brennt' (My Heart is Burning).

In the second sequence, the music, location, and cinematic strategy abruptly change. Accompanied by the techno tune 'Bomba' performed by Ukraine all-women's band Via Gra (a.k.a. Nu Virgos), the camera pans by a number of derelict apartment buildings and abandoned warehouses, with the film's credits superimposed. This rendition of a different, but similarly anonymous modern landscape, is presented from the perspective of a car speeding through, and here there is no subjective point of view established. As viewers, we are asked to occupy the position of detached observers, or of tourists. This is what, as the credits indicate, a suburban landscape looks like 'three months earlier, somewhere in the former Soviet Union'.

In the third sequence, Lilya's point of view is reestablished. With the soundtrack silent, the camera becomes steady, focusing on the painting of an angel leading a small child by the hand. The feminine-looking angel and her protégé are positioned against a background of greenery and large boulders, evoking a conventional nineteenth-century Romantic painting (this adapted angel motif does not evoke a stern male Biblical angel, but rather one that is feminized, or at least androgynous). The camera zooms in closer on the face and wings of both angels, seemingly scrutinizing the grain of the paint as if wanting to put the emotional and ethical point of connection between mother and child firmly into place (with connections to the Virgin Mary and Jesus implicit). As the scene cuts, we see Lilya carefully wrapping up a simple reproduction, framed in a cheap glass case, as she packs her belongings in preparation for what she believes to be a planned move with her mother to the United States.

The first three sequences in *Lilya 4-ever* locate the personal, socio-political, and religious as tightly interconnected. The first sequence portrays a subjective rendition of the harrowing experience of being trafficked into forced prostitution; the second illustrates what a post-Soviet contemporary reality looks like to an outsider; the third offers for Lilya the possibility of spiritual guidance and quietude, as an Angelic mother-figure leads a young child by the hand. An affectively charged scene about ten minutes into the film firmly solidifies these connections into place. Her mother departed, Lilya, in her light-coloured nightgown, is left alone, screaming and crying, outside their apartment complex.

During a protracted half minute-long scene, Lilya kneels like an angel clad in white, offset against the black mud and fallen leaves, while the autumn section of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (Symphony RV 169 in B-minor) cuts out all diegetic sound. Aesthetically this scene confirms the connection between Lilya and the biblical pictorial motif of the angel and the child, affirming the film's interest in tying the personal to the religious, and the socio-political to the familial.

Maternal Betrayal

Lilya is a child abandoned and betrayed by her own mother. She is also betrayed or neglected by all other maternal figures she encounters: her aunt, a teacher, a social welfare worker, and a landlady. Had these women not abandoned her, Lilya would arguably not have been forced into prostitution. Moodysson's interest in gender, sexuality, and adolescence informs the opening of the film in three different ways. First, Lilya's descent into prostitution and trafficking is caused by her mother's betrayal. In this scheme, it is not a patriarchal and neoliberal society that is fundamentally at fault. Rather, the scene appears indebted to the Western notion of the family – or a religious institution – as responsible for the caretaking of its members, which diminishes a possible identification with a socialist program of provision through the state. The maternal betrayal also formulates a deterministic and sexualized paradigm from which Lilya cannot escape: it is just a step away from prostitution. Her friend Natasha (who appears to have a protective father but an absent mother) sells sex for pocket money. As Lilya's mother departs, seemingly of her own free choice, she also appears to be drawn into a trafficking scheme organized by a boyfriend supposedly residing in the United States (Lilya's aunt describes her own sister as opting to spread her legs to foreigners for fast money). The departure scene, Wilson suggests, 'bathes in the pathos of its subject' and connects us to the 'horror of the film's repetitions; as Lilya runs at the start of the film, as she runs at the end, she is arguably each time (inexhaustibly) repeating this hopeless departure from her mother, and recalling the viewer's departures' (Wilson 2005: 337). This allows for a typical Moodysson affective connection: 'Lilya is the child the

viewer has been' (Wilson 2005: 337).

