

From literary girl to graphic novel hero: trans-medial transformation of Stieg Larsson's Lisbeth Salander

Kerstin Bergman, Lund University

ABSTRACT

Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy* (2005–2007) has become an international hyper-bestseller phenomenon, translated and adapted across linguistic, cultural, and medial boundaries. But what happens to Larsson's complex woman protagonist, Lisbeth Salander, when the story is adapted and transformed? In this article, Larsson's first novel, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005), is compared to its graphic novel adaptation (2012–2013), written by Denise Mina with visual renderings by Leonardo Manco and Andrea Mutti. The transformation of Salander is analysed by means of comparative close readings of central scenes, and media specific features in combination with additional choices made by the creators of the graphic novel are highlighted. It is concluded that in the graphic novel, Salander is depicted as more "normal" and simultaneously more of an outcast, less of a (feminist) superhero, softer and more emotional, and less of an expression of feminism than she is in Larsson's novel. Mina, Manco, and Mutti are found to contribute to transforming Salander in a manner that weakens the strong political agenda that characterised Larsson's original novel.

KEYWORDS

Adaptation, trans-medial translation, inter-semiotic translation, graphic novel, crime fiction, Stieg Larsson, Millennium trilogy, Lisbeth Salander, Denise Mina, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

In the last half decade, Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy* (2005–2007) has become an international hyper-bestseller (Bergman 2013b) phenomenon, adapted across linguistic, cultural, and medial boundaries. Some of the most notable features of Larsson's novels are the extensive and playful use of different crime fiction sub-genres (Bergman 2013a) and the portrayal of a woman hero, Lisbeth Salander (King and Smith (eds) 2012, Bergman 2012). But what happens to Larsson's complex protagonist when the story is translated and transformed not only into another language, but also into another media format and a different cultural context? One of the most recent Larsson adaptations is the graphic novel version of the first novel of the trilogy, *Män som hatar kvinnor* (2005; *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* 2008)¹. The graphic novel script was written by Scottish crime writer Denise Mina, the Argentinian artist Leonardo Manco and the Italian Andrea Mutti provided the visual renderings, and it was published in two volumes (2012 and 2013) in the United States by Vertigo/DC Comics. Additionally, American comic book artist Lee Bermejo created the cover images of both volumes. The Vertigo imprint of DC Comics is known for making intelligent and provocative non-superhero comics, primarily belonging in the genres of horror, fantasy and crime, for an adult audience — Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* series (1989–1996) being one of their most celebrated creations. A large part of the buyers and readers of the graphic novel adaptation of Larsson's novel are

likely already familiar with the story and its characters from the novel and/or the film versions, but curious to further explore Larsson's universe in a new media format. A fundamental reason behind adapting Larsson's novel into the graphic novel format is of course to capitalise from the already popular story by (re)selling it to old, and potentially also new, consumer groups (cf. Hutcheon 2013: 86–88). The reliance on the "pre-sold" qualities of *The Millennium Trilogy* is highlighted by how Larsson's name dominates on the graphic novel covers, while Mina's, Mutti's and Manco's names are presented in a substantially smaller font. In addition to the commercial motivation, the creators of the graphic novel naturally have individual reasons for partaking in the project. Mina, for example, has stated that she was very keen to participate due to her love for Larsson's work, particularly since she is "interested in feminist crime fiction" and fascinated by the "representations of crimes of sexual violence in the book". She has further stressed the importance of the project being intellectually stimulating in a different way than her regular prose writing (Clark 2012). Additionally, what that attracts her to turning Larsson's work in particular into a graphic novel is that "Salander is very visual and the whole story – the usurping of gender roles, the motorbike, the gothic island – it could hardly be more graphic," and that Larsson "was a really radical political writer who used mass market media to get his political points across, and I [Mina] felt a lot of those points were lost in the film versions" (Brown 2012). Mina's motivations for partaking in the adaptation of Larsson's novel thus seem like a combination of political reasons, intellectual challenge and a desire to make a tribute to Larsson (cf. Hutcheon 2013: 93–95).

In this article, Larsson's original novel and the graphic novel adaptation of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* will be analysed by means of comparative close readings of central scenes, in order to identify how the character of Lisbeth Salander is transformed. And despite Mina's motivations stated above, the thesis of the article is that in the graphic novel adaptation, media specific features in combination with additional choices made by Mina, Manco, and Mutti contribute to transforming Salander in a manner that weakens the strong political agenda that characterised Larsson's original novel.

Graphic adaptations of literary novels have been produced since Clare Dwiggin's 1918 adaptation of Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* (1876), titled *Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn*, and they have become more commonly available since 1921 (Versaci 2007: 183). Since

adaptations are to a different medium, they are re-meditations, that is, specifically translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example words) to another (for example, images). This is translation but in a very specific sense: as transmutation or transcoding, that is, as necessarily a recoding into a new set of conventions as well as signs (Hutcheon 2013: 16).

