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# Millennium Trilogy:

## Eye for Eye and the Utopia of Order in Modern Waste Lands

# LA TRILOGIE MILLÉNNIUM:

## L'OEIL POUR L'OEIL ET L'UTOPIE DE L'ORDRE DANS LE MONDE MODERNE GÂCHÉ

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**Abstract:** This essay starts with an overview of the formulas used by Stieg Larsson in his *Millennium* trilogy, namely crime fiction, travel narratives and gothic plots. I then focus on two main characters Mikael Blomkvist and Lisbeth Salander, and argue that Blomkvist, a modern Theseus, leads us to the labyrinth of the globalized world, while the series' protagonist, Lisbeth Salander, modeled on the Amazon, is an example of the empowerment of women in crime fiction by playing the role of the "tough guy" detective, while also personifying the popular roles of the victim, the outcast and the avenger. Dialogues with Greek tragedy will also be discussed, namely Salander's struggles with strong father figures.
**Key words:** Fictional Crime; Revision of Myths, Evil; Patriarchal Societies; Women Empowerment; Freedom; Control

**Resumé:** Cette étude commence par un aperçu des formules employées par Stieg Larsson dans sa trilogie *Millennium*, composée de fiction policière, de récits de voyage et d'intrigues gothiques. Elle se concentre ensuite sur deux personnages principaux: Mikael Blomkvist et Lisbeth Salander. Nous démonstrons que Blomkvist, tel un Thésée moderne, nous entraîne dans le labyrinthe du monde global, tandis que l'héroïne des séries Lisbeth Salander, telle une Amazone, illustre le pouvoir conféré aux femmes dans la fiction policière en jouant à la fois le rôle masculin du detéctive coriace et le rôle populaire et féminin de la victime, de l'exclue et de la vengeresse. Les dialogues avec la tragédie grecque sont également abordés dans les combats de Salander contre des images de père fort.
**Mots-clés:** Crime Fictionel; Révision des Mythes; Le Mal; Société Patriarcale; Autonomie des femmes; Liberté; Contrôle

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## 1. NOVELS WHICH COME IN FROM THE COLD: A SKILLFUL COMBINATOIRE OF FORMULAS AND LANGUAGES

To those who have been foretelling the end of detective fiction, Stieg Larsson's trilogy of novels known as the "Millennium series" proves that the genre is still alive, revitalized by the empowerment of women in a patriarchal society and by the belief that detective fiction has been, in the last decades, one of the main outposts of realism and social criticism in contemporary literature. Aware of the complex nature of real crimes in the modern globalised world, Larsson knows that realism and verisimilitude don't match with the idea of a Supersleuth; therefore, as in police procedural narratives, he resorts to the collective instance of detection, articulating both legal and illegal methodologies of detection,

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while foregrounding two main investigators: Mikael Blomkvist (a journalist) and Lisbeth Salander (who helds a kind of freelance job in a security agency).

Larsson's popularity all over the world is a phenomenon which can be easily understood by reading the whole series. Larsson masters all the narrative strategies to seduce readers of all ages and nationalities. There is proof enough that the author was addressing readers outside Swedish frontiers and we find some examples in the first novel, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, when Larsson goes into detail about the "two levels of social welfare protection" (Larsson, 2008, p. 202) in Sweden: "trusteeship" and "guardianship". His (didactic) explanations are mostly enlightening for the non-Swedish reader:

> A trustee steps in to offer voluntary help for individuals who, for several reasons, have problems managing their daily lives […] Guardianship is a stricter form of control, in which the client is relieved of the authority to handle his or her own money or to make decisions regarding various matters." (Larsson, 2008, p. 202).

Then, like so many other writers and moviemakers, Larson's plays with people's universal fascination for religious mysteries, enigmas and hermeneutics, while highlighting the way the Bible and other religious books have inspired hideous serial criminals throughout history. There are many passages dedicated to the Hebrew Bible, to the Apocrypha and to the controversies sorrounding different Church's branches. The transcription of Latin expressions (*e.g.*, "sola fide" or "claritas scripturae") together with the biblical passages, which provide the clues to unveil the secular mysteries, proves that Larsson was well acquainted with Umberto Eco's bestsellers and with similar plots. There are many signs of both *The Name of the Rose* and of *Foucault's Pendulum* in the "Millennium series" and in some sense these two works are contained in the first novel, *The Girl with the Black Tattoo*.

