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# Representing and experiencing motherhood on- and off-screen in Swedish film

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## **Abstract**

This chapter discusses how common dilemmas of combining mothering and professional life are negotiated on- and off-screen. The chapter analyses experiences of combining mothering and film work and representations of motherhood on-screen. The study is based on interviews with women film-makers who belong to different generations and five films representing the caring for children in different ways. The need to secure economical subsistence and to cope with ideals of being a present mother are common themes in the interviews, and the chapter concludes that women's experiences of mothering reveal gender biases in the organisation of the Swedish film industry. Further, the films analysed reflect societal changes and continuities in how motherhood is constructed, but more prominently, they evade any easy or stereotypical interpretations of mothers.

## **Introduction**

The idea that women are first and foremost mothers and that mothers are tools for their children to become capable and autonomous individuals (Ruddick, 1995) is omnipresent in societal and cultural representations of motherhood. On-screen, women are delimited to being represented as mothers (or as mothers-to-be), while being circumscribed by Oedipal narrations and representations (de Lauretis, 1984). Women as mothers are made into passive and secondary figures who only exist to help men (sons) become 'real' men. Feminist film theory resonates in feminist analyses of mothering, which are careful to distinguish between dominant

constructions of motherhood used to discipline and domesticate women on the one hand, and women's actual practices of motherhood on the other. Meanwhile, it is also noted that these two sides – that is, constructions and experiences – of motherhood are intertwined in women's experiences of mothering and give rise to feelings of insufficiency and guilt (see, e.g., Rich, 1976).

This chapter deals with a Swedish context and aims to explore how women film-makers and their experiences as mothers and daughters inform representations of mothers on-screen. Through analysing interviews with women film-makers and their films we argue that experiences of caring for children result in portraying mothers as persons in their own right on-screen. We also argue that the analysed films display features related to discussions about motherhood in Sweden at the time of the film's release.

Juggling motherhood and a career in film has been reported to be a challenge for women living with children and is an instance which reveals how the film industry is gendered (O'Brien, 2015, 2019; Liddy, 2017; Wing-Fai et al., 2015; Wreyford, 2013). The Swedish film industry is no exception: in spite of Sweden's reputation of being gender equal in many respects, women in the film industry still experience trouble combining mothering and film work.

Relying on interviews collected for a research project on women and the Swedish film industry, this chapter focusses on six Swedish women film-makers and five films made by them, spanning over five decades (1977–2017). They were chosen because they have made films that relate to issues about motherhood and because motherhood came up in our interviews with these women. The period coincides with the development of gender equality efforts including reforms such as expanding public childcare. This periodisation allows us to investigate how dilemmas connected to motherhood have changed over time and how on-screen representations reflect these changes. All films except one depict contemporary Sweden at the time of their opening. The exception is Suzanne Osten's *Mamma*, which is a semi-autobiographical film set in the 1940s. In selecting the films, we sought one film in which mothering was a central theme from each decade made by the interviewed women. The focus on mothering enables us to address various aspects of mothering as a practice and relation,

rather than viewing motherhood as biologically determined (see, e.g., Ruddick, 1995; Holm, 1993).

The chapter is structured as follows: first, we offer a short contextualisation of how motherhood and parenting have been discussed and negotiated in Sweden, and then we review how motherhood has been analysed and discussed in the field of film studies. Following these two sections, we recount how experiences of mothering and working in the film industry are expressed in the interviews before discussing the representation of motherhood in the five films. The chapter ends with short summary in which we bring out our findings.