Despite the many developments that graphic novel adaptations (or inter-semiotic translations) of novels, have gone through over the years, it remains a truism that they involve many changes directly related to the conversion of medium and format (cf. Hutcheon 2013: 36). The long text of the novel is radically shortened and simplified into lines contained within speech balloons, and most of the more descriptive elements are conveyed by images rather than by text; images that describe characters, locations, and feelings. As noted by Thierry Groensteen, in “narrative drawing, showing and telling are one and the same thing” (2007: 163). In this specific case, the fact that the two volumes of the graphic novel were published a year apart might have given additional cause for leaving out complicated parts of the original narrative.

There are, however, also more fundamental changes made in the inter-semiotic translation of Larsson’s novel into the graphic novel format, changes not directly attributable to the limited textual space and/or the visual possibilities provided by the new medium. Some of the most significant alterations are related to the portrayal of Lisbeth Salander. In the novel, Salander is often seen and depicted from the perspective of middle aged businessmen, who perceive her as an outcast and assume she suffers from some kind of psychiatric disorder. The reader actually has to look closer to understand that this is not the “truth” about Salander, and that Larsson’s implicit author rather presents her as a complex young woman who, considering her terrible experiences, is reacting and being quite “normal” (cf. Bergman 2012: 142)². In the graphic novel, the portrayal of Salander is more direct and explicit, but here, the reader encounters quite a different Salander.

1. Cover girls and initial impressions

Even by simply glancing at and comparing the covers of the novel and the graphic novel volumes, respectively, a makeover can be clearly discerned. The book cover of the Swedish original explicitly alludes to a magazine cover. It thereby signals the importance of story elements such as the Millennium Magazine, Salander’s co-protagonist Mikael Blomkvist’s investigative journalism, and the social criticism associated with Blomkvist and the fictional magazine. Furthermore, the “cover girl” of the novel’s magazine is a victim of violence, something that constitutes a reference to the consequences of the Swedish title: *Män som hatar kvinnor*, men who hate women (for a more extensive analysis of the cover of the original edition of *Män som hatar kvinnor*, see Bergman 2013a: 39–40).

As the title was radically changed for the English translation, Salander as “The Girl” and protagonist of the series, is foregrounded instead. This emphasis continues in the visual layout of the graphic novel covers, and here the title tattooed on Salander’s body on the cover of the first volume emphasises her as the main selling point even further. Although she is

seemingly naked in this picture, it is not a particularly sexual image. Instead, Salander is portrayed as having a muscular, cool, and androgynous presence, as well as being strong and rebellious in her appearance with tattoos, piercings, heavy black makeup, and smoking a cigarette. It is clear that she is no ordinary middle class woman, but that she is a dominant character in control. Simultaneously, however, she is also shown to be in a constant state of mourning, as signalled by the black armband tattoo on her left arm, something that adds complexity and depth to an otherwise fairly straightforward cover image.

The image on the dust jacket of the second graphic novel volume has similar connotations. Salander's position as an outsider is now stressed even further, as she, with her rebellious looks, is contrasted against the upper-class mansion in the background, from which she is separated by a spiky hedge. Nevertheless, she is still portrayed as the one in charge, challenging the reader with her stare. She obviously has agency, being no mere victim, but is rather a lonely and less than happy "visual sister" of fictional women heroes of popular culture such as Modesty Blaise, Beatrix Kiddo, Sarah Connor, Fox, Death, and Alex Munday. Salander's resemblance to American women action heroes of popular culture is frequently noted by scholars and critics alike. For a discussion of Salander's women forerunners in Swedish crime fiction, see Bergman (2012).

The covers of both volumes show the graphic novel's version of Salander to be a strong type of loner, very much in charge of herself and her surroundings. Furthermore, throughout the early part of the story, in the graphic novel, she is given comparatively more page space than in Larsson's novel, where she hardly appears at all during the first half of the story. Additionally, in comparison with Larsson's original text, Salander's external attributes are continuously stressed by the nature of the graphic version's visual renderings. The reader is made constantly aware of her makeup, her piercings, and the way she dresses³. Groensteen, in discussing what defines the type of "narrative drawing" featured in comics, notes that "typification" and simplification of characters are central to the images, but that the typification "presents a danger: that of the stereotype, that answers to the necessity of fully visually expressing something through 'exterior signs' (or clues – of its richness, honesty, deceit, etc.) that are simple and immediately decodable" (2007: 162)⁴. The continuous visualisation of several of Salander's external attributes thus serves to establish and emphasise certain traits and characteristics in the graphic novel's portrayal of her, while others, established as equally important in the original literary text, fade into the background and/or are omitted. Another result of the visual rendering is that the sexual nature of the relationship between Salander and Miriam "Mimmi" Wu becomes more

emphasised than in the original novel, as they are drawn naked in bed together (ex. Mina *et al.* 2012: [67]).

The visual character and content of the panels are the most striking elements of any graphic novel, and Groensteen concludes:

The narrative drawing [...] very often evacuates that which is not necessary to the intelligibility of the represented situation. If the sequentiality obliges it to certain redundancies, they do, at every moment, privilege the elements that have an immediately informative character, eliminating or backing up the rest (2007: 162).