The reading of this novel is enough to explain the author's immediate success and how he managed to create addicted readers eagerly waiting for the other two novels of the trilogy. Larsson succeeded in revitalizing some formulas of the English nineteenth-century sensationalist novel, like *The Woman of White*, by Willkie Collins, which is able, as D. A. Miller puts it, to "address […] to the sympathetic nervous system, where it grounds its characteristic adrenalin effects" (Miller 1988, p. 146). Indeed, what in the beginning appears to be a novel written according to the *whodunnit* tradition (epitomized by some novels by Agatha Christie), with some touch of the American *hardboiled* tradition (as in Hammett's and Horace McCoy's novels), will gradually turn into a horror story, bringing to mind some of the horrible stories popularised by movies and TV series, like *Seven*, by David Fincher, *The Silence of the Lambs* (after Thomas Harris's novel), or *Dexter* (after *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, by Jeff Lindsay) just to mention some narratives which raise strong ethical questions and deal with the theme of evil in contemporary world.

In fact, that very first novel can be considered as a kind of *anthology* or compilation of many narrative plots and subgenres, which, like Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), address different kind of readers. It has the appeal of adventure and travel writing (the landscapes of Sweden, but also of the Caribbean seas), of gothic *romance*, of biblical narratives and of the generic mixture of several strands of crime fiction (both novels and movies): the *whodunnit* tradition, the *hardboiled* American novel, *thrillers* and all kinds of narratives of suspense.

On referring to the very first novel as an "anthology" I take as an example Umberto Eco's approach to *Casablanca* in *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods.* Eco considers that *Casablanca* is overburden with cinematographic *clichés* and archetypes in such a way that it becomes a "kind of museum for any aficionado of cinema" (Eco 1994, p. 127). One can say that the "Millennium series" is an anthology of twentieth-century stories which are part of our imaginary, both in book and film forms. The anthology changes according to each reader's *Encyclopedia* and his personal *Wunderkamera.* But it is very likely that we shall find some recurrent titles in that readers's memory: the above mentioned Eco's novels, *Five Little Pigs*, by Agatha Christie, *The Big Sleep*, by Raymond Chandler, and more recent crime novels as those by Sara Paretsky and Val McDiarmid, two authors quoted in the trilogy, along with others of lesser importance. Larsson's series doesn' t lack the usual metaficcional dimension of detective fiction, and the precise reference, in the first novel of the series, to Val McDiarmid's *The Mermaids Singing* produces a kind of *mise-en-abyme* effect: the reader acquainted with the Scottish writer's themes is advised about the horror elements of Larsson's fiction.

As to the movies' network, the list is too long to single out any more titles than those already mentioned, but, beyond David Fincher's *The Social Network* (released only in 2010) there is a less obvious one we have to highlight: *Close Up*, by Michelangelo Antonioni. It is only by studying Blomkvist's methods of investigation that the parallelisms become manifest. In an investigation which also brings to mind Poirot's in *Five Little Piggs*, Blomkvist begins by studying police archives looking for some error, but it is a photography that will play a crucial role in the investigation process. After long hours scrutinizing old photos, he suddenly discovers in one of them the *punctum*, *i.e.*, the very proof that something *was* there (rather than "is") as Roland Barthes puts it in *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (1980): the girl's *gaze* at someone outside the photo's frame. This is the moment the detective ceases to be a figure of blindness: he *sees* Harriet *seeing* some sign of danger. Later one, the investigation progresses when he *sees* a minor *punctum* in another photo and

mainly when he *sees* what his daughter has seen at a first glance, by pure chance: that an apparently list of telephone numbers was a list of biblical names.

Larsson's trilogy seems not to move far away from the paradigm which rules most detective novels from the emergence of the genre in the second half of the 19th century until present times: one which celebrates the power of images, whatever their material support or ontological nature. Larsson's novels are a celebration and a capitalization of the power (of) and fascination for images: of old photos, of (hidden) cameras, of videos, of scanners, of all internet resources – and, of course, of human retina. It is worth reminding that Jacques Dubois in *Le Roman Policier ou La Modernité* underlines the simultaneous appearance of photography ("le marché des images") and of detective fiction ("le marché des fictions"), while recalling some studies about the close relationship between photography, criminality and identity issues. (Dubois 1992, p. 24). The novel itself reminds us of the symbiotic connection between detective fiction and cinema, according to Alfred Hitchcock's essay "Lights! Act! Mostly Camera" (1941), in the introduction to an anthology on the most famous detectives up to that moment:

> "Each [detective] had heightened perception – whether visual, tactile, or aural – that delivers to his brain an insistent warning. '[…] For the camera tells the truth. It is an implacable record of what really happened. Those who see the picture – and observe all its details – must inevitably know the whole story.
> Such is the game here offered to the reader. He knows, as the detective knows, everything that can be seen, everything that can be heard. The challenge to his camera eye is in the recording of the extraordinary. The challenge to his wits is in the making of one moving picture of the disjointed negatives.
> It is essentially a director's problem. The component parts of the story are there; the job is to make a picture of them." (Hitchcock 1941, pp. v-vi).