### **The Swedish context: motherhood, work and childcare**

Since the introduction of gender equality as a policy field in 1974, the dual strategy to increase (a) women's gainful employment and (b) men's involvement in caring for (their own) children has been promoted by a number of reforms. While 50% of all women worked in 1970, only 9% of all children attended public day care. However, during the 1980s public day care expanded substantially, and in 1995 the government introduced a 'day care guarantee' for all children over the age of one year. In 1998 a national curriculum for preschools was introduced and childcare officially became a part of Sweden's educational system. Today 50% of all one-year-old children, 90% of all two-year-olds and 94% of all children between three and six years attend preschools, while 82% of women work (Martin-Korpi, 2015; Statistics Sweden, 2019). To improve the conditions for combining work and childcare, the parental leave act from 1974, which granted men and women remunerated leave for caring for newborns and toddlers, has been expanded several times and today allows either of the parents to stay at home with an 80% wage reimbursement for 390 days, and an additional 90 days with a lower remuneration. While women and men, under the gender-neutral term 'parents', are equally referred to as providers and carers in policies, women still use 70% of the parental leave benefits, and they do almost twice as much work as men in the household, including childcare (Försäkringskassan, 2018; Stanfors, 2018). In addition, many women who live with children testify to feeling guilt for being absent. This reflects the fact that women and men perform their parenting duties in different conditions and that motherhood and fatherhood are constructed according to different ideals (Elvin-Nowak, 1999; Widarsson et al., 2014; Alsarve et al., 2016).

Turning to the film industry, gender equality efforts have led to an increase in the number of women behind the camera. But the conditions for women in the industry are still problematic in terms of budget size, conditions for distribution and screening (SFI, 2018). However, mothering has, perhaps a bit surprisingly given its importance in the general discussions about gender equality, not been problematised in the deliberations about women in the film industry. Meanwhile, in our interviews with women film-makers, mothering does come forth as important to their experience of work. We will now proceed to develop a theoretical framework for understanding the representation of motherhood on-screen and how women's experiences of mothering may be understood to influence women filmmaker's portrayal of mothers on-screen.

### **Theorising motherhood in film**

In film, representations of women have been largely circumscribed to a few stereotypes or archetypes (Rosen, 1973; Haskell, 1974; Soila, 1991). In tandem with Luce Irigaray's analysis of women's social roles, the three most dominant female archetypes on-screen are the virgin, the prostitute and the mother (Irigaray, 1977). While these archetypes are static in themselves, they may start out as one and, through pressures that are both intrinsic and extrinsic, develop or transform into another. But whereas virgin characters may turn into prostitutes or mothers, and prostitutes may become mothers, mothers seldom become prostitutes.

If understanding film as a 'gender technology', instructing us how to perform gender (i.e., what we can do and be), then women spectators too are circumscribed (de Lauretis, 1987). And since most films reproduce the original Oedipal story, film is about boys becoming men through overcoming obstacles and about girls becoming women and mothers through domestication (de Lauretis, 1984). Hence, mothers (or mothers-to-be) constitute central figures in film. While being crucial for men's existence, they always remain secondary because of the supportive roles that they are given, assisting men (sons) in becoming real men while also serving to prove men's heterosexuality.

Academic literature that connects the maternal with the cinematic apparatus and experience has a long history (see Eisenstein, 1949; Krakauer, 1985; Braudy, 1976). The relation between

the spectator as infant and the screen as mother has also been brought forward by feminist film theory as a way to debunk the male-dominated aspects of cinema and spectatorship. This line of research has turned the treatise of Hollywood cinema as phallogentric (Mulvey, 1975) upside down in two ways: first, by focussing on the empowering mother as screen, exchanging the paternal discourse for a maternal one, and secondly, by countering the exclusion of women as possible spectators and subjects. One of the most influential texts to validate the maternal in relation to spectatorship is Gaylyn Studlar's 'Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of Cinema' (1984). Building on Gilles Deleuze (1967), she asks us to deconstruct the psychoanalytic belief in the Father (and the Symbolic as his domain) and instead to imagine the Mother as the most central and powerful figure in the child's life. The mother, she argues, is powerful because of the safety she offers, but she is equally powerful in that she makes visible an obvious male lack. Studlar's theorisation on spectatorship is important for the conception of film representation and also for the critique of phallogentric Freudianism: not only does her work challenge Freud's tenets regarding the aetiology of masochism as a response to the father, it serves to invalidate the Oedipal scenario.