The Post-Soviet Mother Country

The maternal betrayal also reflects the betrayal of a post-Soviet Russian mother country, evoking the prevalent trope of Russia as *rodina*, the Mother Country, as well as post-Soviet construction of sexualized youth culture. Soviet culture tended to cover up practices of, and references to, youth sexuality, as Fran Markowitz shows in her comprehensive ethnographic study *Coming of Age in Post-Soviet Russia*, including dissuading a distinction between children and adolescents (2000: 18). Markowitz draws, for example, on the prevalent term *deti*, children, to describe all between ages 0 and 17. Reactions to *Show Me Love* when it was screened in Russia in 1999 supports a view of post-Soviet cultural suppression of sexuality. *Show Me Love* was described as addressing an 'unusual, if not shocking theme. Lesbian love, and particularly among youth, is close to a taboo subject' (Londén 1999; ref. Erik Ohlson). Though this is not explicitly addressed in *Lilya 4-ever*, part of the social stigma of (youth) prostitution is that it negates earlier official discourse, which promoted 'the image of the Soviet Union as a sex-free society' (Markowitz 2000: 132). The participation of women in a sexual market economy is doubly contested. As Markowitz argues, 'the fact that there is sex in Russia (and was sex in the Soviet Union) is still [in the mid-1990s] difficult for the public to deal with, and thus it is discussed in sensationalistic forms. A veil of silence continues to hang over the subject in respectable circles' (Markowitz 2000: 134). Moodysson's portrayal of Lilya establishes an oblique point of connection both with his previous film *Show Me Love* and with this aspect of post-Soviet gendered and sexual practices. Lilya is not only an individual victim; her figuration represents as well what appears to the viewer to be the crumbling of Soviet ideology. Lilya is presented as both typical and unique. She is simultaneously a victim of a ruthless patriarchal society driven by dehumanizing profit motives, an angel seemingly redeemed by her gradual descent into loneliness, poverty, abuse, and delusions, and a migrant subject abandoned by a nation destroyed by neoliberal economic practices. In this regard, it is certainly possible to

label *Lilya 4-ever* a didactic film with a political agenda, which uses an individual young woman's plight (and her mother's betrayal) to criticize geopolitical inequities caused by neoliberal policies in the service of global capitalism. It is also an explicitly religious film, however.

A Film about 'God's Benevolence'?

Lilya 4-ever has been framed as Moodysson's most explicitly political film.² It is also his most openly religious film, seemingly inspired by divine intervention:³ 'The story of the film came very suddenly to me. It was as if someone had whispered in my ear and said "This is the film that you are going to make and you cannot do anything else"' (Leigh 2002; c.f. Scott 2005: 254). In a number of statements connected to *Lilya 4-ever*, Moodysson affirms that he wants 'to make wake-up films' for Westerners oblivious to economic and geopolitical inequities that force those impoverished into acts of desperation; Moodysson has also repeatedly emphasized that he sees trafficking and prostitution in the former Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe as an economic problem, caused by Western neoliberal policies that remove the social safety net (Moodysson 2004; Leigh 2002).

This film comes with a message: Moodysson dedicates it to 'the millions of children and adolescents around the world who are abused in the sex trade' (Lagerström n.d.) and in paratexts surrounding *Lilya 4-ever*. In the director's notes for the Swedish DVD, Moodysson calls it a film about 'God's benevolence' and as seeking to convey 'hope' to the world. In an interview, Moodysson explains that it was originally 'a more religious film. It dealt with Jesus walking around in the world next to Lilya. He was physically one of the characters in the film' and that perhaps Lilya's friend Volodya (Artyom Bogucharsky) 'became a metaphor for Jesus [...] I like the idea of Jesus as a little boy who is very kind and tries to do everything he can to save this girl' (Leigh 2002). Though Moodysson has affirmed his interest in spirituality and his Christian beliefs in a number of interviews – a preoccupation evident also in much of his poetry – little scholarship has addressed this aspect of *Lilya 4-ever*. Read from this perspective, the film appears both as an exemplum and as a modern allegory, yet also as curiously

naïve. Moodysson, like Lars von Trier in *Breaking the Waves* (1996; one of the films in the Golden Heart Trilogy, it also features a young woman character as an innocent prostitute), appears to be referring to what in popular culture is figured as Catholicism's preoccupation with the tragic: the world is fallen and can be only partly redeemed by the sacrifice of an innocently pure child or young woman.

