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Lisbeth Salander's Strategic Evasion as Criticism of Democracy

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Tässä artikkelissa tarkastelen miten Stieg Larssonin Millenium-trilogian toinen päähenkilö Lisbeth Larsson kuvataan henkilöksi, johon kohdistuva marginaalistava mykistäminen muuntuu vastarinnaksi strategisen välttelyn keinoin. Tämän välttelyn keskiössä on Salanderin lohikäärmetatuointi. Sen avulla elokuvissa tuotetaan symbolisin keinoin Salanderin subjektiuteen liittyviä merkityksiä, joiden avulla Salander saa äänensä kuuluviin. Lohikäärmetatuointi yhdistyy elokuvissa paitsi Salanderin henkilökohtaisiin traumaattisiin lapsuudenkokemuksiin ja hänen muutokseensa uhrista kostajaksi, myös positiiviseen emotionaalisuuteen ja paranemiseen. Elokuvatrilogian lopussa lohikäärme muuntuu yksityisen ja julkisen rajan merkitsijäksi, kun Salanderin tähän asti lihaan kaiverrettu ja toisten silmiltä piilossa ollut symboli materiaalistuu näyttävästi hänen poliittiseen vastarintaan yhdistyvässä punk-asussaan. Lohikäärmettä lähestytään artikkelissa vastarinnan symbolina ja sen evoluutiota subjektiuden kehittymisen merkitsijänä. Aineistona ovat trilogiaan perustuvat ruotsalaiset elokuvat vuodelta 2009.

Key words: Lisbeth Salander, silence, symbol, voice

1 The Millennium series

When Stieg Larsson's Millennium trilogy was published posthumously between 2005 and 2007, the novels immediately became bestsellers. All three Swedish film versions of the novels had been launched by 2009. While the female protagonist is highlighted only in the original Swedish title of the second novel and film, all the English titles – *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Män som hatar kvinnor, 2005) *The Girl Who Played with Fire* (Flickan som lekte med elden, 2006) and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* (Luftslottet som sprängdes, 2007)[1] place Lisbeth Salander at centre stage, foregrounding the story in the trilogy as being about her trauma and her victimization, her turning agent and eventually, after years of systematic silencing, her winning recognition in society.

[1] The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (2005/2008); The Girl Who Played with Fire (2006/2009); The Girl Who Kicked the Hornest's Nest (2007/2009).

Salander and her expressively ambiguous silence is also the focus of this article. This silence manifests itself as Salander's refusal to speak in a paradoxical situation in which she is simultaneously rendered silent. Her self-chosen retreat into silence – the inaudible protest from her position of marginalisation – is also a political strategy of power in the form of the silence imposed on her by the conspirators who work to suppress her voice. It marks the boundaries of the private and public, margins and centre, non-subjectivity and subjectivity, and ultimately in this trilogy, of non-citizenship and official recognition.

My aim is to outline the ways in which Salander's silence functions as a 'strategic evasion', a private space of agency that provides room for different non-verbal ways of constructing subjectivity and voicing resistance beyond verbal language and outside the public domain in the three Swedish films based on the trilogy. The multimodality of filmic expression offers different ways of displaying this strategy through visual imagery beyond the spoken linguistic code because, in filmic presentation, the linguistic elements become coalesced into a system of representation based on a rich variety of images and sounds.[2] Although Lisbeth Salander does not express herself in verbal language in public until the very end of the film trilogy, her voice of dissidence is made manifest through her acts and the exhibition of her body.

Salander's agency and embodiment have been previously discussed in several studies that without exception also emphasise her controversiality. For example, Kim Surkan (2011: 35) attributes subversive potential to Salander's resistance to societal norms and her "disregard for any affiliation with a particular [sexual] identity" in her queer reading of the character. Salander has been analysed as a fashion icon whose 'style-fashion-dress' functions as a bodily style and an expression of cultural anxiety (Kaiser 2013); she has been measured against the production of social criticism embedded in the novels (Thomas 2012); she has been treated as an example of social marginalisation as produced by stigmatizing practices and unrecognized talent (Martin & Simms 2011;

[2] For a concise introduction to multimodality see for example H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2002) and Anders Björkvall, *Den visuella texten: multimodal analys i praktiken* (2009).