This passage perfectly describes the reconstructive work led by Blomkvist in the first novel, the one which is closer to the *whodunnit* type. But the fact that Larsson overtly inspires himself in a whole tradition of crime narratives doesn't mean he has not brought something new to the genre.

## 2. REVITALIZING ANCIENT MYTHS

Together with the above mentioned intertextual and intersemiotics relationships, the "Millennium trilogy" also exemplifies the way contemporary fiction renews itself by an artful revision of ancient myths, and above all of Greek myths and Greek literature. Some references immediately relate Larsson's stories to the Greek world. When Blomkvist goes after Harriet Vanger, in Australia, where she had hidden for the last forty years, she asks her son not to shoot "the messenger"; some pages farther, Lisbeth explicitly refers to "our nemesis", when displaying a theory on the murders she and Blomkvist have been investigating. Although Nemesis stands in detective fiction as the detective's antagonist or archenemy, still stands that in Greek tragedies Nemesis was the avenger and punisher of crimes. The theme of *revenge* is at the heart of Larsson's novels and both Harriet and Lisbeth can be seen as avengers, sharing many traits: Lisbeth tried to kill her father when she was a young girl to free her mother and the whole family from his sadistic tyranny; Harriett did succeed in murdering hers, freeing herself from the sexual abuses she suffered, but she also condemns herself to oblivion and exile in Australia. Lisbeth matches the portrait of the classic Nemesis quiet well: "implacable", as was Nemesis, the Greek goddess who was given the epithet Erynis.

Almost a century ago, in his essay "The Guilty Vicarage" (1948), W. H. Auden had rightly argued about some analogies between detective fiction and Greek tragedy (and Oedipus search has lead some critics to explore other analogies). Auden argues that the true interest of the detective story is the "dialectic of innocence and guilt" (Auden 1962, p. 147) and he goes to underline some important structural similarities in both genres, which may help approaching the "Millennium series":

> As in Aristotelian description of tragedy, there is Concealment (the innocent seem guilty and the guilty seem innocent) and Manifestation (the real guilt is brought to consciousness). There is also peripeteia, in this case not a reversal of fortune but a double reversal from apparent guilt to innocence and from apparent innocence to guilt. (Auden 1948, p. 147)

These two sentences sum up the misfortunes and adventures of some characters created by Larsson, above all that of Lisbeth Salender, as we follow her adventures in the second and third novels. While the first novel, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, focus on the mysteries of the Vanger family, in the second, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, Lisbeth's life and secrets are slowly unraveled. The second novel tells a story of persecution and it is overburden with violence and horror, climaxing in the moment Lisbeth is buried alive. However, the third novel, *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest*, stands as that moment of reversal when the true criminals (Lisbeth's father and some government officials) are unmasked and the truth emerges. As in Greek tragedy, catharsis occurs at the end of the trilogy and a sort of *equilibrium* is

reestablished, although, contrary to what Auden states, the detective(s) is(are) unable to restore the state of grace; in fact, the state of grace was only apparent The plot of the first novel, the strongest similarity to Greek tragedy, is well known: Mikael Blomkvist, a middle-aged journalist, engaged in denouncing a billionaire illegal's activities, is asked to solve the mystery of the disappearance, forty years earlier, of the beloved niece of an important retired businessman in the island of Hedeby. The old man is obsessed by that mystery, for Harriets's corpse had never been found and he goes on, year after year, receiving the pressed flowers she used to offer him on his birthday. In his search for new evidence, Blomkvist becomes acquainted with the history and idiosyncrasies of the vast Vanger family. Step by step he uncovers the skeletons in the Vanger's closets and in the end he faces a monstrous reality concerning some male members of the family. He discovers that, for many generations, the Vanger's history has been one of violence, of women abuse, of parental cruelty and of deep involvement with anti-Semitic groups. In the end, the paradise which the island seemed to be turns into a literal Hell, with the serial killer burning in the middle of flames. Harriet's brother, Martin Vanger, the CEO of Vanger's industry, and a respected citizen, turns out himself to be a serial killer. He had been raping and murdering women, as he recorded in his Book of Death; he had videos and photos of all the murders. A kind of Dexter-figure without a good father (on the contrary, his own father had initiated him into raping his own sister), Martin had a torture chamber, like Dexter, where Blomkvist would be held captive and from where he would later be released with Lisbeth's help.