Lilya 4-ever thus links its political agenda to an explicitly Christian framework, including diegetic fantasy-inspired figurations of Volodya and Lilya as angels, complete with feathery wings. In a particularly striking sequence, Lilya, imprisoned and alone in an apartment in Sweden, recites the Lord's Prayer, then smashes her framed picture of the angel and her protégé. She hides herself in a symbolic sarcophagi under a coffee table draped with white sheets. Delusional, she sees the deceased Volodya open up an apartment wall as they exit out onto the roof of the building. The camera circles around them while an interdiegetic soundtrack of chiming church bells (much like what von Trier includes in the final sequence of *Breaking the Waves*) affirms that this is the characters' subjective experience, as the sound breaks an otherwise eerie quietude. Volodya then tells Lilya that he has a Christmas gift for her: 'It is all this [camera pans over grey cityscape]', he says, the 'whole world. The houses, cars, streets, the wind. It's all yours. You can do what you like'. Seated on the edge of the tall building, the camera on the ground and zooming up toward them, Lilya expresses her exasperation: it is 'cold' and this 'world isn't that good [...] I don't want this life'. Volodya, however, laments his own suicide, encouraging Lilya (who remains quiet during the scene) 'to remember that time we sat on the bench and you wrote "Lilya forever"? And those assholes spat at us. I said that we should leave but you said that you weren't ready. You wanted to finish writing first [...] This is how it is now. Everyone is spitting at you, but you're not ready. Jump if you want to. I'll catch you. But then you lose, and the assholes that spit at you win. You see?' [Lilya is quiet]

Volodya, though a boy, is a spiritual leader of – indeed a bestower of – the world in this sequence. Yet his moral message combines the secular and the spiritual. Invested in the secular ideal of individual autonomous strength in the face of an oppressive collective, he

counsels Lilya not to relinquish her individuality – here associated with the inscription, as if in eternity, of her name (Lilya forever). In a later reappearance in a dream-sequence, Volodya coaches Lilya to open the door to the apartment and exit, which leads to a repeat of the prologue scene with Lilya running through the suburban landscape, eventually jumping to her death. Suicide is particularly problematic in an religious tradition to which Lilya’s iconography otherwise seems to allude. Volodya, of course, cannot ‘catch her’ as she jumps.

The diegetic representation of a vaguely Orthodox but seemingly folklore-inspired framework in *Lilya 4-ever* is strikingly material – feathery wings appear on Lilya’s back after her suicide, when we see her joyfully playing basketball with Volodya on the rooftop of the abandoned submarine base in their hometown, the setting sun filtering golden rays that reflect on their wings. Yet the Christian theological implications are obscure, as these contrast starkly to the materiality of angel wings and the post-mortem images of blissful reincarnation back in the mother country. Following her suicide (she jumps from the bridge in the film’s first sequence) Lilya relives part of her life in a revisionist penultimate mini-narrative. Returning to her home, Lilya redeems her betrayal of Volodya, as she rejects Andrei’s offer of a job in Sweden and thereby prevents Volodya’s suicide. Within this narrative, Lilya is thus redeemed as an individual with agency to make ethical choices only in death; in life, she is deterministically coded as a victim of her own mother’s betrayal as well as that of her mother country and of Sweden (see Kristensen 2007: 18-20). The figuration of Lilya as a victim operates on multiple levels – she is also (ab)used in this film as didactic vehicle that serves as a political message and, arguably, also as part of a postmodernist experiment that reinserts a vaguely redemptive spirituality into a context marked by capitalist and political secularism.

On the other hand, the film reflects post-Soviet attitudes among youth in terms of religious practices during the 1990s. Lilya’s own religiosity, her careful handling of the angel-picture and repeated invocation of the Lord’s Prayer, reflects what Markowitz traces among Russian youth with regard to religion: it is, adolescents proclaim, an individualistic and personal choice, and one that should not be publicly mandated or

'publicly displayed' (Markowitz 2000: 189). Religious practice may be personal and individualistic for Lilya (indeed, no other character in the film partakes in any religious rituals), as Moodysson has described it being for himself, yet *Lilya 4-ever* materializes Christian iconography in the film (Lilya and Volodya sprout wings!). It thereby also makes it concrete, visual, and public.

