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On Punishment and Why We Enjoy It in Fiction: Lisbeth Salander of the Millennium Trilogy and Eli in *Let the Right One In* as Scandinavian Avengers

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Abstract I propose an explanation for why spectators may enjoy excessive punishment when watching fiction, even in Scandinavia where harsh punishment is roundly condemned. Excessive punishment is typically carried out by a vigilante avenger, and in fiction this character is often a fantastic character (e.g., not realistic, taking on superhuman and/or supernatural characteristics). We allow ourselves to enjoy punishment more easily when the character who punishes is clearly fictional. In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* and *Let the Right One In*, fantastic elements seep into an otherwise realistic setting and allow the spectator to fully enjoy the main characters' vigilante revenge. The theory of fictional reliefs posited here holds that this mixture of modes facilitates one of two paths to moral judgment.

Keywords: moral psychology of fiction, revenge

Scandinavian countries are renowned for their humane penal systems. Punishment is downplayed in legal reasoning in favor of rehabilitation: the aim of Scandinavian prisons is to rehabilitate the offenders and successfully re-integrate them in society.¹ In commercial Scandinavian fiction, however, punishment can be quite harsh. For example, at the end of *Let the Right One In* [*Låt Den Rätte Komma In*] (Alfredson 2008) the vampire Eli tears apart the 12-year-old Oskar's bullies, who are themselves adolescents. Who would support killing children who bully? As two legal theorists ask, "Why do Eli's actions feel just?" (Crofts and van Rijswijk 2015: 250). Likewise, in the first film adaptation of Stieg Larsson's Millennium trilogy, Lisbeth Salander takes revenge on her rapist by raping him back: this is an eye-for-an-eye morality far removed from the official consensus of Scandinavian society. The aim of this paper is not to argue that Scandinavians secretly root for harder punishment. Rather, my starting point is an observation made by Arthur A. Raney: when we engage with fiction, we as spectators expect overpunishment.

I propose that the spectator enjoys excessive punishment when watching fiction. In the films considered here, the protagonists who punish wrongdoers excessively are often vigilantes, and vigilante avengers are often fantastic characters: though partially realistic, they take on superhuman and/or supernatural characteristics. Making the vigilante avenger a fantastic character facilitates enjoyment of punishment, because the spectator arguably enjoys overpunishment more easily when the character carrying it out is clearly fictional. I explore how moral psychology sheds light on our moral intuitions and emotions in relation to punishment and discuss two Scandinavian case studies, *Let the Right One In* as well as the Swedish film adaptation of Stieg Larsson's trilogy *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* [*Män Som Hatar Kvinnor*] (Oplev, 2009), *The Girl Who Played With Fire* [*Flickan Som Lekte Med Elden*] (Alfredson, 2009) and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* [*Luftslottet Som Sprängdes*] (Alfredson, 2009). As wholly or partly fantastic characters, Eli and Lisbeth constitute what I elsewhere label fictional reliefs: purely fictional elements that relieve spectators of the obligation to evaluate rationally, allowing them instead to rely on moral intuitions and emotions (Vaage 2013, 2016). These films tease out moral feelings many

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¹ "Prison is not for punishment in Sweden: we get people into better shape," says the director-general of the Swedish prison and probation service in one interview (James 2014).

spectators, especially Scandinavians, might not willingly acknowledge, such as the sheer pleasure of witnessing punishment and revenge.

1. Punishment in Fiction

Perhaps surprisingly, considering that punishment in some form or another features prominently in most commercial fiction, there is not a lot of research on the topic. However, William Flesch offers an explanation for the human interest in narrative, arguing that the punishment of wrongdoers is critical (Flesch 2007). In evolutionary psychology, the dominant view is that human morality evolved in order to facilitate collaboration. Our species developed moral emotions and intuitions to ensure the value of cooperation. One of these moral emotions is righteous anger in response to wrongdoing, which is accompanied by the desire to see the wrongdoer punished and by a feeling of pleasure when witnessing the punishment. Indeed, humans are altruistic or pro-social punishers who desire to see wrongdoers punished even if no harm has been done to them personally (see e.g., Greene 2013: 57-9, 61, 74).

