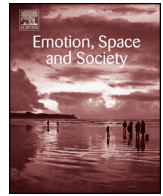




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## Book review

**Film Review: Lense-Møller, L. (Producer), & Metz, Janus and Plambech, S. (Directors)..**  
**Heartbound - A different kind of love story,**  
**Studio: Magic Hour Films ApS, Country of Origin: Denmark, Sweden (2019).**

“Heartbound - A different kind of love story” (*Hjærtelandet* in Danish) was released in Sweden, in 2019, and distributed globally by Camera Film. It is the sequel to the 2007 film, “Love on Delivery” (*Fra Thailand til Thy* in Danish), picking up the story of Thai women living in rural Denmark, ten years after the first film. It is directed and written by award-winner Janus Metz and trained anthropologist Sine Plambech. Heartbound explores two “opposite ends of the world” linked through Thai-Danish marriages.

The film opens with a sequence from the first film, set ten years ago, in which we learn the women's migration histories. As in the first film, Heartbound's story centers on Sommai, a now older Thai woman, the connections she has established between her village in Northeast Thailand and her home in rural Denmark. Viewers meet several other women from the same Thai region: Kae, Mong, Basit, Lom and Saeng. Kae, Basit and Mong are long-established migrants in Denmark while Lom and Saeng are in their 20s, still in Thailand, and making migration decisions which will shape their futures. Sommai is a key figure in introducing the women to Danish men who they eventually marry and as informal leader of the Thai community in rural Denmark. Through the stories of their daily life, viewers see firsthand how families are connected, bridged and torn apart by migration. Throughout the film, viewers are shown ways in which migrant lives are simultaneously ordinary - spousal fighting, divorce, illness, rearing of children, work struggles, death of pets and friendships - and in this ordinariness of daily life we see also see how each individual experiences life uniquely.

Heartland is an engaging film with beautiful cinematography. The contrasts between the rural landscapes of Thailand and Denmark creates a palimpsest of colour, textures and sounds. The film is lush in detail and mood, often dark. The film provides a rich texture, often found in small details on screen. Viewers are treated to these details in ways that other research mediums cannot convey. The musical score is simple and poignant. Through these subtle details, viewers appreciate the ways in which global power relations and gender are entwined into daily life.

The film has some tender moments with three scenes in particular standing out. The first early in the film shows a group of Thai women laughing about sex with an array of emotions washing across their faces: fear, excitement, nervousness, sadness, longing and friendship. The second is of a Thai woman teasing a Danish woman about her husband while they work in the fish factory. The teasing has the air of a long workplace friendship forged over shared experiences. Both these scenes represent the complexity of joy and happiness in hardship, but these themes are dropped later for the heavier, more dramatic themes such as death, divorce, broken dreams and poverty. Likewise, a third scene of one of the Danish men, Kjeld, playing with his children in the

yard highlights the intersection of love and the daily ordinariness of parenting. Given the weight of other themes, these moments are a welcome relief and balance to a film focusing primarily on the hardships.

At times, however, the film feels heavy-handed, relying heavily on close-ups of individuals with an intensity that often feels intrusive. This intensity is amplified as they focus primarily on the Thai women rather than their Danish partners thus creating a feeling of ‘otherness’ applied to only the women. The film uses a metaphor of wind to symbolize changing energies and feelings, movement between the two countries and strife in personal relations. These scenes are at-times heavily edited and juxtaposed insensitively against the tender moments these families experience. The richness of the film is in the women's stories, however their stories often feel individual and disconnected from their context. The Danish part of the film feels diluted and taken-for-granted. Men are often positioned in the background with their experiences of marrying and living with Thai women left unexplored. A tender moment, for example, is when Kae's prospective husband uses a dictionary to communicate with her, but we learn little about his experiences in this exchange. Men are portrayed as a good opportunity and the push is for the women to *adjust* to the men. Including the male narratives and emotions could have added balance to narrative of families being construed through migration.

The film's heavy-handedness is also reflected in the primary narrative of transnational marriage. The film places transnational marriage as a central part of global flows of heteropatriarchy and global South/North relations. In this narrative, women are portrayed as poor with limited choices while the men are lonely and undesirable in their rural home context. The Danish men are given little acknowledgement and the audience is given little about their backgrounds except, in one instance, where one of the Danish mothers states, “it is about time he married”. This narrative imbalance reflects global norms of their privileged position being unworthy of consideration as it is not exploring their role in the (re)production of these norms. In a similar vein, the absence of Thai men in the story and the over-generalization of them being prone to drug use and desertion adds to the discourse of hegemonic white masculinity being the ideal and safe compared to their poorer racialized counterparts. At the same time sex work is heavily moralized through the film's visualization. Sex work for some women is a means of livelihood and escape to the city and it seems most women in the study have done sex work. Taking a more value neutral approach would have added more nuance to the story. This weakness is depicted with the case of Lom, who fails to find a foreign husband in the tourist area of southern Thailand and returns to her village in humiliation and burdened with caring for her gravely ill mother.

Perplexingly, the role of place and context, or the specificities of Thailand and Denmark are largely incidental to the story. Viewers are given limited information about these places more broadly. There is a missed opportunity to explore the complexity of life and love in migration related to social structures. By stereotyping the conventional narrative, the film replicates and reproduces colonial and Eurocentric discourses. This is reinforced by the focus on Thailand which is also de-

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contextualized thus eliciting little knowledge of the Northeast region and its relation to other areas of Thailand while Denmark is seen as a land of opportunity that, like the men, fails to deliver. Unfortunately, the Danish context is also left to an overly simplistic narrative that it is somehow still the better choice for all concerned. The film adds little nuance to a well-established discourse.

The film's greatest strength lies in its time scale and perspective. As viewers are reintroduced to the women ten years later, we can see the ways in which migration is a process, which is illustrated beautifully. Few studies are able to offer such a long and detailed perspective on a particular group of people. For example, mobile phones evolve as tools used by young women who have recently migrated. An emotive example is Saeng Facetiming her children still in Thailand. The pain of separation is contrasted between different locations and generations - a well-appointed kitchen in Finland and a small house in Thailand. The film thus creates a visual linkage of the day-to-day work of connecting emotionally across spaces and places.

The film is a moving example of migration processes and demonstrates how visual methods can contribute to research narratives. The film should be a welcome addition to courses with themes of gender, sexuality, global processes, development studies and geography. It

presents key contemporary themes in a humanized manner and the weaknesses of the film would surely encourage debate in classes. From a methods perspective it is a solid example of conducting multi-sited visual ethnography. It has the possibility to lead to discussions on the role of participatory visual techniques where women and men decide who and what is filmed contributing to more dimensional and grounded stories. Both as a work of art and as a teaching tool, this film offers a strong base for discussing contemporary issues in migration.

#### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2019.100633>.

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