The dark history of the Vanger's aristocratic family brings to mind all the horrors concerning the world of Greek gods and of evil figures from Greek tragedy: incest, cruelty, sadism, fratricide, patricide, uxoricide, matricide and all sorts of murders which were committed within the family. There is even a motherly figure which resembles Medeia (Isabella) and, above all, fatherly figures similar to Cronos, who, according to the myth, killed his own children. In fact, Lisbeth's father, Zalachenko, who has fathered eight children across Europe (and only keeps in touch with the abnormal one), condemns her to a kind of symbolic death, when he declares her insane and sends her at the age of 12 to the Children's Psychiatric Hospital, where she is psychologically abused by the renowned Dr. Peter Teleborian.

As in Greek tragedy, family affairs are also interwoven with State affairs. One learns about Gotfried Vanger's (Harriet and Martin's father) neo-Nazis sympathies, as well as Martin's. This relationship between a closed community (the history of the family microcosm) and the history of the whole society (the current Swedish neo-Nazi movements and xenophobia symptoms) as well as between past and present events becomes more clear when one our attention is lead to another family's tragedy and one which will be told in a very discontinuous way: Lisbeth's.

As Cassandra, Lisbeth's denunciation of her father's violence was not (deliberately) heard by the authorities her mother becomes a disabled person after being hardly beaten and will end up dying, many years later, in the hospital where she was kept. Moreover, Lisbeth's rape by her second guardian, the lawyer Nils Bjurman, will later on become the main connection between private and state crimes and secrets. As Zalachenko, Lisbeth's father, is presented as a criminal protected by a Swedish governmental unit, criminalization extends to the whole state and even overflows the boundaries of a single country (although we only become aware of it in the second and third novels).

Therefore, in the tradition of the hardboiled detective fiction, Larsson's novels have strong political motivations and they are a vehicle for criticism and denunciation of corruption in contemporary world. They also have a highly informative and even didactic dimension which highlights Larsson's commitment to many causes, as it is clearly illustrated in the *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest*. Structurally, this novel is divided into five parts. Three of these parts are preceded by historical accounts of the myths of the Amazons in several continents according to ancient writers, to modern historians and anthropologists. In the second part, there is an account of the universality of the myth, but the emphasis falls upon Greece. Larsson tells us that one owns the word "amazon to the Greeks" which, as he explains, means "without breast" In the third part, we are told about Amazons in Northern Africa in the 1st century a.C. and Amazons in Anatolia who refused marriage because they saw it as a form of submission. Finally, in the fourth part, Larsson tracks down a powerful nation of Amazons in Western Africa, in the 17th century, which was defeated only in 1892. The author adds that, in spite of their existence being historically attested, not only there are no references to Amazons in the military history of any country, but also no movie has ever told their story. He ends up by pointing out the only scientific work on these women he knows of: *Amazons of Black Sparta*, by the historian Stanely B. Alpern (and one gets the full reference: "Hurst & Co LTD. London, 1998").

# 3. POWERFUL FEMALE CHARACTERS AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW TYPE OF HEROINE

One can never know if this kind of "dissertation" about Amazons inserted in *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest*, the last novel of the "Millennium series" occurred to Larsson after or before the creation of Lisbeth's character, but there is no doubt that it is the Amazon myth that first comes to the reader's mind in his first encounter with Lisbeth's portrait. At least to most (informed) European readers – who will gradually recall other ancient mythical figures. It is possible that some Nordic readers will first think of the super-heroines of their folk imaginary such as the *shieldmaiden*, but these will easily merge with the popular portrait of the Amazons presented in Larsson's last novel. To my mind, this is due to the utopia

drawn in the Millennium trilogy of a world where women are not only rescued from the footnotes of history – but also become major figures in contemporary world. The "Millennium series" is very likely the most important fictional work written (so far) in the 21st century by a man where all kinds of violence against women are portrayed and it thus can be read as a work on behalf of women's rights. We must not forget that, in 2009, the author was awarded a prize in Spain, for contributing to the fight against domestic violence.

It is well known that Stieg Larsson inspired himself in the famous Pippi Longstocking, whom he imagined as an adult, to create Lisbeth Salander, as the author revealed in some interviews. There are even some clues in the series connecting these two characters; yet, Nordic fictional and mythological characters almost seem devoid of importance when compared to the Greek ones. Lisbeth may first strike us as a dark elf, on account of her adolescent features (being 25 years old), her low stature and dark (dyed) hair, which undermines the Nordic stereotype of tall women with blue eyes and blond hair, but it is the image of the warrior which prevails – allied to that of the survivor. As the Greek Amazon, she has no breasts (in the first novel), she rides a bike (the closest replica of a horse in an urban setting), and she carries a taser to protect herself (both a "sword" and a phallic symbol). Like the Amazons all over the (ancient) world, she keeps fighting strong male figures.