According to Flesch, the tendency to monitor the behavior of others to track their display—or lack—of cooperation is essentially what draws us to fiction:

Human sociality, or the cooperative or altruistic dispositions of most humans, combines these features: we monitor others, tallying the history of their cooperative behavior; we monitor how others respond or fail to respond to what they discover about the history of the cooperative behavior of their fellows; we are moved to punish defectors, even if they do not harm us, and to reward altruists, even if their altruism doesn't benefit us; and we are moved to approve of others who do punish defectors and reward altruism. Much human emotional life consists in and commits us to these responses to the behavior of others, and to these emotions, which impel and guarantee that behavior. Here we have in place all the features needed to explain an interest in narrative. (2007: 127-8, emphasis original)

Thus, our interest in narratives stems from our tendency to want to monitor others, because it is intrinsically interesting to keep track of altruism or its absence. The gratification of witnessing wrongdoers punished is given a central role in this theory, and a critic might reasonably object that this explanation for our interest in all kinds of narratives is flawed, since surely there are stories without punishment. Nevertheless, Flesch's observations may explain our enjoyment of stories with wrongdoing. Indeed, in commercial entertainment, there is typically a villain who is punished at the end.

Additionally, much empirical research on a model known as Affective Disposition Theory (ADT) supports the idea that people enjoy stories where wrongdoers are punished and dislike stories where wrongdoers get away with perceived injustices (cf. Raney 2002, 2011; Raney and Bryant 2002; Zillmann 2000; Zillmann and Bryant 1975; Zillmann and Cantor 1977). Yet Raney found one puzzling effect when investigating enjoyment of the so-called justice sequence, defined as "a series of events that portray the committing of a crime and the ultimate consequences experienced by the offender" (Raney and Bryant 2002: 404). In line with ADT, viewers are expected to enjoy stories where offenders are punished proportionately to the crime they committed, but Raney actually found that

Respondents in the study who enjoyed the drama the most were those who thought that the crime portrayed actually warranted less punishment. Conversely, those who enjoyed the drama the least reported that the villain deserved a greater punishment. ... In other words, viewers of crime dramas might tend to expect and demand (for the sake of enjoyment) a punishment that is greater than what is morally acceptable in reality; only such overpunishment will lead to enjoyment. (2005: 151)

So viewers' enjoyment of justice sequences is not representative of what we would endorse in real life. We want punishment in fiction to be more severe, and we enjoy the story less if it is not.

Why is that so? In his study of violence in film, Henry Bacon points out that punishment used to be a public ritual where the crowd played a central role. Although he warns that "it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between the decreasing of opportunities to observe real violence in public and the increase of representations of violence in fiction," he suggests that "representations of executions seem to have the same double function as public executions: to moralistically impress the people of the mighty arm of law and to give the spectators an experience to be remembered" (Bacon 2015: 19, my emphasis). He ties this to what he labels the revenge instinct: we "might not approve of revenge in real life, but we may nevertheless find it profoundly satisfying when in a story those who have been wronged and humiliated succeed in beating their tormentors – or if someone altruistically punishes them" (19). He suggests that punishment in fiction serves as an emotional substitute for public executions of wrongdoers, since modern social systems led to more humane punishment: whereas criminals are punished behind closed doors – or, in Scandinavia, reformed instead – commercial fiction caters to moral emotions, such as righteous anger, and thus offers violent punishment for consumers to enjoy. If we take Bacon's suggestion seriously, these moral emotions may still play a role in the enjoyment of fiction.

However, in spite of Bacon's suggestion that witnessing punishment is intended to impress the onlooker of the power of the law, vigilante avengers are one of the most clear-cut examples of activation of the revenge instinct in fiction, as he also observes. Bacon argues that this is "one of the most typical narrative patterns in American action films of the past few decades: the ability of the regular law enforcement is seriously flawed and a lonely hero, a vigilante, is needed to punish the baddies" (Bacon 2015: 42). He ties this to the characteristically American resentment of government control and points out that "for one reason or another, law enforcement is not available or is exasperatingly inefficient" (42). One thing to keep in mind is the excessive violence of the vigilante's retribution compared to the punishment that would be meted out by law enforcement even in the U.S. One explanation for the absence of the law in the vigilante narrative may be that it offers the spectator the pleasures of an especially violent revenge.