Assigning importance to what is included in, and to what is left out of, the visual representations as Larsson's story is translated into the graphic novel format, is thus particularly crucial in identifying and analysing the changes the character of Lisbeth Salander is going through in this trans-medial adaptation.

It should also be noted that throughout the graphic novel, Manco and Mutti are primarily providing dark and realistic images of characters and backgrounds, using a clearly "photo-referenced" and "wide-screen" stylistics where visual representations dominate over the relatively sparse text.

2. Trauma, normality, and emotion

In transforming the story of Larsson's novel into the graphic novel, Mina, Manco, and Mutti have chosen to put less focus on Salander's traumatic personal history. Perhaps this is their way of simplifying the narrative for the shorter format, thus reducing, or perhaps rather concentrating on, Salander's trauma to being primarily the consequence of her being raped by her legal guardian Nils Bjurman. Instead of referring to a traumatic childhood, Mina and her co-creators focus on, for example, how Salander teaches her hacker friend Plague and her boss Dragan Armanskij social manners and how she visits her mother repeatedly — elements that explicitly demonstrate normality rather than symptoms of trauma. The many scenes where Salander appears in "disguise" — without the heavy makeup, instead wearing a hat or a wig and "conventional" clothes — also become additionally obvious in the visual media. In these scenes, the reader encounters Salander as a very ordinary-looking girl, often smiling at people she meets, something that contributes to creating an image of her as normal.

Nevertheless, in the graphic novel, Salander is shown to be much more traumatised by Bjurman's rape than in the novel. As she returns home after being raped, Larsson shows her as weak and vulnerable (2005: 253–

254), but he never dwells on this, and instead lets her take her revenge (2005: 255–256, 258–263) as she then puts the incident behind her. The graphic novel, however, stretches out Salander's pain and distress all throughout the second volume, following her exacting of revenge at the end of the first (Mina *et al.* 2012: [133–138]).

Groensteen concludes that "narrative drawing obeys an imperative of optimal legibility" (2007: 162), but in reading the graphic novel version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, it becomes evident that in order to secure legibility, the images still sometimes need to be augmented by words. This is particularly clear in relation to the depiction of Salander's hurt. Her suffering is shown primarily by the visualisation of language, as the words uttered by Bjurman during the rape scene keep returning to Salander. This is shown by graphically enhanced words and phrases "floating around" in panels — what Scott McCloud calls a "montage" of words and images, where "words are treated as integral *parts* of the picture" (1994: 154) — where Salander appears alone (ex. Mina *et al.* 2013: [5, 17–18]), during times of quieter reflection when nothing else distracts her from reflecting on the rape incident. The visualised words thus illustrate that Salander is constantly re-living the rape experience in her mind. Furthermore, the tattoo Salander chooses to remind herself of the rape also consists of a word, "bye" (Mina *et al.* 2012: [130]), which is the last thing Bjurman says to her after the rape (cf. Mina *et al.* 2012: [117]) in the graphic novel. By contrast, in Larsson's version, she simply tattoos a band around her ankle (2005: 254).

In the graphic novel, it is noted by Salander's previous legal guardian, Holger Palmgren, how Salander has always used work to distract her from her traumatic experiences, now as well as in the past (ex. Mina *et al.* 2012: [76–78]), and, after a scene containing an unusual number of "rape-words" coming to mind, Salander calls Dragan Armanskij, hoping he can provide her with work (Mina *et al.* 2013: [17–18]). Even Mimmi Wu cannot distract Salander from thinking about the rape (Mina *et al.* 2013: [2–3]), and in the end Wu leaves her ([139]). At an earlier point in the (graphic novel) story, Wu's last word as she and Salander part is also "bye", just like the rapist's. Salander responds with a "yeah", and in the following frame we see a close-up of Salander's clenched hands as she walks away from the door, an indication that Wu's farewell reminds her of that of the rapist (Mina *et al.* 2013: [43]). The strong association between the word "bye" and the rape thus creates a very uncomfortable similarity in this scene, one that is never subsequently dealt with.

In Larsson's novel, Salander is portrayed as cold and distanced in exacting her revenge on Bjurman (Larsson 2005: 255–256, 258–263). The graphic novel version, however, shows her in a rage — and while her being raped is illustrated mostly by a sequence of close-up frames of their eyes and parts of their faces, with Bjurman shown to be very cool and collected, and only the penultimate panel actually showing Salander's ravaged body

(Mina *et al.* 2012: [112–116]), her later rape of him is depicted in much more visually explicit detail. After Salander has incapacitated Bjurman with her Taser gun and tied him up, the panels alternate between showing him from above (her perspective) and her from below (his perspective), thus making the power relations unambiguous. Although their faces are also very much in focus during this rape sequence, the close-ups are alternated with images showing a somewhat wider perspective, primarily of his restrained body. As the scene progresses, Salander's face shows increasingly more rage — illustrated by facial expressions with bared teeth and darkened eyes, and by her raising the large black dildo with which she eventually rapes him while he screams out, facing the reader. Then she calmly smokes a cigarette and takes out the tattoo equipment, before violently kicking him with her boots. After that, the rape sequence ends with a full page frame of her tattooing "I am a rapist" over his naked torso (Mina *et al.* 2012: [133–138]).