Throughout the series, Lisbeth undergoes physical and psychological abuses of every kind and ends up in a hospital bed where she manages to escape death through the intervention of a *deus ex-machina,* embodied in Dr. Jonasson – who, together with Armansky, Lisbeths' boss, play the role of quasi-father figures. Lisbeth has an extraordinary capacity to regenerate herself and, like the phoenix, she is also able to be reborn from her own ashes. Even if she has inherited this feature from her father (who survives the fire set up by his own daughter), she goes even farther, for she manages to come back from the world of the dead – escaping by herself from the grave where her half-brother, Niedermann, has literally buried her. Her physical superiority over men is not due to any abnormality at all (contrary to Niedermann' s absence of pain), but due to the boxing lessons she had in the past, to her survival instincts, to her intelligence (as when she plays with Niedermann's terrors) and to the fact that she is always underestimated on account of her adolescent features.

Lisbeth Salander's character is undoubtedly Stieg Larsson's major creation, as well as a singular novelty in crime fiction in the last decades concerning the depiction of heroes. As Dashiell Hammett in the early twentieth-century, Larsson was able to renew the old formulas of detective fiction, even when resorting to stereotyped characters and situations, by creating a new type of "detective". John G. Cawelti, in *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, remarks that "the good writer must renew […] stereotypes by adding new elements, by showing us some unexpected facet or by relating them to other stereotypes in a particularly expressive fashion" (Cawelti 1976, p. 11). And Cawelti goes on stating that there are at least two ways of stereotype vitalization: "one is the stereotypical character who also embodies characters that seem contrary to the stereotypical traits" (Cawelti 1976, p. 11), like Gary Cooper, who is (*i.e.*, acts as) both a man of violence and a shy and gentle one. The other way is "the addition of some touches of human complexity or frailty to a stereotypical figure" (Cawelti 1976, p. 12). Concerning Blomkvist's character, he can be explained according to these two modes of stereotype vitalization. He is a mixture of the deductive detective and of the private-eye of the hardboiled novel, *i.e.*, a kind of contemporary knight who fights financial fraud, political corruption and all kinds of crime without fear of consequences – like going to jail (as he eventually did). On the other hand, he is completely different from those major archetypical detectives: he trusts people, he has a strong friends' network, he was married once, had a child, got divorced, and he was emotionally and sexually linked to several women, while keeping a rather unorthodox love relationship with a married woman, whose husband approves of it. If he appears as a brave and high-minded figure, he is also vulnerable and becomes completely powerless in Martin's chamber of torture. Contrary to a whole tradition of popular and more canonical narratives, he is saved from death by a woman.

In Lisbeth's case, the first mould may be that of the female detective figures that have emerged in late crime fiction, such as Parestky's detective V.I. Warshawski or Sue Grafon's Kinsey Millhone; however Larsson manages to build a fascinating character by also bringing some Greek characters and myths into life and blending them together. If Blomkvist succeeds in solving the mystery of the Vanger's family and in denouncing the corrupt billionaire and industrialist Wennerstrom, it is because Lisbeth helped him in the labyrinthic world in which he moved: the island of Hedbey with its chamber of death and the entangled world of financial and political matters. As a brilliant hacker, Lisbeth embodies a modern Ariadne who guides Blomkvist-Teseus in his search for Minotaurs and brings him back from all labyrinths. Delving into everybody's computers, Lisbeth gets all kind of information (private secrets and State's ones). Even when she is almost entrapped in her body, confined to a hospital room, she is able to offer important threads to her lawyer (Annika) and to people in danger (Erika), for she "has" supplementary eyes: those provided by Internet. The role of Ariadne overlaps with that of a female Orpheus rescuing men from dark caves, both physical and mental. The most obvious one is the scene where she releases Blomkvist from Martin's underground chamber of horrors and literally saves his life; in a more discreet way she brings her first legal guardian to life, when she succeeds in helping him to recover from a heart stroke. In both cases, she acts moved by feelings akin to "love" and gratitude, although she seems devoid of human emotions. Furthermore, Harriet Vanger's rescue from exile could not have happened without her intervention.