Timm 2011). In addition, she has been treated as a contemporary appropriation of mythical figures: for example Maria de Lurdes Sampaio (2011: 75) parallels her resistance against authorities with the Greek princess Ariadne, a guide and pathfinder. I have elsewhere discussed her as a literary trickster drawing on an elaborate masquerade (forthcoming) to "expose hypocrisy and inequality, to subvert existing social systems" (Landay 1998: 2). In this article, I will approach Salander from the perspective of 'embodied symbolic expression' by which I refer to the ways in which her body is displayed as the locus of symbolic, non-verbal signification. However, my aim is not to discuss body language as it is most often understood, that is, as the "management of time, space, appearance, posture, gesture, vocal prosody, touch, smell, facial expression, and eye contact" (Goman 2011: 3), but rather as communication with similar goals but a different ontological status. My aim is to show how Salander's non-verbal speech emerges as signs that integrate subjectivity and the body, and how this 'anti-signification' serves as an evasive communicative strategy that is both empowering and subversive. 'Anti-signification' is a term used by Katie Wales (2001: 28) to refer to "any demotic heteroglossic or 'multi-voiced' counter culture in comic or exuberant opposition to a hegemonic official culture: a kind of subversive anti-culture, often with its own anti-language." The most central signifier of this strategy is the large dragon tattoo carved in Salander's flesh. Its uncanniness, the looming presence and simultaneous invisibility, both underlines and undermines the hidden but officially established male culture of violence which Salander criticises. In what follows, I will discuss two ways in which the dragon becomes the central signifier of Salander's evasive, non-linguistic speech through which her political aim is reached at the end of the trilogy.

2 Salander and the deficit of democracy

Lisbeth Salander is a "tattooed and pierced Goth anti-heroine" (Forshaw 2012: 6), a hacker and a recluse with a motorbike and a photographic memory, who is, in the first part of the trilogy, hired to assist journalist Mikael Blomkvist to investigate the mysterious case of a vanished woman. As the motive behind her disappearance – male violence – is gradually unveiled, Salander's traumatic past and the violations she has

been subjected to are also revealed to the viewers. Her effort to defend her mother against her abusive father resulted in her being sent to several years of psychiatric treatment starting at the age of nine and thereafter being monitored by an appointed guardian. It is Salander's loss of social status and right to speak for herself that guarantee the concealment of a high-level political conspiracy until the moment she is raped and humiliated by her new appointed guardian. From that point on, the story of a victim turns into the story of an avenger who transforms her voicelessness and invisibility into a space from which she makes manifest her resistance through a strategic refusal to communicate within the parameters imposed on her by those who have silenced her and defined her social status as deviant and marginalized.

Salander thus appears as a volatile, and in her indefinability, multifaceted social critic who points out the loopholes in the democratic system. In the Millennium series, as in Nordic Noir in general, social criticism plays a significant role. Larsson's trilogy presents institutional violence as part of how Swedish society works and by doing so points out "in particular the cracks that have appeared in the social democratic ideal" (Forshaw 2012: 2). Traditionally, the concept of democracy entails equal civil rights and the "full participation of citizens in public discussion and decision-making" (see Siedentop 2011: 2). In the context of the Millennium series, the term 'social democracy' refers not only to the equal opportunities of the members of society; it also indicates a deficit of democracy both as regards the inherent requirement of welfare societies to guarantee the safety of their members as well as their right to citizenship in equal terms. Larsson's biographer Kurdo Baksi (2010: 57) emphasizes his commitment to the ideal of democracy which he saw as important but fragile: "Democracy cannot be taken for granted. Every day and at every level of society we must fight for democracy, tolerance and respect." The Millennium trilogy elaborates the fragile balance that makes institutional violence possible in the democratic system, but at the same time it also functions as a celebration of the system's ability to correct itself. It does this through the narrative of Lisbeth Salander.

3 Silence and anti-signification

Silence, like all communication, takes place in a context, and, like all communication, it has to do with a certain way of constructing messages in order to create shared meaning. According to Frey et al. (quoted in Guerrero & Hecht 2008: 6), communication takes place when someone makes the attempt to put forward a message or "whenever a person perceives and assigns meaning to behaviour". Silence is behaviour that gains its meaning from the context: when no verbal message is expressed, the power relations that regulate the silence become significant. Silence is a concern of the individual as well as the collective. Besides understanding silence or silencing as a phenomenon on the level of individual discourse or a single person, the terms are often used metaphorically when referring to oppressed minorities and their exclusion from communication or matters related to freedom of speech and censorship (Jaworski 1993: 13). Thus, obviously, silence relates to power. Those in power have greater ability to regulate speech and silence, while the socially marginalized have lesser opportunities to participate in the regulation of expression, including silence. Since the ability to regulate silence also denotes an ability to violate rules unilaterally, silence can be used as a means to negotiate power relations. Robin Lakoff (1995: 25) points out that "the powerless cannot choose to be silent, any more than they can choose to speak, or choose the meaning of their speech".