Studlar's study was published after the height of analytical work on two of Hollywood's most canonical melodramas: *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937) and *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), both of which focus on a (single) mother (see, e.g., Cook, 1978; Kaplan, 1983; Williams, 1984, 1988). Here, Kaplan's reading of *Stella Dallas* (1983) stands out. She fleshes out how the mother is useful only as long as she is nurturing and life-giving (Kaplan, 1983). This, of course, is not the case only in *Stella Dallas*, but in most mainstream films: once a (any) female character is no longer of use, she is made obsolete. Following Irigaray, women can only be sexual objects (virgins and prostitutes) or they can be nurturing bodies (mothers).

Some 15 years after the focus on maternal melodramas, Lucy Fischer published *Cinematernity*, which explores representations of motherhood within specific film genres while also discussing how genre has been gendered by (mostly male) theorists (Fischer, 1996). Fischer contends that motherhood has played a fundamental role, not only in 'feminine' genres such as the melodrama but in the overall cinematic representation and experience. In a more recent collection by Addison et al. (2009), a number of scholars discuss the 21st-century obsessions with the maternal star body and media's maternal scrutiny. In line with Fischer, they too argue

that film's obsession with motherhood is nothing new: 'mothers have indeed always been central figures, and as such, they have always served a political and ideological agenda, not seldom serving misogynistic and conservative ends' (Addison et al., 2009, p. 4).

In the five films that we have chosen to analyse, mothers are central, but they are outside of the Oedipal structure. Instead, they are there in their own right, struggling and trying to cope as mothers, as women and – in some instances – as professionals. Before discussing the five films, we will focus on their makers and how they describe their own experiences of mothering while working in the film industry.

### **Experiences of motherhood and working in the film industry**

Having access to childcare and other parental benefits has probably contributed to the non-problematisation of women's caring responsibilities in contemporary discussions about women and film. However, our interviews reveal problems similar to studies in other European countries pointing to how the organisation of film production produces problems for women who are living with children. These include irregular incomes and irregular working hours as well as problems making use of benefits and rights for parents (see O'Brien, 2015, 2019). Precarious conditions and informal hiring (Wing-Fai et al., 2015) hinder women from using their rights out of a fear of losing their jobs or future job opportunities, and, further, they do not want to be considered 'difficult little bugger[s]', as editor Lena Runge (Interview, March 19, 2019) puts it in describing her fight for her legal right to shorter working hours.

The organisation of work in the film industry rests on ideas about the creative process, described by director and producer Mia Engberg as a 'notion that one has to organize the film set and the shooting so that everyone works 12 hours per day . . . until one almost pukes of exhaustion' (March 8, 2018). The discrepancy between the organisation of work in the film industry and the eight-hour workday and five-day workweek upon which childcare services are based stands out as a problem in our interviews.

However, while the practical aspects of day care are important, the interview participants also testify to feelings of guilt as they relate to ideals of the present mother. Katinka Faragó, once a continuity supervisor who turned producer, has mothering experiences from the 1960s and

1970s, when she relied on nannies. Her work included travelling and sometimes meant staying away for long periods:

I was six weeks in the US filming, and the telephone operator did not know how to connect me with Sweden so I had to teach her in order to be able to call home.

[...] All that guilty consciousness [...] it was terrible. One should not be away from one's children. (May 15, 2018)

Director Maria Hedman Hvitfeldt, whose child was born in the early 2000s, felt that the long stays away from home were 'not worth it'. The father of their child worked in their home town and managed pick-ups and daily care, but even so, she 'heard from preschool that [child's name] suffered from my extensive travelling' (April 9, 2018). These two examples of maternal guilt are separated by almost 40 years, yet they indicate that norms for mothering work to induce guilt in mothers. The more recent example illustrates how even Swedish childcare reforms are entrenched with the ideal of a present mother (Jansson, 2001; Bekkengen, 2002; Elvin-Nowak, 1999).