Lisbeth Salender also plays the role of a contemporary Antigone: someone who defies the Laws of the State, the regulatory discourses of modern "technologies of punishment" and control, according to Foucault's concepts in *Surveiller et Punir. Naissance de la Prison*. This may sound untrue, if we think that Lisbeth tries everything in order to kill her biological father and her half-brother, but the truth is that the so-called "bonds of blood" had already been destroyed by her father, who is a monster beyond all kind of human bonds. Moreover (either as a cause or as a consequence), Larsson engages in a revisionist portrait of the "family" unit, which is more related to the contemporary society we live in. In the third novel, Lisbeth thinks about her "friends", those of the Hacker Republic as her real family. Although, except for Peste, none of them knows her true identity or her true face, she feels she has a family across the world, people ready to help her whenever she needs. Millennium trillogy offers the image of a changing world where there is a place for different kind of families; Larsson even engages in the mixing-up of roles: Lisbeth takes care of her mother as if she were her daughter (and she also takes care of her guardian). In fact, on defending her mother against the Soviet spy who *happened* to be her father, she is akin to Antigone, by defying the patriarchal order. The moment Lisbeth challenged what was expected from a daughter and a girl, she created her own rules and codes; her imprisonment in a sort of cage and the treatment she underwent only enhanced her refusal of male dominance and increased her *resilience.* She has not a fixed identity or at least one that can fit into a gender category, let alone in a clinical file. Lisbeth's eidetic memory and her difficulty in having conversations had led some critics to the diagnosis of Asperger syndrome. This is a rather impoverished way of approaching her – and a view which is tainted by some of the prejudices the novels portray. In fact, Lisbeth is not devoid of feelings and emotions. She fell in love with Mikael; she tried to kill her father, because she was angry due to her mother's suffering; she loves her friend Miriam. She puts herself in danger to save a boy with whom she had a short love affair during her Caribbean holidays. Although there seems to be some truth in her difficulty of keeping a conversation, that difficulty can be explained on account of the psychiatric treatment she underwent, as well as the psychological traumas she experienced as a young girl. And she has discovered the power of silence – after having found out that men use too many rotten and debased words. Her silence (which doesn't fit into dominant representations of women) is still a way of talking, *i.e.,* a peculiar oppositional speech: it is defiance to the male speech of the Law. Lisbeth refuses to have any talk at all with psychiatrists, policemen or any other figure of power.

Although her final victory requires the help of a whole team – of Mikael Blomkvist (who always believed in her innocence), the box champion Paolo Roberto and many women, specially of Annika (her lawyer) and the police woman Monica Figuerola – in some sense Lisbeth still manages to remain the main character. The women's actions in the third novel and mostly their alliance exemplify quite well the importance of female empowerment and the role they may have in the battle for justice and for a better world. Lisbeth is (*i.e.*, becomes), no doubt, a member of that female community, but she goes beyond it, for she goes on evading categorization. In her bisexual life she defies sexual categorizations of all kinds. The first image of Lisbeth is that of an androgynous person or of someone who leads a bisexual life. However, after the plastic surgery she undergoes in order to increase her breast, after a new haircut and other minor body transformations, she becomes more "feminine", according to social codes. She feels herself more attractive and often looks her breasts and her bust bodice in the mirror in a rather narcissistic way. This external "feminization" doesn't change neither her sexuality (she goes on "being" bisexual) nor her physical strength.

Maybe the theories displayed by Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler in their most influential books, *The Epistemology of the Closet* and *Gender Trouble*, can shed some light upon Lisbeth's behaviour. Early in the first novel, there is a passage in which Lisbeth muses on her sexuality: "Salander […] has never thought herself as a lesbian. She had never brooded over whether she was straight gay, or even bisexual. She did not give a damn about labels, did not see that it was anyone else's business who she spent her nights with". (Larsson, 2008, p. 293).

In fact, from the very beginning, Lisbeth shows her reluctance towards labels and she sexually behaves in many different ways throughout the three novels. She seduces Blomkvist as she seduces the boy in the seaside; she manages to disturb her employer by asking him if he is sexually attracted to her.

In short, she never plays the passive sexual role still dominant in women's representation and in Lisbeth's character it seems that sexual difference stereotypes very often overlap. It is perhaps not by accident that the initials letters of Lisbeth Salander (LS) and of Stieg Larsson (SL) form a pregnant anagram: Lisbeth may be read as an alter ego of Larsson. It is on account of her moral "freedom", *i.e.* on her personal codes (which free her from fearing other people's judgments) that Lisbeth is labelled a prostitute and is arrested, since her behaviour is only socially and morally allowed to men.

Lisbeth challenges the whole structure on which modern societies have been founded: logocentrism and phallocentrism. But, like so many other female figures who have been playing that role in different kind of narratives all over the world, I think Lisbeth's appeal is due to four main overlapping reasons*: i*) the way she embodies a defence of difference, without making a plea for it (as the tough detective, she acts rather than talks); *ii)* by showing that State overprotection (as in all "nanny states") can equal too much control; *iii)* by illustrating the way the revolution in communications that took place in the last three decades has changed personal relationships, as well as the very nature of "real" and "reality"; *iv)* in Lisbeth's appropriation of the technology of surveillance that once belonged solely to the State, which raises another set of questions (the boundaries of the public and the private; the limits between citizen's rights and the power of the State, etc.).