In the Millennium trilogy, Lisbeth Salander is constantly urged to speak, but what she is allowed to say is regulated by those with power over her. When she makes an effort to rebel against the constraints defined for her, first as a child and later when she asks her guardian for money for a new computer, what she tries to communicate is distorted and turned against her. Those with the power to hear and interpret determine the contents of her speech as mere delusion, lies and oversized requirements and punish her for her communicative escapades. At the psychiatric hospital, constrained to her bed, she becomes the object of the paedophilic desires of her psychiatrist, and several years later, she is raped by her guardian. When her efforts to express herself in speech prove futile, she translates the violations she has experienced into carvings on her body: in the films

her dragon tattoo is strongly associated with her traumatic past from which it speaks a private, metaphorical language of victimhood.

The moment of her metamorphosis from victim to agent is marked by a symbolic act: Salander herself seizes the tattooing instrument and carves an explicit verbal sign of resistance on the chest of her rapist. The text reads: "Jag är ett sadistiskt svin och våldtäcktsman" (I'm a sadistic swine and rapist) (*FLE* 1:02:24). Although the declaration remains a private statement until towards the end of the third film when Salander is taken to court and finally given an opportunity to express herself in public, this act is already a manifestation of a change in power relations.

From that point on, Salander's silence turns dangerous. In communication situations where dialogue – no matter how biased – is the expectation, a person's silence is experienced, as anthropologist Boris Malinowski (quoted in Jaworski 1993: 13) writes, as not a "reassuring factor but […] as something alarming and dangerous." Many linguists have indeed paid attention to the characteristic of silence to feel potentially hostile, awkward and as something that should be avoided to prevent embarrassing or uncomfortable moments in communication, as well as the breakdown of communication (Jaworski 1993: 13). The *uncanny* awkwardness caused by silence can be explained by the ambiguity on which it is based. Silence as communication is volatile: based on both recognition and estrangement at the same time, it incorporates what Freud refers to as the unfamiliarity which appears at the very heart of the familiar (see Bennet & Royle 2009: 35). However, by so doing, it sets in motion the presupposed relations of power.

When Salander's submission is replaced with strategic evasion, she turns into a threat. In her powerless state, she not only chooses to regulate silence; she also chooses to 'speak' in a way that communicates a blurred meaning.

4 The girl with the dragon tattoo and strategic evasion

It is precisely Salander's silencing that makes room for the emergence of her personal anti-linguistic speech that involves the body in a process of symbolification through her

tattoo: as the English title of the first film indicates, Salander is "the girl with the dragon tattoo". The dragon as such is a mythical animal invested with a great deal of cultural meaning. It is marked by ambiguity: in western representation dragons are quite one-sidedly intimately associated with power, evil, isolation and destructive fire, whereas in eastern folklore their associations with wisdom and renewal are emphasised (Birkalan & Garry 2005: 73–74). Salander's large tattoo, which is displayed in the films as covering her back and right thigh, (see *MHK* 1:24:10 and 1:34:57), is mentioned in passing in studies that deal with her and simplistically connected to her previous traumatic experiences and her violent agency (see for example Martin & Simms 2011: 12). However, Salander's tattoo communicates ambiguity in that it also prominently signifies positive sexuality as well as healing. The tattoo is conjoined with the images of fire constantly present in the films and, in addition to destruction, is also associated with the regenerative imagery of the Phoenix myth.

4.1 Dragon as the bearer of trauma and healing

The dragon tattoo is displayed when experiences of sexualized violence are presented, for example in the beginning of the second part, *Flickan som lekte med elden*, when Salander wakes up from a nightmare in her luxury flat that serves as her refuge abroad before she decides to return to Sweden (*FLE* 0:01:32). In the nightmare, the traumatic memory of the rape by her appointed guardian Bjurman (*MHK* 0:50:37) resurfaces (*FLE* 0:01:00) and is blended with other memories of earlier assaults by Peter Teleborian, the paedophilic psychiatrist, whose use of 'touching therapy' is revisited in the dream scene. Later in the film, the camera focuses on the tattoo when Teleborian appears on TV to make expert statements about Salander's lack of mental stability (*FLE* 1:24:19).