Bacon sees this narrative pattern as typically American because "it is difficult to think of another film culture which would have produced even in proportional terms so many films in this theme," yet he also recognizes that "the appeal is universal" (Bacon 2015: 43). I think Bacon is right to point to the vigilante's appeal cross-culturally. Although it might be that it is in American film culture that the vigilante has proliferated most prominently, in the transnational exchange of tropes, cycles, genres, and narrative patterns among film cultures, the vigilante has crossed the Atlantic Ocean to Scandinavia.

2. Blending Realism and the Fantastic: The Millennium Trilogy and Let the Right One In Scandinavian crime fiction and film culture are traditionally realistic. Paula Arvas and Andrew Nestingen point out that Scandinavian crime fiction often criticizes social behaviour, national institutions, and gender politics and is gloomy, pensive, and pessimistic. They argue that "combined in the Scandinavian crime novel [these factors] form a unique constellation" (Arvas and Nestingen 2011: 2). In a similar vein, Steven Peacock ties Swedish crime fiction to the "fractured dream of the welfare state" and maintains that the "Swedishness" of Swedish crime fiction is to be found in its verisimilitude and realism (Peacock 2014: 3, 16). He links this to the national film culture, which from the 1960s was dominated by realist aesthetics: "fantasy took second place to a jarring grainy realism that sought to use film if not quite as

agit-prop then certainly as an essay form, a vehicle for comment on injustice and corruption” (Cowie quoted in Peacock 2014: 42). Thus, one central topic in Swedish crime fiction is the character who suffers injustice and inequality at the hands of corrupt representatives of the welfare state.

In contrast to this tradition, Lisbeth and Eli, both violent vigilante avengers, stand out from the social realism of the stories in which they appear, resembling characters in American commercial genre films. Careful analysis teases out their defining features as Scandinavian avengers. Let us concentrate on the Millennium trilogy first. Whereas the Millennium trilogy is characterized by realism in many ways, it also goes beyond realism in its portrayal of Lisbeth in particular. Lisbeth embodies the failings of the Swedish welfare state in that she has wrongfully been subjected to years of abuse by its officials (e.g., she is subject to false imprisonment both in a psychiatric ward as a child and in prison as an adult, declared incapable of managing her own affairs, and raped by her legally appointed guardian). Lisbeth is a victim: disempowered, humiliated, and insignificant in the view of the corrupt powers that be.

However, she is also so much more than this. Lisbeth’s story intriguingly borrows from international film culture, and American film most prominently. Rikke Schubart maps the female action hero in popular cinema and singles out five female archetypes. One of these is the rape-avenger of the rape-revenge cycle dating back to the 1970s, a subtype of exploitation film which was integrated into mainstream American film culture in the 1980s and into blockbuster films in the 1990s (Schubart 2007: 84; see also Clover 1992; Heller-Nicholas 2011; Henry 2014; and Read 2000). The rape-revenge story follows a vigilante narrative pattern, wherein the rape of the female protagonist, typically depicted in gruesome detail, is followed by very violent revenge as she tracks down her rapists and brutally kills them. The rape transforms the main female character and makes her active, transgressive, and violent. One of the best-known examples is *I Spit on Your Grave* (Zarchi 1978).²