Another concern for mothers relates to the project-based work model with no steady income (see, e.g., Wing-Fai et al., 2015). Several of the women interviewed testify that the discontinuity of income is problematic. They describe how they take on jobs, such as lecturing and teaching, for survival. For instance, Faragó describes how she felt herself forced to take on extra work just after finishing a Bergman production: 'It was 1971, I think. It was November. Two children looking expectantly at their mother, saying: "Soon it is Christmas, mom!" And I thought to myself, how the heck am I going to fix this?'

The experiences of combining work and motherhood narrated by women film-makers reveals feelings of guilt for not being present or good enough. While the project-based organisation of work in the film industry chimes badly with the way preschools are organised, the experiences of film workers reflect problems reported by women in other sectors as well. This leads us to exploring how women film-makers who have experience of caring for children or of being cared for by a mother in a society that largely defines womanhood in terms of motherhood portray mothers on-screen.

**Paradistorg / Summer paradise (1977)**

In 1976, actor Gunnel Lindblom is approached by Ingmar Bergman to take over a film project based on a novel by Swedish author Ulla Isaksson. She takes on the project and brings in Faragó as producer. Most of the film crew consists of women, from the two main protagonists and the supporting roles to costume design, editing and set design.

Paradistorg deals with female friendship across generations and social class. The characters spend summer days in a beautiful house in the archipelago while debating motherhood, childcare and the current development of society. The character Emma, a social worker, argues that it is damaging for children to be left in day care at an early age, and she reprimands women who go back to work too soon after having given birth. Refuting her is her best friend Katha, who is a medical doctor with her own practice and also a mother of two and grandmother of three. She has managed to bring up her two daughters by herself while also being successful in her profession.

[PICTURE HERE]

Caption: Paradistorg (Lindblom, 1977)

Katha (Birgitta Valberg), medical doctor and single mother of two (and grandmother of three), together with her ageing parents, Wilhelm (Holger Löwenadler) and Alma (Dagny Lind), in Paradistorg by Gunnel Lindblom (1977). Photographer: Johan Nyqvist

Paradistorg reflects the worries in the 1970s in Sweden, when it became obvious that women were not home, the supply of public day care was lacking and many children were left alone after school. Gunnel Lindblom tells us (April 27, 2018) that ‘the difficulties of being a professional woman’ is a theme that runs through all her films. Women caring for children at home were not as convinced as the politicians that public childcare was the best option for children (Jansson, 2001). The worry that dissolving the bond between mother and child was detrimental for the child’s development informed the debate about so called nyckelbarn – children with both parents working outside the home who, hence, must wear a house key on a string around their necks so as to have access to their home after school. These children, it was argued, risked becoming drug addicts and criminals, a fear that producer Faragó experienced herself:

So, that [childcare] was a bit tricky. I thought they would take drugs and smoke when they were ten, but none of them have even looked at a cigarette. And they

are very successful ladies, now in their fifties. But, there were times when it was difficult. [...] Talk about having a guilty conscience!

The debate about nyckelbarn, along with the debate about day care as a prerequisite for women's gainful employment, clearly informs the media debate spurred by the film's release (see Gustafsson and Runesson, 1977; Sima, 1977). When interviewing Lindblom, she tells us that she thinks the media discussion was unfair in its interpretation that the film was against preschools and 'on the wrong side of feminism' (April, 27, 2018). From her point of view, the film problematises the individualisation and privatisation spurred by the idea of self-realisation (through a career), and the message is that people have to engage in societal issues, for instance, the well-being of children.