A detail commenting on all these reasons would lie beyond the scope of this essay, but, since the first and the third reasons have already been somehow addressed; nevertheless, I would like to make some brief comments on the remaining two. The way the State's overprotection (and mainly the Swedish system of guardianship) can go wrong and become perverse is easily illustrated by Lisbeth's ironical view of her own life:

> Unfortunately society was not very smart or understanding; she had to protect herself from social authorities, tax authorities, police, curators, psychologists, psychiatrists, teachers, and bouncers, who […] would never let her into the bar even though she was twenty-five. There was a whole army of people who seemed not to have anything better to do than to try to disrupt her life, and if they were given the opportunity, to correct the way she had chosen to live (Larsson, 2008, p. 353).

Leaving aside the fact that Lisbeth is the victim of extreme sophisticated conspiracies (more "All the *Evils*" than "All the *Evil*"), her oppressive experience doesn't necessarily happen in many citizens' daily life; the problem is that contemporary societies don't allow the sort of freedom Lisbeth claims. That leads us to the last topic and to what has become an endless debate. Science and technology invented computers and the Internet created a giant, transnational *eye* which is available to every citizen or, at least, to the skilled ones like Lisbeth. In this sense, it is as if the famous Bentham's Panopticon had been endlessly multiplied, shared by all citizens, who can also explore the power of being unseen seers – or even of watching one another in real time. The questions of visibility and power are at the very heart of the whole issue raised by Lisbeth as a hacker. As Lisbeth states, "*Knowledge is power*" (Larsson, 2008, p. 296), and this power can manifest itself in many different ways: surveillance of someone's movements, the gathering of high confidential State's documents and her appropriation of the billionaires Winnermann's fortune. It is true that Lisbeth has a private code, which is a form of self-discipline, but what she does is nothing but a criminal act, even if we take Lisbeth's robbery (as Blomkvist did) as a kind of reward she offered herself, since until that moment in the saga (the end of the first novel) she kept on suspecting all offices of justice. That is why Lisbeth is such a fascinating character: she doesn't present herself as a victim demanding for the reader's compassion and tears. Information plus money means more power: even the power of changing her body and her identity. After being hardly controlled and punished for minor infractions, Lisbeth gets some control over her life, but it is only by the legal intervention of Annika that she earns her *freedom*. Being a survivor, she does stand in the end both as a symbol of individual strength and of the importance of collective support.

# 4. CONTEMPORARY CRIMES AS LEGIBLE TEXTS – OR THE EVERLASTING TRIUMPH OF DETECTIVES

I have begun this essay by offering some reasons for Larsson's popularity but I cannot conclude it without adding another one, which will still leave much space for further discussions. In a world of anxiety and uncertainty such as ours, Stieg Larsson's trilogy is still a hymn to rationality, to the triumph of truth and justice (or some kind of moral repair): one has to capture and to legally punish monsters like Dr. Teleborian, as well as other personalities endowed with power and money in order to assure society's stability and security. As to Lisbeth's father, death comes as an ambivalent kind of punishment. In a world of chaos and fragmentation, Larsson shifts from the tendencies in most contemporary crime fiction, which present evil as something widespread and impossible to contain (as in *The Silence of Innocents*) or as something which pervades all values, as if there was no more room for the establishment of criteria for judging right and wrong deeds. In the "Millennium series", these words "right" and "wrong" are not at all out of date. Therefore, Larsson raises moral questions which have been banned from literary works, mainly from the canonical ones.

In the enlightening *Essay in Modern Thought*, Susan Neimand argues that we face evil "[w]henever one voice protests, *That should not have happened*, and another insists, *But it did*, an opposition arises that can become intolerable." (Neiman 2002, p. 267). She thoroughly discusses nazi ideology and mass murder at nazi death camps and argues about the different meanings of the word "evil" concerning Auschwitz and the Lisbon earthquake in 1755. The question is that in face of sexual abuse, and all kinds of violence women undergo everyday in the so-called "civilized world" (in spite of the rights acknowledged by Law), it is impossible not to think "*That should not have happened",* followed by the unavoidable fact: *But it did.* In this sense, we are still dealing with "evil"; the difference is that in this case, evil can be not only explained but also contained – and this happens in Larsson's fictional world. In that sense, his trilogy matches to a certain extent the definition Gil Plain makes of detective fiction: "Crime fiction in general, and detective fiction in particular, is about confronting and taming the monstrous. It is a literature of containment, a narrative that makes safe." (Plain 1988, p. 3). Yet, it is possible that what is no doubt a reassuring ending for many readers, may still be rather problematic to others: can the final recognition of Lisbeth's innocence and the punishment of all culprits efface all the previous terrible events from the reader's memory (the dismembered corpses of many women, the mental illness of Lisbeth's mother)? It is rather disturbing to realise how much both Lisbeth and the Vanger family's personal lives are entangled in the mid-twentieth century European history. Does "All the Evil" that Lisbeth keeps talking about in the first novel confine itself to what