Perhaps the limited visualisation of the rape of Salander is a way of not sexualising her as a rape victim, but — contrary to events in the novel — it simultaneously makes her revenge come across as more brutal than the initial rape, and Salander as someone who takes pleasure in the pain and hurt she inflicts.

Salander's rage — conveyed through facial expressions, bared teeth, and body positions — and her depiction as almost revelling in violence, is also stressed in the scene in the second volume of the graphic novel where she rescues Blomkvist from the serial killer's torture chamber (Mina *et al.* 2013: [91–93]). In the novel the reader observes her from Blomkvist's perspective, as he sees her storming in, fury-like, looking "like a beast of prey" striking the killer violently (Larsson 2008: 360), while the panel sequence of the graphic novel is at least as violent. Additionally, Mina, Manco, and Mutti have chosen to link her rage in this scene to the earlier rape and revenge episodes, by having Salander repeat the word "bye" while bashing the killer with a golf club (Mina *et al.* 2013: [91–93]). Afterwards, when the killer is temporarily subdued, she is also portrayed as more emotional, as she tenderly cuts Blomkvist down from where he is tied up, while affectionately addressing him as "Mikey..." and displaying a sad-looking face with puppy dog eyes (Mina *et al.* 2013: [94–95]). By contrast, in Larsson's original, this scene is described with no hint of emotion, as Salander cuts Blomkvist down, throws him the keys to the handcuffs, and runs off after the killer (Larsson 2005: 446–47). The team behind the graphic novel have thus chosen to make Salander much more emotional, and her emotions — whether it is rage, sadness, or hurt — are stressed in a visually very explicit manner. Groensteen regards this type of expressivity as fundamental to narrative drawing: the "body (the gestural) and the face (the physiognomic expressions) of characters should be as expressive as possible" (2007: 162). Although perhaps not necessarily true for all modes of graphic representation, as Groensteen's words well describe the stylistic conventions used in this particular graphic

novel, it might thus be conceivable — to some extent — to interpret the increased emotionality of the graphic novel version of Salander as partly attributable to the media format of the adaptation which makes her face and body expressive and constantly visible.

3. A lesbian outcast?

Another change in the adaption of Salander is in her relationship with Mimmi Wu. Mina, Manco, and Mutti turn them into much more of an identifiable couple, rather than the casual “friends with benefits” Larsson portrays in the novel. Larsson’s Salander actually states that she prefers men as sexual partners, and with the exception of Wu, she only has sex with men throughout the trilogy. In the graphic novel, however, Salander even goes so far as to leave Blomkvist, stating that “I’m not enjoying it [having sex with him] and I miss my girlfriend” (Mina *et al.* 2013: [138]). After another night with Wu, Wu nevertheless leaves her, and Salander ends up alone (Mina *et al.* 2013: [139]). This explains why, just a few pages later, Salander is sad at the end of the graphic novel, while in Larsson’s novel it is the realisation that Blomkvist has no intention of being exclusive with her that makes Salander feel so upset and sad. Whereas Larsson thus made a point of making Salander bisexual, albeit generally preferring men, the creators behind the graphic novel rather portray her as a lesbian who just happens to make an exception with Blomkvist, one that is soon regretted on account of her not enjoying the sex. The reason behind this change of emphasis is unclear. Larsson made it a point throughout the trilogy to make the issue of sexual preferences less dramatic, by depicting not only Salander but also a number of the other characters of his novels as bisexual or gay. Sexual orientation is thus rendered relatively unimportant — for the characters as well as the implicit narrator/author (cf. Bergman 2012: 140–41). Mimi Schippers shows how Larsson thereby outlines an egalitarian model of sexuality that additionally involves polyamorous and non-committal relationships (2012: *passim*). In the second novel, *Flickan som lekte med elden* (2006; *The Girl who Played with Fire* 2010[2009]), Larsson also puts focus on how absurd the media’s obsession with sexual preferences is, as he relates how the tabloids write about Salander when she is on the run accused of murder, describing her as a member of a “lesbian Satanist cult” (Larsson 2010: 425). That the graphic novel’s creators have made a point of labelling Salander “lesbian” can hardly be read as anything but yet another way to stress that Salander is an outsider in society; that she is different as she does not conform to the heterosexual norm. In combination with the previously mentioned uncomfortable association between Wu, the lesbian girlfriend, and Bjurman, the rapist, created by the use of the word “bye”, being a lesbian (into which Salander here is transformed) receives quite unfortunate connotations in the graphic novel — despite this most likely not being the graphic novel creators’ intention.