Neoliberal Angels and Intellectual Secularism

Introducing a material and public component of contemporary Christianity in *Lilya 4-ever* serves two main purposes, both of which connect religion to socio-political contexts. Moodysson's film reflects on the 'resurgence of religion that occurred throughout the former Soviet Union', which, Wanner and Steinberg argue, 'took many scholars and analysts by surprise, for they had come to think of socialist societies as thoroughly secular, if not atheist' (Wanner and Steinberg 2008: 1). Religion in the post-Soviet era indeed reflects a yearning for what was 'at one time an official communist moral code', which gave 'primacy to community, equality, selfless labour, devotion to the common good, and personal character (not always practiced, of course, but often voiced and taught as an ideal)' (Wanner and Steinberg 2008: 8). From this perspective, Lilya's own religious practice, undertaken in her home and alone, never in groups or in a church setting, appears to be part of a private and individualistic attempt to counteract what Wanner and Steinberg describe as a post-socialist society 'characterized by enormous moral disorder, corruption, uncertainty, and fragmentation, including competing conceptions of proper behaviour and social justice' (Wanner and Steinberg 2008: 8). *Lilya 4-ever's* critique of neoliberal global capitalism, and its concomitant gendered inequities, is thus addressed from within a Christian framework that scholars understand as critical to post-Soviet culture's conception of itself, and, indeed as one of the ways it has formulated a response to market economy. For Moodysson, however, social commentary is always gendered, and always formulated as expressed through sexualized practices - in this case, Lilya's forced prostitution. This is part of what constitutes *Lilya 4-ever's* productive ambivalence; it seeks authentically to account for

gender and sexuality in connection with Christianity. If sexuality was a taboo topic in Soviet culture, it most certainly remains so in religious practices associated with the post-Soviet Orthodox Church.

Lilya 4-ever reflects contemporary post-Soviet discourses on adolescence, sexuality, capitalism, and religious practices and combines these with what appears to be Moodysson's personal interest in challenging neoliberal capitalism from a Christian perspective. The critical silencing of this strategy (in Sweden and internationally), including discussions of whether his strategy is problematic or not, is significant. The silencing illustrates contemporary Swedish and Western European culture's insistence on secularism as a prerequisite for intellectual and political inquiry and equality. It also connotes a prevailing view of Sweden as rational and secular, promoted both domestically and internationally. The silence on religion in the critical reception thereby reflects, but from a perhaps unexpected perspective, quite heated contemporary debates about immigrants from Islamic countries in Sweden and the European Union as seemingly too religious – their faith (and by extension assumed gender discriminatory practices) marking them as pre-modern, alien, and Other in a welfare state (or European supra-state) built on secular centrist social democracy and policies of state-mandated gender equality. In *Lilya 4-ever* vague references to spirituality and Christian redemption also appear to divest Lilya's abusers, passive spectators, and the film's audience of political or ethical agency. Just as Lilya is driven inexorably toward suicide in the framework rigidly put in place by the film, audiences appear to be directed toward religious reflection. For a secular Western viewer, this may be Moodysson's most difficult proposition, especially as it is also gendered and ethnically coded: the lamb to be sacrificed in the name of religious redemption, compassion, and action is an icon of vulnerability – a young woman trafficked into sexual abuse; an illegal immigrant from a culture construed as Other.

Geographic Complexity: *Lilya 4-ever* as Swedish/Post-Soviet/EU/Global Film

Moodysson's interest in spatiality – from geo-political contexts to

minute details of the production design – informs *Lilya 4-ever*. The montage of landscape shots in the film’s second sequence indicates that for Moodysson the location of an unnamed post-Soviet republic is both metaphorical – nonspecifically representative of the ruins of the once powerful USSR – and strikingly material, its derelict grey apartment buildings foreshadowing the human degradation and alienation to be experienced therein. Yet the film’s very production circumstances illustrate a paradoxical conflation of the material and the metaphorical.

Though we are invited to extrapolate from *Lilya 4-ever* a delocalized and non-specific sense of place, the film’s production and funding circumstances belie such anonymity. The film is shot in Tallinn and the coastal town of Paldiski (about thirty miles west of the Estonian capital), yet Akinshina is a Russian actress and like all other characters in the film she speaks Russian, rather than Estonian. Though not explicit, Lilya’s precarious social position can be understood as illustrating the problematic status of Russian minorities in post-Soviet non-Russia.⁴ Animosity toward this ethnic group was particularly high in the Baltic states following the break up of the USSR and many of its members have been ‘denied full political and civic status’ or ‘turned into “second-class citizens”’ (Pilkington 1998: 28). Furthermore, as Wennerholm notes, ethnic Russian women in Latvia and Estonia face employment and social discrimination and ‘as a result, there are large numbers of Russian women prostitutes in Riga and Tallinn’ (Wennerholm 2002: 13).