seemed to be a kind of revision of the Freudian primal scene? Can we read Larsson's novels as a plea against the forgetfulness of history, a plea for memory? My answer is that we can – and that we should. And these will probably be the first words of another essay on the "Millennium series".

# CONCLUSION

From the late 1980's onwards, detective fiction, or crime fiction (to use the present widespread label), underwent many changes and was able to renew itself even when there seemed to be a disintegration or a negation of the genre. Thomas Pynchon and Paul Auster, among many other authors, have written novels that fit into the category of what William Spanos called "anti-detective fiction" (in the essay "The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination"). Spanos defines "anti-detective fiction" as follows:

the paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern literary imagination …. the formal purpose of which is to evoke the impulse to "detect" and/or to psychoanalyze in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime (or find the cause if the neurosis (1972, p. 154).

The deconstruction and subversion of detective genre codes, those of the whodunnit tradition in particular, and all postmodernist reformulations (parodic games, above all) can be seen as reactions to the genre, yet they still maintain a strong relationship with it and by no means can it be studied without a comparative approach. This process of rewriting is, however, not the most interesting kind of the genre's mutation in the last decades. Moreover, these experiments were announced by the anti-psychological exploitations of nouveau roman, also undermining the rational principles that had supported this genre prominent since its early stages.

What is really important in most contemporary crime narratives – and in the mainstream genres narratives all over the world – is the way they have become politically motivated, challenging and disestablishing foundational values of Western society. The genre which many critics consider a conservative one has proven to be a perfect vehicle for the treatment and denouncement of complex issues and crimes of our civilization: drugs, sexual trafficking, immigration issues, modern forms of slavery, environmental concerns, institutional corruption, economic transnational crimes, and all sorts of bloody and monstrous murders.

If, as Witold Gombrowicz claims in his renowned book Cosmos (1965), detective fiction is an attempt at organizing chaos we can state that in a civilization where many human values have collapsed, the future of detective fiction will indeed be a brilliant one. The quest for meaning and for a pattern in this world is as old as humanity: if it is very often synonymous with an almost irrational belief in a design underneath the surface, it may also mean a refusal of fatality, of status quo and a strong effort of righting wrongs – as woman crime writing has been doing in the last two decades.

The late twentieth century brought rise to the development of diverging branches of crime writing – historical mysteries, black crime novels and many narratives concerned with ethnic minorities, to name just a few – however, it is the boom of women crime writer's work that has caught the attention of literary and cultural studies. Women have always been writing detective novels, but it is only in the late twentieth century that women began to systematically fight the recurrently masculinizing features of the genre and chose women as protagonists, ranging from the female police officer and the amateur private investigator to the lesbian detective who pushes the genre to its utmost limits. Although women working in police departments do not shake the masculinist institution, it does point towards a form of woman empowerment. At times women's behavior in police cases is still, even to the present day, a replica of the male one, but most times she does embody a whole new vision of the world's issues and a refusal of dry, ratiocinative solutions for contemporary issues. Acting as an amateur P.I. in a work of fiction, woman further manifests her emancipatory power, although, being a dangerous complex world, the female investigator seldom works alone.

In spite of the aporias and contradictions one can point out in woman crime fiction, there is no doubt that it attempts to question and challenge the phallocentric and white male structure still experienced in the 21st century. Nevertheless, the most striking novelty in this century is that the most daring detective novels with strong female characters have been created by a man – which is also proof that the traditional opposition between men and women has begun to collapse. As for their author, Stieg Larsson, one may say that he has written a draft of a new history. In the last novel of the Millenium trilogy, The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest, it is worth noticing that the fourth and last part begins by reminding the reader that in the 1940s there was factual evidence of survivors of the Amazons, the classical all-female warriors, living in Eastern Africa in the late 19th century. While the previous part of that same novel is entitled "Disc Crash", sounding rather like an end, the title of the fourth part is "Restart", a new beginning, and, it is in this very part where women are the true subjects of history – at least within the fictional boundaries of the Millennium series.

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