To summarise, in the graphic novel, it is very much stressed that Salander is a rebel and that she is different, as the reader is constantly reminded of her visual appearance and, among other things, of her relationship with Wu. She also smokes constantly — something that today is a signifier of social class to a greater extent in the US than in Sweden. Simultaneously, Salander also comes across as more “normal” and more emotional. She dwells on her traumas — thus reacting more like a victim is typically “expected” to react — and possesses more rage than in Larsson’s novel. In Larsson’s version by comparison, Salander seems to be fairly collected and rational throughout, although rather disillusioned by her previous experiences, which causes her to have a difficult time trusting people.

In stressing Salander’s otherness, the graphic novel corresponds with David Fincher’s American film adaptation of the novel, where Salander is similarly turned into more of a pariah than she is in Larsson’s novel. In Fincher’s case, this was likely done in an attempt to discourage audience identification with Salander, i.e. discouraging (young) people from taking after her example in any way. Simultaneously, however, Philippa Gates suggests that the most crucial difference between the Swedish novel and Scandinavian film version, and the American film, respectively, is that the two former “posed a question to their respective audiences regarding whether Salander’s revenge was justifiable, placing readers/viewers in the uncomfortable position of questioning their identification with Salander” (2013: 211). In the American film, however, the revenge is never questioned, and the audience can “comfortably” cheer for Salander, whom Gates refers to as an “American Superhero” (2013: 211). Jason Bainbridge, in writing about superheroes in comic books, concludes that the typical DC Comics superhero is “a personification of justice, all premodern in the sense that they promote themselves as divine figures of retribution, offering both the premise of transcendent justice in place of equality (enabled by their superpower) and physicality in place of rationality (accentuated by their formfitting costumes) as conduits to truth (beating, sometimes literally, the truth out of the villain)” (2009: 67). Although Salander is no traditional superhero and lacks actual superpowers, she still possesses many of the qualities mentioned by Bainbridge, and, to some extent, the tradition he discusses might account for some of the changes to her character in the DC Comics adaptation, not least when it comes to visual physical appearance and to the almost “divine” rage she expresses in the violent scenes. Salander as a superhero has been discussed by Rosenberg (2011).

Nevertheless, although the graphic novel Salander might look like a superhero, she is still more sensitive and emotional than any conventional superhero, and in terms of the justification for her revenge, it is clear that the graphic version lies somewhere in-between the American film version and the Swedish/Scandinavian versions. It is hard to identify with someone who behaves like a victim (the lingering hurt) – no one wants to

be a victim — and whose revenge is shown as worse than the original violation — nor do we want to be perpetrators. In Larsson's novel, the reader is invited to emotionally engage with Salander to a greater extent, against the men who violate her and/or perceive her as an outcast.

4. Genre-related transformations

Some of the changes relating to Salander made during the transformation into the graphic novel format are also applicable to the use of genre, that is, to the complex combination of different crime fiction sub-genres characterising Larsson's initial novel. In *Män som hatar kvinnor*, numerous genres — crime genres as well as other popular genres — are evoked, both by direct reference and the use of different genre elements. A development can be seen throughout the novel, as the main genre initially employed, the whodunit, is slowly substituted by the serial killer thriller genre. This transition between the novel's two main crime fiction sub-genres is gradual, but with an important turning point marked by several genre elements. Some of these genre elements are a brewing storm, the killing of a pet used as a warning, and an explicit act of violence against one of the detective characters. I have previously discussed Larsson's use of crime fiction sub-genres more at length in Bergman (2013a).

In the graphic novel, however, the use of genre(s) has been simplified, and hardly any implicit or explicit references are made to children's detective stories, the hardboiled feminist crime fiction, police procedurals, true crime books, or the other crime genres repeatedly referred to and utilised in Larsson's trilogy. Nevertheless, in the graphic novel version, the main stress is also — as in the novel — on the whodunit and the thriller, with the whodunit clearly dominating. In relation to the mysterious disappearance in the past of Harriet Vanger — a mystery that Blomkvist is hired to look into early on — typical whodunit elements like the isolation of the island from which Harriet disappeared (an isolation caused by a fuel truck crashing on and blocking the bridge leading to the island) are repeated much more frequently in the graphic novel version, and so is the fact that the person responsible for Harriet's disappearance, as well as the serial killer, must necessarily be found among the members of the Vanger family. Indeed, a limited number of known suspects is an essential feature of the classic whodunit. Mina, Manco, and Mutti even provide a list of the family suspects illustrated with portraits (2012: [46]). Larsson also provides a list of family members, but they are not as explicitly pointed out as the only possible suspects. Larsson instead chooses to keep the identity of the serial killer/s completely unknown to readers for much longer — not limiting the possible perpetrators to family members only.