Though Swedish state policy has encouraged close economic and cultural ties with Estonia, its capital Tallinn was portrayed as notorious for its prostitution in the 1990s; easily accessible via ferry from Stockholm, it was an attractive sex-tourism destination for Swedish men. A Swedish flag can be seen briefly in the background as Lilya and her friend Natasha leave the Tallinn bar where Natasha has engaged in prostitution. Moodysson acknowledges that the Russo-Estonian background has significance in the film, but that it is not meant to be central to the story (research interview). His representation of Sweden as completely without redeeming qualities for Lilya is starkly apparent however – in this country proud of its international solidarity and

domestic welfare state principles, Lilya is only abused and neglected, while contemporary Swedes (including two female police officers and shoppers in an H&M store) look the other way.

The geographical and socio-political complexity of *Lilya 4-ever* is central to most critical studies of the film. Olof Hedling (2004) calls *Lilya 4-ever* a 'Swedish film', not least because of its adoption by the Swedish political establishment; Wilson positions it as a 'European child narrative' (2005: 332); Kristensen studies it as a 'Swedish-Russian' film that illustrates 'European "anxiety"' about 'transnational mobility' (2007: 1-2); Graffy credits it as 'a convincing "Russian"' film (2003: 21); and Nestingen reads the film as 'a symptom of global capitalism in the Baltic Region' (2008: 3). *Lilya 4-ever* can from this perspective also be seen as reflecting anti-European Union discourse in Sweden during the mid-1990s, in which, as Nestingen argues, a 'privileged trope was the prostitute' and through which "'Europe was equated with a bordello'" (Nesting 2008: 3, citing Trägårdh 165). For Moodysson *Lilya 4-ever* also constitutes a comment on American imperialism, both popular and political. Moodysson includes a number of references to US popular culture, including basketball player Michael Jordan and pop singer Britney Spears. He also links a crumbling post-Soviet state to 'the idea of imperia in ruins. The film was shot right after September 11. We were affected by that. Here we were in a defunct empire, receiving reports about another one crumbling' (research interview). His poetry collection *Vad gör jag här* (What am I Doing Here?, 2003), an extract of which is published in this volume, was written concurrently with pre-production preparations for *Lilya 4-ever* and includes a lamentation of September 11.

And yet the specificity of the production circumstances indicates the film's hybridity. *Lilya 4-ever* is based on the story of a Lithuanian woman, it was produced by Swedish Memphis film and co-produced by Danish Zentropa, and it received funding from the regional film centre Film i Väst, from Swedish Television (SvT), and from the Swedish and Danish Film Institutes. The A-list crew is exclusively Swedish, and consists primarily of long-time Moodysson and Memphis collaborators, while all primary actors are Russian. The film's production and funding circumstances are predominantly Swedish or Scandinavian, yet the film

cannot be easily labeled according to national parameters. In order to receive co-production funding from Film i Väst the film had to be partially shot in the Trollhättan vicinity. Moodysson insisted that the Swedish exterior scenes be shot in Malmö, presumably to maintain a connection to the facts upon which the film is based, though the kinds of locations featured in Sweden – anonymous apartment complexes and surrounding suburban infrastructure – could just as well have been shot in Trollhättan. This meant that the interiors of the film's non-Swedish domestic space were built up in studio. Production designer Josefin Åsberg pursued intensive on-location research in Estonia for the scenography and props, and shipped a container of 'real' Estonian objects to Trollhättan to construct Lilya's and her mother's apartments in Film i Väst's Trollhättan studio, so that it looked like it 'could have been shot in Paldiski, Estonia' (Åsberg research interview). *Lilya 4-ever* shares with *Show Me Love* and *Together* an investment in the creation of a domestic authenticity – what Nestingen calls with respect to *Lilya 4-ever* 'a melodrama of the home', yet deconstructs that fantasy by consistently emphasizing that Lilya is both homeless and a child (Nestingen 2008: 125). Similarly, *Lilya 4-ever* is a film that challenges a Euro-Slavic ideology of the nation as 'home', just as it challenges a European film history tradition that tends to canonize and interpret film as national cultural artifacts.