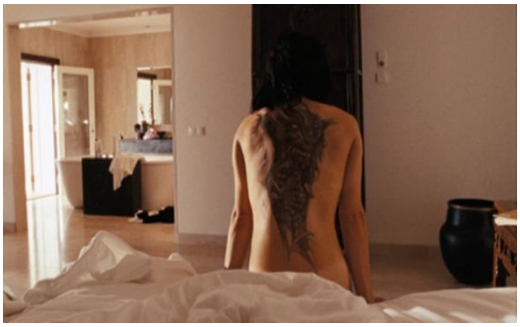

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Image 1. Lisbeth Salander and the tattoo in *Flickan som lekte med elden*

The dragon is explicitly connected with time and pain in the third part of the trilogy when the sympathetic doctor in charge of Salander at the hospital enquires about her reasons for going through the long and painful process that acquiring such a large tattoo requires. Salander wards off his question on the reasons but admits that "Yes, it hurt and took time" (*LSS* 0:40:37, translation by Tiina Mäntymäki). However, at this point the dragon represents not only trauma ingrained in her flesh but also serves as a reference to healing and strength. When Salander turns her back towards the doctor, lifts up her shirt and shows him the tattoo in a communicative gesture, the dragon expresses her next, non-verbal line in the dialogue: partly covered by a bandage, the wounded but still fierce and dangerous-looking dragon is now associated with healing and care.

The duality of the dragon as a representative of both destruction and regeneration (Birkalan & Garry 2005: 73) is evident in the meanings associated with Salander's tattoo. In addition to silencing and sexual violence, it is also linked to healing, emotionality and positive sexual desire as expressed in Salander's encounters with her friend and lover Miriam Wu (*FLE* 0:18:36) and Mikael Blomkvist (*MHK* 1:23:59). Dragons are 'composite animals' (Birkalan & Garry 2005: 73), and likewise Salander's dragon tattoo is a highly ambiguous image in which the present and the past as well as the body and memory come together. On the one hand, it represents brutal violations of integrity and the agency born out of them, while on the other, it is a marker of positive desire for another body. The dragon can be seen as Salander's other, an animal ingrained in her flesh, created through pain and blood as an inseparable part of her: it represents the memory of the body in its ambiguous presence and visibility. Thus,

through the dragon, Salander's evasive communication becomes part of her ontological situation.

4.2 Dragon, masquerade and agency

Those who experience Lisbeth Salander's evasive communication strategy as threatening, constantly produce speech about her in order to resubmit her to their power. She is talked about in private and in the media and defined as "mentally disturbed", "murderer", "in need of treatment" or "incapable of taking care of herself" (see *FLE* 1:24:19) as motivations for her incarceration. From her position of marginalisation, Salander herself speaks not only through her violent guerilla-like actions, but also through elaborate masquerades in which the linguistic code is translated into semiotic signs that have meaning in terms of visuality and through the dialectic of visibility and hiding. As linguists have pointed out, meaning emerges through the binary relation of presence and non-presence. In what follows, I will discuss briefly an example that serves to represent Salander's criticism of the workings of the 'patriarchal democracy', which tolerates no dissident voices. In this example, in which the dragon is materialized in a punk attire, her strategic evasion is constructed as a masquerade, drawing on the dialectic of visible vs. hidden, private vs. political and private vs. public.

Masquerade inherently links with the dialectic of hiding and displaying. It is a playful way of occupying a subject position beyond stability and of giving an expression to the fluidity of parodic and ironic play. Masquerade as a way to escape social constrictions has also been viewed as a practice to allow women to escape from patriarchal rule (see Craft-Fairchild 1993: 53). In Salander's case, masquerade clearly represents a space beyond the constrictions of the male-defined place reserved for her in society. However, masquerade does not represent escape only, but also agency and subversion: it is a space from which ironic statements embedded in parodic, visually ostensive expressions are made manifest.