### **Mamma/Mother (1982)**

Susanne Osten established an independent theatre group in the 1960s and has since been an influential force within the political (and feminist) theatre movement. *Mamma*, her first feature film, was made as 'a redress of the invisible, an issue that we pursued in the women's movement at that time' (April 16, 2018). *Mamma* is a semi-autobiographical film about Osten's mother, film critic Gerd Osten, who aspired to become a film director in the 1940s. Osten tells us that she made the film after receiving her mother's diary: '[Reading the diary] I thought, this has never been portrayed on screen. An intellectual woman who makes film' (interview April 16, 2018). In the film Gerd expresses how she wants to make a film that 'shows a woman's real face, a woman who loves'. In her way are traditional gender norms and expectations – and several men who first encourage and then dismiss her film ideas. We also learn that there is a more private obstacle in her way: Gerd's daughter Nelly, whose presence obstructs her creative work. Gerd is constantly fighting conventions and says, quoting Jacques Prévert's 'Notre vie c'est maintenant' ('Our life is now'). She so wants to live, but there is clearly no room for Nelly in the life she aspires to live.

The timeless theme of this representation of motherhood is depicted from the view of the woman who does not want to lose her autonomy, while clearly also connecting with the discussions about women's liberation in the early 1980s.

[PICTURE HERE]

Caption: Mamma/Mother (Osten, 1982)

Gerd Osten (Malin Ek) as aspiring film director in Susanne Osten's Mamma (1982).

Photographer: Hans Welin

Mamma does not condemn the mother, but rather the portrayal of the mother makes her choices and her not-so-good mothering intelligible. The explanation offered in the film points to the organisation of society as the reason why women cannot both have children and be professionals. Interestingly, there are two parents to care for Nelly, yet the film shows how rules and expectations clearly hold the mother responsible as main carer for the child. When spending a day off with her two girlfriends at a public swimming pool, Gerd says: 'One should be able to live with children, work, love – surely. But it doesn't work'. One friend answers: 'The worst thing is that one wasn't told before, told that one has to make a choice'. The other friend says, as she turns to Gerd: 'I do think your film should end with them having a child once she has liberated him. And that HE takes care of it'. They all laugh out loud as if that would be an outrageous idea.

Time passes, and Gerd never gets to make her film. Encountering one setback after another, she finally becomes mentally unstable. As the film ends, there is an image of her as an old woman sitting in an institution, and there is a voice-over that says 'Gerd continued as a film critic in the 1950s. She became mentally ill. She lost all her friends. She dies 1974. Mom never got to make her film'.

While Osten depicts how problematic it was for women in the 1940s to combine motherhood and professional life, the film also features obvious references to the debate about women's situation in the early 1980s. The statement about the swapping of roles – with women being free and men caring for children – is possibly a wink to Gerd Brantenberg's novel *Egalias döttrar* from 1977, which was popular in the women's movement of which Osten was part. There is one big difference between the mother in the film and the daughter, though: while Gerd never got to make her film, her daughter did. And while the film is about a specific woman who is turned down in a phallogocentric system, it is also a film about a woman who desires and demands change for a more equal society. In this way, Gerd refuses to be a

secondary figure, as does Osten when making the mother the very central figure in her film (and in Gerd's life).

### **Tsatsiki, mamman och polisen / Tsatsiki, mom and the police man (1999)**

Ella Lemhagen has been directing feature films since 1996, and most of her work caters to larger audiences. *Tsatsiki, mamman och polisen* is based on two novels by Moni Nilsson-Brännström, and the script was written by Ulf Stark. *Tsatsiki*, about a child's longing for a missing father, is also a film about single parenthood. *Tsatsiki* has never met his father, but knows that he is from Greece. His struggling want-to-be a rock star mother has a heart of gold, and while she seems to lack control over her life, her love for her son is portrayed as endless, as is his for her. In several scenes, their intimate and loving connection, their togetherness, is depicted as ideal (and as one that ought not to be in need of a third party). While his mother may appear irresponsible, she is a present mother putting her child first. Here, it is the fathers who are problematic: *Tsatsiki* dreams about his father and imagines him as loving, however he is absent. His mother's boyfriend, on the other hand, is present, but uninterested and aggressive. Further, the school teachers seem all to be caring women, whereas the principal is a man who hides in his room doing paperwork. The caring for children is, however, not completely gender divided: courting *Tsatsiki*'s mother is a kind, slow and soft-spoken police officer who takes care of him when the mother is busy.