Moodysson traveled in Estonia to scout for locations and chose the port city Paldiski because of its ghostly sense of abandonment, which indicates the centrality of material place for his productions. As casting director Jesper Kurlandsky affirms, Moodysson demanded dedication to realist details at all levels of a production. Moodysson is particularly interesting as a director in this regard, Kurlandsky continues: 'It is complicated to have such a dedication to realism while engaging with another country's culture. We desperately needed a strong local crew. They became our filter, our reality check' (research interview). As in *Show Me Love*, Moodysson's core team depended on a temporary local crew for creating the kind of location authenticity the director wanted. While filming on location in Estonia, this desire for authenticity extended to dialect coaching in order to ensure authentic language use among the Russian-speaking actors who came from different areas

(Moodysson depended on translators and none in the core production crew spoke Russian). *Lilya 4-ever's* apparently realistic representation of desperate conditions in an unidentified post-Soviet republic and strong criticism of social, gendered, and economic inequities between Eastern and Western Europe is thus intercut with tensions regarding production circumstances. One of those tensions involves the fact that *Lilya 4-ever* is shot in Film i Väst studios. These studios were, in fact, partly paid for with European Union structural funds awarded to Film i Väst and the Trollhättan region as part of an economic revitalization and employment-creation initiative (see Stenport 2012). Moodysson's film may seek to criticize the notion of Fortress Europe, a trope illustrating the European Union's restrictive official immigration policies that nevertheless cannot prevent trafficking human beings for profit (see Westin 2004). At the same time, the film benefited from a European Union sponsored initiative for regional economic development, as represented by the film center Film i Väst. Production design and shooting location have always been very significant in Moodysson's films. In *Lilya 4-ever*, like in *Show Me Love*, they also reflect thematic tensions apparent within the film.

Part of *Lilya 4-ever's* intriguing ambivalence is that it obliquely comments both thematically and through its production circumstances on patterns of migration and mobility within a changing multi-ethnic Europe, including alluding to darker sides of Sweden's immigration policies, by focusing on an extremely vulnerable illegal immigrant caught between two states (see also Nestingen 2008: 130). With the exception of the co-written script for the TV mini-series *The New Country* (2000), Moodysson had never explicitly addressed contemporary multi-ethnicity in his films. Like in *Show Me Love* (which includes a thematized insider-outsider problematic) and *Together* (which reinscribes Sweden's 1970s public rhetoric of solidarity with those oppressed or marginalized in other countries), this social tension is only implicit in *Lilya 4-ever*. This film, like all of Moodysson's, with the exception of *Mammoth*, is conspicuously white (including Lilya and Volodya as angelically white-complexioned).

An Establishment Film?

Lilya 4-ever was lauded by the Swedish establishment, including politicians and journalists, as an authentic and realistic portrayal of prostitution and trafficking. There was tension between establishment views and audience reactions, with politicians appearing to support the 'didactic tone of the film' (Hedling 2004: 326); indeed four members of the Swedish government proclaimed the film 'a masterpiece' (328) just before the national film awards ceremony. At the same time, Margareta Winberg, the vice prime minister with responsibility for gender equality, lauded the film in a TV interview. She said that the film should be 'obligatory viewing' for young men (Hedling 2004: 326). Swedish film reviews and commentary in large influential daily papers unequivocally praised the film (Hedling 2004: 326). The film was subsequently used as a pedagogical tool in Swedish schools (See Lundquist and Viklund 2005).

The film's release in August 2002 coincided with the implementation of a controversial new Swedish anti-prostitution law that summer, which criminalized the purchase of sex rather than the selling of it (see Wennerholm 2002; Svanström 2004). Around the same time, trafficking of foreign women to Sweden became recognized as a growing social problem, yet one which the country had not allocated resources to tackle (Wennerholm 2002: 15). The concurrent media debates about the new prostitution law and increasingly visible victims of trafficking arguably contributed to the strong positive endorsement of the film from members of the political and intellectual establishment.