Susan B. Kaiser (2013), when discussing Salander's way of dressing, points out the ways in which her outfits express a strategic ambiguity through which she "negotiates

cultural and personal anxieties by mixing and matching, concealing and revealing, and going on both offence and defence". Thus, Kaiser (2013: 26–27, 29, 39) treats what she calls Salander's 'style-fashion-dress' as a metaphor of her fluid subjectivity which resists permanent positioning and also makes manifest her strategy of incorporating dress in her agency. Salander's constantly changing style can be seen as an inherent part of her strategy of constructing an agentive self, drawing on the inherent irony and parody of the masquerade as a strategy of displacement. She speaks through the volatility of changing masks and their ability to distort meaning.

Throughout the film trilogy, Salander's silence and visually significant masquerade construct her communication in terms of ambiguity, and at the end of the third volume, *Luftslottet som sprängdes*, it reaches its culmination when she appears in court dressed in conspicuous, gothic-inspired punk attire to challenge the conspirators who have rendered her silent. The high angle of the camera following her route from her cell along the prison corridor gradually moves to a low angle position thus foretelling the publically acknowledged shift of power and the change of status towards which she is walking (*LSS* 1:33:12–1:33:35). Kaiser (2013: 43) interprets Salander's punk clothing in terms of "ambiguous self-fashioning" as a "strategic parody of the way in which the media had been labeling her". However, when seen in the wider context of the films, the punk clothing becomes more than a commentary on her demonisation by the press: it is a symbolic sign that draws on ironic and hyperbolic masquerade with the purpose of drawing attention to processes through which subjectivities are constructed and represented.

The fantastic punk outfit relates to Salander's evasive resistance in two ways: first, it creates an explicitly visual and visible link with Salander's subversive agency and the rebellion associated with punk culture. As a reference to the punk subculture of the 1970s and the rebellion and hatred of the establishment that punks expressed through their music, language, behaviour and overall media image, the punk costume represents a place from which to voice a critique of social oppression. Moreover, the retro-punk costume functions as a reference across time, a strategic masquerade that points back to the game of secrecy of the cold war era and the 1970s when Alexander Salashenko,

Lisbeth's father, was given a new identity and secret hiding place in Sweden (for Punk and nostalgia, see Reynolds 2011). The gothic-inspired outfit is an ambiguous culmination point in which past and present, Salander's personal victimization and her violent agency, her silencing and the end of her silence, merge.

Second, the punk outfit associates with her dragon tattoo and the paradoxical symbolic meanings it embodies. With the hairstyle, the rivets like scales and the black-green colour, Salander's outfit is a public replica of her hidden dragon tattoo. The tattoo, ingrained in her flesh, serves as a reference to her traumatic experiences which until now have remained private, concealed and unrecognized. The punk outfit, instead, is a public manifestation of what has remained hidden until the court case and marks her transfer from marginalization to recognition, as well as her giving up of her avenging identity. The outfit marks the end of evasive silence: at court Lisbeth Salander, dressed in a dragon outfit, tells her story in her own words without distortions. So, the semiotic sign which the dress constitutes becomes a symbol of a concrete place for verbal speech from which Salander's voice is heard in public for the first time. This symbol opens up to different directions that involve language, speech, space and time: in the dragon outfit speech, signification, subjectivity, as well as past and present, meet.

5 Conclusions

In this article, I have discussed the meanings communicated by Lisbeth Salander's dragon tattoo in Stieg Larsson's Millennium trilogy. I have argued that the tattoo 'speaks' a private language of evasion that simultaneously functions as a place of resistance. In the final part of the film trilogy, the dragon materializes in the punk outfit that now represents a public place of speech. Although the trilogy begins as a prototypical victim narrative and follows the victim-turned-agent structure common in crime fiction, Salander reaches beyond the prototypical victimized woman. The dragon tattoo adopts a highly ambiguous role in this process: it is part of herself, a reminder of her traumatic experiences. It serves as a central symbol of her silencing and victim status, but when it turns into a place of speech, it simultaneously turns into a political

statement and critique of the system that allows for the institutional violence through which marginalization is produced in a democratic society.

In the Millennium films, the dragon is a powerful symbol: As a marker of both the contested and redefined subject, it highlights the deficit of democracy. It also represents the other of democracy that demands an incessant redressal of the system. Moreover, it is ambiguous and never stable, constituting re-emerging places for the emergence of repressed voices.

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