Apart from the incidents of Salander's rape and her subsequent revenge in the first volume of the graphic novel, the whodunit format — and the less suspenseful structure, storyline, and pace associated with that sub-genre — remains predominant for the majority of the two graphic novel

adaptions. Additionally, unlike in Larsson's novel, the reader is hardly invited to partake in solving the whodunit mystery, something that further adds to the lack of suspense characterizing most of the graphic novel version. The thriller genre is really not introduced until the second half of the second volume, shortly after Salander and Blomkvist first meet. In this way the thriller genre is associated with the two protagonists being together, and, taking Salander's rape and revenge experience into account, particularly with her. In the novel, there are stronger connections made between Salander and the tough, solitary detectives of the hard boiled crime novel (Bergman 2013a: 41, 44, 46), an association which anchors her strongly in the detective role, despite also being a victim. However, as she is rather associated with the thriller genre in the graphic novel version, it is her status as victim that is stressed, women victims being a staple ingredient of the psychological thriller genre.

As the thriller genre is introduced in the graphic novel, suspense and tempo somewhat increase — the latter sometimes illustrated by long sequences of narrow, "widescreen" frames with almost no text, as in the scene when Blomkvist is shot at while jogging (Mina *et al.* 2013: [62–63]) — but the serial killer aspect of the thriller genre is still toned down, or at least simplified. The basic scenario where serial killers proceed from starting fires and mutilating animals to finally killing humans is thus established and repeatedly referred to by the characters. The pattern is also reflected in the story: the two protagonists talk about a fire in the parsonage in the past, Blomkvist's cat is found killed, Blomkvist gets shot at, and soon he and Salander come into close contact with the serial killer. The killer is responsible for both the fire and the death of the cat, has gone on to kill numerous people, and is now ready to kill the two of them. Contrary to the typical serial killer genre format, however, very little attention is paid to the killer's other victims — only Blomkvist and Salander as potential victims seem to count. Even if also somewhat briefly mentioned in Larsson's novel, greater attention is nonetheless paid to the many earlier victims of the killer.

The crucial scene in the serial killer's basement, where Blomkvist is almost killed, is nevertheless important in both versions of the story, while the ensuing action scene where Salander chases after the killer on her motorbike is somewhat less dramatised in the graphic version. It is presented only in images, showing in alternating frames how they both drive along in separate vehicles they eventually meet a fuel truck, which causes the killer to brake sharply and smash into the truck resulting in the truck and his vehicle catching fire. Salander, however, never even stops to check whether the killer is alive after the crash, but immediately leaves the scene (Mina *et al.* 2013: [95–100]). This adds to the image of her as more emotional in the graphic version, as she returns as soon as possible to attend to Blomkvist who has been hurt. Upon her return she simply tells him that the killer "blew up" after hitting a fuel truck, before she

helps Blomkvist home to take care of his wounds (Mina *et al.* 2013: [101–103]).

The circle is thus closed by the reappearance of a fuel truck stopping the killer as he is trying to leave the island, just like a similar truck closed the bridge and prevented anyone from leaving the island on the day of Harriet Vanger's disappearance. To stress this connection, the bridge is even visible next to the fuel truck in the last full page panel before Salander returns to the island (Mina *et al.* 2013: [100]). In the first incident, nobody died and the truck never exploded, but when the scene is restaged under different circumstances, the investigation into Harriet's disappearance that started on the day of the first incident can finally be brought to a conclusion with the death of the serial killer. This pattern is thus emphasised more in the graphic version than it is by Larsson, but in both versions Salander is portrayed as an action hero during the sequence of events, saving Blomkvist and making sure the serial killer will never harm anyone ever again.

5. The visual representation of violence against women

After everything is over, Salander returns to the killer's basement, erases all traces of her and Blomkvist ever having been there, and takes and burns the killer's files, films, and photographs of the tortured and murdered women. In the graphic novel, most of the story's feminist message is centred on Salander's aversion to the preservation and use of visual documentation of abuse. When Blomkvist questions that by burning the killer's images she is contributing to the cover-up of the crimes, she explains: "I did it for the women he attacked." "These things leak out. Give the next generation of killers materials...ideas...aspirations... ..goals" (Mina *et al.* 2013: [107–08]). All Salander saves is a list of the women's names with enough information to make them identifiable. Handing this over to the Vanger family's lawyer, she instructs him: "You are going to trace the families and compensate them. [...] From now on The Vanger Corporation will donate two million annually to the national organization for women's crisis centers in Sweden" (Mina *et al.* 2013: [110]).

Also earlier during the investigation, Salander points to the potentially counterproductive and exploitive use of visual evidence of violence against women. As she and Blomkvist discuss the victims of the serial killer and Blomkvist asks her whether she had found any photos from the crime scene, she replies: "Available, but they add nothing. Too many of those pictures around. Being used as cheap thrills... .. That's the nicest thing they use them for anyway. Bad enough that these women were raped and murdered. Now they are being used as porn" (Mina *et al.* 2013: [57]). Mina, Manco, and Mutti's choice to criticise the visual documentation of abuse and the (potential) ways naked and explicit images of women victims might be used, is well in line with the visual format of the graphic novel, and with how they themselves have avoided visualising Salander's

body in the panels showing her being raped (Mina *et al.* 2012: [112–116]). In the only frame of the rape sequence in which Salander's whole body is depicted, she is shown on her stomach with a sheet draped over her lower abdomen ([116]). The criticism of images of sexual violence is a specific feminist statement which is not made as explicitly in Larsson's novel.