The social-democratic government at the time initiated two different state-funded distribution programs for the film. In the first, *Lilya 4-ever* was screened in locations such as Moldavia, Albania, Kosovo, and republics of the former Soviet Union, to counteract trafficking by reaching 'people in government leadership positions, public opinion shapers, and representatives of the legal system' (cited in Hedling 2004: 327; see also Kristensen 2007: 1). Kristensen argues that, in this sense, *Lilya 4-ever* furthers the ideology that 'Sweden and the West as a whole hold the banner of educators, and the post-Socialist countries are the uncivilized learners' (Kristensen 2007: 3). Drawing on Ella

Shohat's discussion of Eurocentrism, Kristensen suggests that Lilya functions as a representative of the lost Second World possibility: 'the female Russian is not part of First World Sweden, but represents that world's Other. In short, although *Lilya 4-ever* depicts a transnational movement, the film (re)-produces the (neo)-colonial discourse of "us" and "them"' (Kristensen 2007: 3). Similarly, 'The Russian female is constructed as the non-European Other. This post-Socialist female Other fascinates us because we find her social decline unjust and horrific. The post-Socialist decay [...] rouses the viewers' empathy and desire to rescue the film's victims' (Kristensen 2007: 5).

In the second government initiative, the film was distributed as mandatory viewing in all Swedish high schools and to those pursuing military service. The aim was to 'emphasize gender equality' as a strategy to reduce trafficking (Sparrmann 2006: 168; see also 180-181). This socio-political background paints a picture of do-gooder Sweden carrying the torch of equality around the world. It also positions Moodysson as a naïve spokesperson for an ingrained cultural world-view of Sweden and Swedish social policy as occupying the moral and political high ground.

Conclusion

Lilya 4-ever is in many ways a diagnostic film: one can argue that it weaves a tapestry of the frayed yet interconnected strands at the heart of New Europe. Bringing together the strains and contradictions of assumptions of post-Soviet nation states, Sweden, and the New Europe through the prisms of gender and equality, Moodysson casts new light on nations in flux. His return to a postmodernist vision of catholic Christianity can easily seem on the surface to be retrograde. Yet his use of overtly fantastical images of gender – and the pawn of the prostitute, victimized young woman – gleaned through the eye of Roman Catholicism points to the way in which neoliberal salves cannot answer all the questions posed by New Europe and its gendered inequalities. By stepping outside the received truths of social democratic Sweden, European supranationalism, or post-Soviet neoliberalism through the rubric of Catholic penance and salvation,

he foregrounds the way that, even within supposedly secular world views, new paradigms must be imagined, though they are difficult to implement, in order to understand and redress the present.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Larry Smith, Scott MacKenzie, Lilya Kaganovsky, Jonathan Ebel, Mariah Larsson, Thomas Salumets, Anna Cavallin, Mads Bunch, and many other colleagues and students for input and feedback on the manuscript at various stages of the process.

Notes

¹ One of the ways in which the film visually maintains Lilya as the subjective focus is through the shots of sexual intercourse, filmed from her perspective. In a tightly edited sequence of twelve shots, we see panting, grunting, and sweating men as if they were on top of her. Akinshina was not present as this sequence was shot; Brantås operated the camera but asked to be relieved after a number of takes, shaken by the intensity of the experience. Moodysson then shot the remainder of the takes.

² Moodysson appears to want to downplay political connotations in later interviews (c.f. Wennö 2002). It is clear that the film struck a chord among viewers, including those with personal and professional experience of trafficking. 'Everyone - from someone at an orphanage in Chile and the Swedish foreign minister - got in touch'; after showing the film to '25-30 people from Eastern Europe, mainly women, who are working with trafficking and prostitution in their countries [,] I was quite happy to hear that they though the film was accurate' (Leigh 2002).

³ In one interview, Moodysson explains that 'I wanted to make something that was some kind of a mass for the time I am living in', as part of a response to the 'Where is God?' which he had found himself prompted to ask (Noh 2003); see also Leigh 2002; Brooks 2005.

⁴ In Paldiski, the Russian minority had been associated with the nuclear submarine base located there, which by the end of the 1990s had been completely abandoned. The ruins of the base are featured in the film, as the building which Lilya and Volodja call 'Pentagon'.

References

Brooks, X. (2005). 'Dirty Business', *The Guardian* (London), 4 January. Lexis Nexis (Accessed: 10 April 2010).

Florin, O., and et al. (eds.) (2004). *Vad har mitt liv med Lilja att göra?* Stockholm: Svenska Filminstitutet.

Graffy, J. (2003). 'Trading Places - Lukas Moodysson's Impressive *Lilja 4-Ever* Exposes the Nasty Illegal Trade in Young Women That Underlies the Russian Dream', *Sight and Sound* 13 (4), p.20.