[PICTURE HERE]

Caption: *Tsatsiki, mom and the police man* (Lemhagen, 1999)

Intimacy and togetherness between mother (Alexandra Rapaport) and son (Samuel Haus) in Ella Lemhagen's *Tsatsiki, morsan och polisen* (1999).

Photographer: Anders Bohman

The importance of a child having a present father has been a recurring theme in Swedish debate (Elvin-Nowak, 1999; Klinth, 2002). This belief rests on an understanding of women and men as biologically and psychologically determined to take on different roles in upbringing. While mothers are caring and nurturing, the role of the father is to impose general principles and norms that guide children's entry into society and provide a male role model to boys (Elvin-Nowak, 1999). *Tsatsiki*'s desire for his father, which is encouraged by his mother's stories

about him, reflects his longing for a male role model. The film displays an ambivalence in embracing the boy's need for a father while showing that living with a present father is not a necessity: he adores his mother, and although she is a bit unorganised, she is a person in her own right who has agency and who clearly strives to be more than just a mum. And as the film comes to closure, the mother secures two father figures for Tsatsiki: she takes him to meet his biological father and she gets romantically involved with the nice policeman.

The negotiation of motherhood reflects the more accepting attitude toward single mums in the 1990s, and the depiction of the superhero-mum flirts with the trope of the amazing single parent introduced by single parent interest organisations formed in the mid-1990s. For instance, the names of the organisations Makalösa föräldrar and Enastående föräldrar are both a play on words. Makalösa connotes both 'exceptional(ly good)' and 'without spouse', while enastående translates to 'standing alone' as well as 'amazing'. The film also represents the single mum's longing for love and how to include 'new' men into the mother-child relationship – in doing so, the film provides images of 'new' family constellations, which coincide with a bundle of new words (e.g., 'plastic' mum or dad) in the late 1980s and 1990s.

### **Min skäggiga mamma / My bearded mom (2003)**

Based on a script by Marianne Strand, Maria Hedman Hvitfeldt directed the short film *Min skäggiga mamma* in 2003. After this success, she directed four productions before leaving the film industry for a job as lecturer at Stockholm University of the Arts.

*Min skäggiga mamma* deals with two young sisters living isolated on a small, remote farm together with their father who is suffering from physical injuries and depression after a car accident. The sisters are trying to apprehend why their mother has abandoned them to go and live with another man. The film is told from the children's perspective and contains clearly magic realistic components: as the older sister tries to retell what has happened to her younger sister, she constructs a narrative in which the mother slowly transforms into a horse. This is paralleled with sequences showing the two sisters, who, bored in their clearly isolated milieu, are dreaming of having a horse of their own.

The becoming-horse story is thus used to explain why the mother has left them, since a horse, the older sister says, ‘has to run free’. In the flashbacks, the mother is shown fighting extreme hair growth – all her body parts are increasingly being covered with thick, dark hair. She is desperate and is shown shaving and waxing her face and body all the time, leaving her with open wounds. Finally, she transforms into a big, beautiful horse and leaves. While it would be suitable to apply Studlar’s theory to this film, with the (missing) mother absorbing the screen through the children’s memory of her, the film also invites us to read her in terms of becoming. In becoming-animal, she refutes her obligations as mother, and through the process of becoming-horse, she achieves a non-identity, which may be the very condition of freedom (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996; Braidotti, 2003).