6. Conclusion

Although having many, primarily visual, advantages over the novel format, the graphic and narrative conventions used in the graphic novel version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* do not allow for the same depth and complexity in the creation of characters as the longer novel format used by Larsson does. This is obvious in the portrayal of Salander, which becomes simplified and less nuanced when translated into the new medium. In the graphic novel, Salander is depicted as more "normal" and simultaneously more of an outcast than she is in Larsson's novel. The outcome is similar to what Philippa Gates finds while examining the American film version. Gates concludes that Rooney Mara's Salander is "sexualized, softened, romanticized, and less empowered" (2013: 211), when compared to her portrayal in Larsson's novel and to the Scandinavian film version. The sexualisation of Salander in the graphic novel could perhaps at least partly be explained by the aesthetic conventions of mainstream comics, a tradition with which the stylistics used by Manco and Mutti are closely aligned, and maybe also by a desire to make a story with a woman hero more attractive to a male audience.

Additionally, many elements important to Larsson's characterisation of Salander – for example her photographic memory, the attempted murder of her father, and her institutionalisation as a child – are absent from the graphic novel version. Salander's motivations and her strong engagement against the violation of women are also less articulated, and are essentially pared down to her stance against the visual documentation of women victims' bodies, as discussed above. Despite the powerful cover images of the graphic novel volumes, Salander is less of a (feminist) superhero in the version created by Mina, Mancio, and Mutti. Instead she is shown as softer, and — despite Mina's intentions (cf. Brown 2012; Clark 2012) — less of an expression of feminism. Blomkvist too seems less sympathetic towards feminism, and the graphic novel portrayal of the two protagonists thus contributes to a weakening of the strong political message expressed in Larsson's novel. For discussions of Larsson's Millennium trilogy as feminist, see for example the articles in King and Smith (eds) (2012), and Åström *et al.* (eds) (2013). The political overall message of Larsson's novel is examined by for example Westerståhl Stenport and Ovesdotter Alm (2009).

Referring to the novel, Katarina Gregersdotter concludes: "Via the character of Salander, Larsson openly links government and bureaucracy

to capitalist powers and patriarchy and provides a feminist critique of power and institutions" (Gregersdotter 2013: 95). Instead of making Salander contribute to such an analysis and critique, the graphic novel rather turns Larsson's narrative into "just" a crime story. However, Linda Hutcheon points out that readers familiar with the adapted work will "experience the adaptation through the lenses of the adapted work, as a kind of palimpsest" (2013: 122). This implies that readers familiar with Larsson's original novel might in their reception "fuse" the two works, thus perhaps still perceiving the graphic novel version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* as more feminist and political than it really is in itself. Nevertheless, it has been noted — with reference to the filmic adaptations — that "Salander's transition from textual to visual economies has opened her character up to greater exploitation" (Horeck *et al.* 2013: 12). Accordingly, the main attraction of the graphic novel version is in its visual qualities: particularly in the evocative images of Salander as the sexy and violent rebel. Larsson's criticism of the Swedish state, feckless financial journalism, capitalist society, and of men who hate women, is largely absent or severely toned down in the graphic novel version. Mina, Manco, and Mutti have made an excellent job of conveying Larsson's main storylines to new audiences and readers, but perhaps the political elements of *Män som hatar kvinnor* seemed too complex and difficult to explain in a short, chiefly visual medium.

Bibliography

- **Åström, Berit, Katarina Gregersdotter and Tanya Horeck** (2013). *Rape in Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy and Beyond. Contemporary Scandinavian and Anglophone Crime Fiction*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- **Bainbridge, Jason** (2009). "'Worlds Within Worlds'. The Role of Superheroes in the Marvel and DC Universes." Angela Ndalians (ed.) (2009). *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*. New York/London: Routledge, 64–85.
- **Bergman, Kerstin** (2012). "Lisbeth Salander and her Swedish Crime Fiction 'Sisters'. Stieg Larsson's Hero in a Genre Context." King and Smith (eds) (2012), 135–144.
- **Bergman, Kerstin** (2013a) "From 'The Case of the Pressed Flowers' to the Serial Killers Torture Chamber. The Use and Function of Crime Fiction Sub-genres in Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*." Rebecca Martin (ed.) (2013). *Critical Insights. Crime and Detective Fiction*. Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 38–53.
- **Bergman, Kerstin** (2013b). "Genre-Hybridization – A Key to Hyper-Bestsellers? The Use and Function of Different Fiction Genres in *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Millennium Trilogy*". To appear in *Academic Quarter* (7).
- **Bongco, Mila** (2000). *Reading Comics. Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*. New York/London: Routledge.
- **Brown, Pamela** (2012). "A Conversation with Denise Mina." *Graphic Novels* Nov. 12, 2012. <http://www.mulhollandbooks.com/2012/11/12/a-conversation-with-denise-mina/> (consulted 17.03.2014).