Hedling, O. (2004). 'Om "Lilja 4-Ever" - En Svensk Film', in Jonsson, B., Nykvist, K. and Sjöberg, B. (eds.), *Från Eden Till Damavdelningen: Studier Om Kvinnan i Litteraturen: En Vänbok Till Christina Sjöblad*. Lund: Absalon, Skrifter utgivna vid Litteraturvetenskapliga institutionen i Lund, pp.323-334

Kristensen, L. (2007). 'Divergent Accounts of Equivalent Narratives: Russian-Swedish Interdevochka Meets Swedish-Russian *Lilja 4-ever*'. *Portal: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 4(2), pp.1-22.

Lagerström, L. (n.d.). 'Lilja 4-ever filmhandledning', Svenska Filminstitutet. www.sfi.se (Accessed: 12 April 2010).

Leigh, D. (2002). 'Lukas Moodysson at the NFT', *The Guardian* (London), 20 November. Lexis Nexis (Accessed: 12 April 2010).

Londén, M. (1999). 'Tyst höst för Åmål i Ryssland', Svenska *Dagbladet*, 21 August.

Lundquist, D., and Viklund, K. (2005). *Lilja 4-Ever på Skolbi: Dokumentation Av Svenska Filminstitutets Insatser Kring Lilja 4-Ever på Skolbio i Sverige 2003-2004*. Stockholm: Svenska Filminstitutet.

Markowitz, F. (2000). *Coming of Age in Post-Soviet Russia*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Moodysson, L. (2004). 'Jag gör filmer för att väcka människor som sover', in Florin, O., Lundquist, D., Stenstam, E. and Viklund E. (eds.), *Vad har mitt liv med Lilja att göra?* Stockholm: Svenska Filminstitutet, pp.13-14.

Nesting, A. K. (2008). *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia: Fiction, Film, and Social Change*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Noh, D. (2003). 'Hardcore Spiritualism: Sweden's Lukas Moodysson Explores Personal Vision in *Lilja 4-Ever*'. *Film Journal International*

106 (5), pp.18-20.

Ohlson, E. (1999). 'Fucking Åmål rysk succé', *Dagens Nyheter*. 19 August.

Pilkington, H. (1998). *Migration, Displacement, and Identity in post-Soviet Russia*. London: Routledge.

Scott, K. C. (2005). 'Lukas Moodysson: *Together*', in Scott, K. C. (ed.), *Screenwriters' Masterclass: Screenwriters Talk About Their Greatest Movies*. London: Faber and Faber, pp.244-265.

Sparrmann, A. (2006). 'Film as a Political and Educational Device: Talk about Men, Male Sexuality and Gender among Swedish Youth', *Visual Studies* 21 (2), pp.167-182.

Stenport, A. W. (2012). *Lukas Moodysson's 'Show Me Love'*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Svanström, Y. (2004). 'En självklar efterfrågan', in Florin, O., Lundquist, D., Stenstam, E. and Viklund, K. (eds.): *Vad har mitt liv med Lilja att göra?* Stockholm: Svenska Filminstitutet, pp.45-57.

Vestin, S. (2004). 'Fångarna i fort Europa', in Florin, O., Lundquist, D., Stenstam, E., and Viklund, K. (eds.), *Vad har mitt liv med Lilja att göra?* Stockholm: Svenska Filminstitutet, pp.93-98.

Wanner, C. and Steinberg, M. (2008). 'Introduction: Reclaiming the Sacred After Communism', in Steinberg, M. and Wanner, C. (eds.), *Religion, Morality, and Community in post-Soviet Aesthetics*. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, pp.1-20.

Wennerholm, C. J. (2002). 'Crossing borders and Bridges: the Baltic Region Networking Project', *Gender and Development* 10 (1), pp.10-19.

Wennö, N. (2002). 'Moodysson kritisk till debatten efter *Lilja 4-ever*', 20 February. www.dn.se (Accessed: 12 April 2010).

Widerberg, B. (1962). *Visionen i svensk film*. Stockholm: Bonnier.

Wilson, E. (2005). 'Children, Emotion, and Viewing in Contemporary European Film', *Screen* 46 (3), pp.329-340.

Research Interviews

Kurlandsky, J., Stockholm, Sweden. 10 June 2009.

Moodysson, L., Järnforsen, Småland, Sweden. 24 July 2009.

Åsberg, J., Göteborg, Sweden. 6 June 009.