[PICTURE HERE]

Caption: *Min skäggiga mamma* / My bearded mom (Hedman Hvitfeldt, 2003)

The mother (Malena Engström) ‘becoming horse’ in Maria Hedman Hvitfeldt’s *Min skäggiga mamma* (2003). Photographer: Peter Palm

Before the mother finally transforms into a horse, she gets warmer and warmer, and she starts undressing and leaning out the window to get some fresh air. Her home is suffocating, and we can easily see how this suffocation is not only tied to the house and to the fact that she is in the midst of transforming into another species – it is also tied to her role as mother and wife. She is clearly in agony, and this is one that may be read in terms of a sense of loss of autonomy. Following Adrienne Rich, this feeling is constituted by the overwhelming helplessness of the child and the imperative for mothers to care, combined with ideas of the home as the proper place for women and children to reside (Rich, 1976). The portrayal of suffocating motherhood can also be tied to the critique of neoliberal and neoconservative ideas that emerged in the 1980s and the proliferation of biological discourses about birthing, breastfeeding and mothering that followed in the 1990s. In Sweden, this biologist turn in the debate (Borélius, 1994 Robert and Uvnäs Moberg, 1994) about women and motherhood was criticised and argued to produce feelings of insufficiency and guilt in mothers by feminist scholars, journalists and activists (see Ekman et al., 2002; Elvin-Nowak, 1999).

**Dröm vidare / Beyond dreams (2017)**

Rojda Sekersöz was the youngest student ever to get into the Dramatic Institute in Stockholm at the age of 19. *Beyond dreams* is her first feature film, and it deals with a group of women in their early twenties living in a suburb of Stockholm, where they hang out and dream about going to Montevideo. To realise their dream, they plan a heist in a jeweller's shop. However, Mirja, the main character, is pushed by her sick mother to get a job and start paying rent. She finds a job on the black market as a hotel cleaner. Things are going well until her friends find out about her job and accuse her of betraying them and their dream. When the mother dies, Mirja is left with her younger sister Isa and concludes that she has to give up the dream and take care of Isa. The obligation to care for the sister causes several crucial turning points in the film. For instance, when Mirja brings her sister to work because her mother is in the hospital, disaster follows and she is fired.

An important aspect of the film is that it breaks with the idea of motherhood as biological. Mirja and her friends are visually presented to be 'brown and have tits', as Rojda Sekersöz explains in an article (Wettersten, 2017). However, Mirja's mother is blond, and originates from Finland, a fact that becomes a bit of a surprise to the viewer when the mother first appears. The contrast between her dark skin and hair and her mother's and younger sister's blond appearance makes the audience aware of their own presuppositions. Sekersöz tells us that the surprise was intended and that the choice to have a Finnish mother was made to produce a genealogy of the discrimination of immigrants from the Finns of the 1960s and 1970s to the African and Middle Eastern immigrants of the 2010s (March 22, 2018). She tells us that her next film will also feature 'a Finnish mother' but that she is thinking about how to portray her in order to avoid stereotyping: 'Finnish women are always portrayed in a specific way in Swedish film – so for my next film I will try to create a different Finnish mother' (March 22, 2018). Sekersöz, who is not living with children herself, thinks mother characters are important in representing other aspects of women, like ethnicity. The mother figure thus becomes a person, a signifier of different aspects of what it means to be a human in society.

The problematisation of biology in the film continues as Mirja becomes the primary carer for Isa when her mother is in hospital and later dies. As the primary carer, Mirja has to deal with the same problems as most women living with children do, and juggling caring for the sister with work leads to a chain of events that results in her losing her job. The message in the film

is that it is not the biological bond that creates problems but that social structures (whether having a proper job or pursuing a career in crime) are not built to facilitate caring for children. Thus, the film challenges the notion that the conflict between mothering and care has been solved by the welfare state and reintroduces the material aspects of this problem and how they arise from structures based on gender, class and ethnicity. These aspects are all built into the representation of the mother and of Mirja herself, who takes on mothering duties when her mother dies.