- **Chute, Hillary and Marianne Dekoven** (2012). "Comic Books and Graphic Novels.". David Glover and Schott McCracken (eds) (2012). *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 175-195.
- **Clark, Noelene** (2012). "'Dragon Tattoo': Denise Mina on Larsson, Feminist Crime Fiction" [interview with Mina]. *Los Angeles Times* Dec. 13, 2012 <http://herocomplex.latimes.com/books/dragon-tattoo-denise-mina-on-larsson-feminist-crime-fiction/#/0> (consulted 17.03.2014).
- **Gates, Philippa** (2013). "'Hidden in the Snow'. Female Violence against the Men Who Hate Women in the Millennium Adaptations." Åström *et al.* (eds) (2013), 193–213.
- **Gregersdotter, Katarina** (2013). "The Body, Hopelessness, and Nostalgia. Representations of Rape and the Welfare State in Swedish Crime Fiction." Åström *et al.* (eds) (2013), 81–96.
- **Groensteen, Thierry** (2007). *The System of Comics* (tr. B. Beaty and N. Nguyen). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- **Horeck, Tanya, Katarina Gregersdotter and Berit Åström** (2013). "Introduction". Åström *et al.*, 1–18.
- **Hutcheon, Linda (with Siobhan O'Flynn)** (2013). *A Theory of Adaptation* (2nd edition). London/New York: Routledge.
- **King, Donna and Carrie Lee Smith** (eds) (2012). *Men Who Hate Women and Women Who Kick Their Asses: Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy in Feminist Perspective*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- **Larsson, Stieg** (2005). *Män som hatar kvinnor*. Stockholm: Norstedts.
- **Larsson, Stieg** (2008). *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (tr. R. Keeland). New York: Knopf.
- **Larsson, Stieg** (2010[2009]). *The Girl Who Played with Fire* (tr. R. Keeland). New York: Vintage Crime/Random House.
- **McCloud, Scott** (1994). *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- **Mina, Denise [script], Leonardo Manco and Andrea Mutti [visual renderings]** (2012). *Stieg Larsson's The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, Book 1*. New York: Vertigo/DC Comics.
- **Mina, Denise [script], Leonardo Manco and Andrea Mutti [visual renderings]** (2013). *Stieg Larsson's The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, Book 2*. New York: Vertigo/DC Comics.
- **Rosenberg, Robin S.** (2011). "Salander as Superhero." Robin S. Rosenberg and Shannon O'Neill (eds) (2011). *The Psychology of The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo. Understanding Lisbeth Salander and Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy*. Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 253–270.
- **Sabin, Roger** (1993). *Adult Comics. An Introduction*. New York/London: Routledge.
- **Schippers, Mimi** (2012). "Third-Wave Rebels in a Second-Wave World. Polyamory, Gender, and Power". King and Smith (eds) (2012), 65–76.

- **Versaci, Rocco** (2007). *This Book Contains Graphic Language. Comics as Literature*. New York/London: Continuum.
- **Westerståhl Stenport, Anna and Cecilia Ovesdotter Alm** (2009). "Corporations, Crime, and Gender Construction in Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Exploring Twenty-first Century Neoliberalism in Swedish Culture." *Scandinavian Studies* 81(2), 157–179.

Biography

Dr. Kerstin Bergman is an Affiliate Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at Lund University, Sweden. Her main field of research is contemporary crime fiction (literature, film, television). Among her publications are the key reference works on crime fiction *Kriminallitteratur: Utveckling, genrer, perspektiv* (2011, with S. Kärrholm) and *Swedish Crime Fiction: The Making of Nordic Noir* (2014), as well as numerous articles on Swedish and international crime fiction.

E-mail: Kerstin.Bergman@litt.lu.se



Notes

¹ I am aware that "graphic novel" is a somewhat problematic term (cf. Chute and Dekoven 2012: 190, Bongco 2000: 82 (note 11)), and has been so ever since it was coined and graphic novels became a concept in 1986–1987 (cf. Sabin 1993: 235–248), but, nevertheless, I have found graphic novel to be the most appropriate term in this context.

² "Normal" is also, of course, a problematic term, but I use it here in the manner common in everyday language, i.e. to indicate convergence with the dominating norms in society.

³ In general, the graphic novel version of Salander visually resembles Swedish actress Noomi Rapace portraying Salander in the Scandinavian film adaptation (*Män som hatar kvinnor*, directed by Nils Arden Oplev 2009), rather than American actress Rooney Mara in the same role in the American film version (*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, directed by David Fincher 2011).

⁴ Groensteen outlines narrative drawing in opposition to "illustrative drawing, which makes greater sacrifices toward a decorative tendency and calls for a more contemplative reading," but he simultaneously notes that in modern comics, an intermix of illustrative, more artistic, drawing and narrative drawing has become increasingly common (2007: 163–164). The graphic novel version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* can most likely be regarded an example of such a mixture.