[PICTURE HERE]

Caption: *Dröm vidare* / *Beyond dreams* (Sekersöz, 2017)

Best friends Sarah (Gizem Erdogan), Mirja (Evin Ahmad), Nina (Segen Tesfai) and Emmy (Malin Persson) in Rojda Sekersöz's debut film *Dröm vidare* (2017).

Photographer: Alexandra Aristohova

## **Conclusion**

The films and experiences discussed in this chapter stretch over five decades, a period during which motherhood both as 'practice and institution' (Rich, 1976) changed due to the expansion of childcare. The representations of mothers in the five films reflect changes in both discourse and conditions of mothering, such as the increased attention to single parents (Tsatsiki) and the reinvention of the material aspects of mothering due to austerity policies (*Dröm vidare*). However, they also reveal continuities. The interview participants have mothered under very different conditions regarding access to childcare, and they also differ with respect to the presence of a care-sharing partner. But despite this, they all express feelings of guilt for not being present. We interpret this as a continuity where motherhood is socially constructed to reinforce women's (lack of) autonomy. We believe that while the film-makers' individual and particular experiences may not inform the films, their more general understanding of what it means to care for or be cared for, while also wanting to do something more, shows in how mothers are portrayed in their films. For instance, the negotiation of autonomy and individual freedom in relation to mothering is present in the films, whether through a political argument, a desire to live and create, a dream of leaving the suburb or becoming-horse.

Our analysis supports the argument that women living with children are complex and nuanced persons (and characters) and that they cannot be reduced to being the means for someone else's (men's) becoming. This is most obvious in the films where the mother is perceived from the perspective of the child (*Mamma*, *Tsatsiki* and *Beyond dreams*): here, the mother is represented as anything but secondary, and although her choices may cause the child to suffer, they are still intelligible and legitimate.

When reading the five films, it becomes clear that all of them invalidate the Oedipal scenario described by de Lauretis in the way that they place women and women's stories at the centre (de Lauretis, 1984). Some films have men as supporting (and romantic) characters (as in *Tsatsiki*), but the majority of them position men as having little value for the advancement of the story (*Paradistorg*), or they are next to absent (*Dröm vidare*). Further, they problematise motherhood from a variety of different angles, making motherhood (and mothers) into a heterogenous and miscellaneous group. Through their diverse and at times aberrant (*My bearded mom*) representations, these films serve to deconstruct the conventional representation of the mother as an archetype that has dominated mainstream cinema. From Osten's aspirational *Gerd*, via Lindblom's independent *Katha* and Hedman Hvitfeldt's mom-becoming-horse, to Lemhagen's and Sekersöz's imperfect but loving moms, the portrayal of the mother as altruistic and sacrificial is somewhat turned on its head. Surely, they all nurture to a certain degree, but they have very little in common with *Stella Dallas* or *Mildred Pierce*: these mothers lead their own lives, and in doing so, they demand that their children (most of whom in all films are daughters) care for themselves. If the mothers get ill or die, as in *Mamma* and *Dröm vidare*, it is not because they are punished or made redundant by the film narrative as useless mothers: rather, their endings, however sad, are used as a critique of the gendered inequalities that characterizes society. There is no invitation to cry for them, but with them.

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## **Filmography**

Dröm vidare (Rojda Sekersöz, Sweden, 2017)

Mamma (Suzanne Osten, Sweden, 1982)

Mildred Pierce (Michael Curtiz, USA, 1945)

Min skäggiga mamma (Maria Hedman- Hvitfeldt, 2003)

Paradistorg (Gunnel Lindblom, Sweden, 1977)

Stella Dallas (King Vidor, USA, 1937)

Tsatsiki, mamman och polisen (Ella Lemhagen, Sweden, 1996)