The first instalment of the Millennium trilogy is effectively a rape-revenge story. Lisbeth is raped twice by her legal guardian Nils Bjurman and takes revenge on him not by killing him but by brutally raping him back and tattooing “I’m a sadist pig and a rapist” on his stomach. The spectator later learns that this is not the first time Lisbeth has taken the law into her own hands; as a 12-year-old child she threw gasoline on her violent father and set him ablaze to prevent him from physically and sexually abusing her mother. Lisbeth is avenging both her own rape and that of her mother. Although Bjurman is not killed (by Lisbeth), she does kill another serial rapist and murderer, Martin Vanger. Lisbeth could save him but instead watches him burn to death. She is scolded for this by her partner, the journalist Michael Blomkvist, who tries to argue that Vanger was a victim of horrible circumstances – most prominently, a father who was himself a serial rapist and killer, and who taught Vanger to participate in his crimes from the age of sixteen. Lisbeth, however, brushes this aside and hisses back at Blomkvist to stop talking about victims: Vanger had a choice, as does everyone, and the reason for his behavior was simply that he was a pig who hated women. In this discussion, Blomkvist voices the official Scandinavian view, calling attention to the effects of Vanger’s upbringing and thus suggesting that he too should be helped. Lisbeth’s response is one of righteous anger and vindictiveness, typical of a vigilante avenger. Their discussion is an explicit articulation of the clash between the vengeful Lisbeth and a reasoned, normative view articulated by Blomkvist.

The Millennium trilogy is a changing mix of genres that includes aspects of detective, thriller, fantasy, and espionage novels and films (see e.g., Fister 2013; Leffler 2013; and

² There are rape-revenge exploitation films to be found in a Scandinavian context in the 1970s too, such as *Thriller – en grym film* (*Thriller: A Cruel Picture*) (Vibenius 1973).

O'Donoghue 2013). Notably, Lisbeth adds the most markedly unrealistic element to the story; a composite character borrowing from all these genres, she evokes clearly fictional associations. In the second instalment, moreover, Lisbeth breaks free of the constraints of realism. When she tracks down her father, Zalachenko, who is at the root of all of her problems, the story about her transforms into an action film. The portrayal of Lisbeth in the Swedish adaptation of the trilogy (e.g., her black clothes and her hard, muscular body) arguably derives from Hollywood female action heroines. Remarking on the two film adaptations of this novel, Philippa Gates maintains that whereas the Swedish film began an "'internationalisation process' of the character of Salander by enacting many mainstream (that is, Hollywood) tropes," the "American [remake of the first instalment by David Fincher] pushed Salander firmly into the role of superhero and action babe" (Gates 2013: 210-11). However, Gates overlooks the many action heroine elements present already in the original Swedish novels, which refer abundantly to fiction film whenever Lisbeth takes center stage. For instance, when she decides to find her father: "She was talking to herself. And in a voice she had heard once in a film, she said: *Daaaaddyyyy, I'm coming to get yooooou*" (Larsson 2015a: 498).

Indeed, Lisbeth strongly recalls the Daughter, one of the female archetypes identified by Schubart in popular cinema, whose prototype is found in *La Femme Nikita* (Besson 1990) and its American remake *Point of No Return* (Badham 1993). Although transgressive and violent, this character learns to use her feminine attributes as assets, thus transforming from a girl with a "wrong" masculinity to an acceptable, conventionally feminine woman. Lisbeth's debt to the Daughter archetype, as well as her deviation from it, is apparent in her transformation at the end of the first instalment. Here Lisbeth masquerades as Irene Nesser, taking on a traditionally feminine persona to travel internationally and put her hacker skills to use in a massive con operation that leaves her a billionaire. But contrary to forerunners such as *Nikita*, Lisbeth's transformation is only external. She knowingly masquerades as Nesser.³ When she returns to Sweden with a fat savings account, her blonde wig, high heels, and designer miniskirt are gone, and the old Lisbeth in her black hoodie and skinny jeans is back; she has not really changed in the way that *Nikita* changes.

In many ways, Lisbeth epitomizes the action heroine, playfully taking up a number of conventions in the wave of action films with strong, violent female characters in the 1980s and 90s. As Jeffrey A. Brown points out, one of the strongest distinguishing conventions of the action heroine in film is her relationship to her father (Brown 2011: 76). Schubart also explores how either the Daughter's strength stems from her relationship to her father, on whom she has had to rely excessively, or her masculine qualities are the result of having had to fend for herself in a distorted upbringing (Schubart 2007: 210). Lisbeth's strength can indeed be tied to her troubled childhood and to her father, who takes on the monstrous features of the supervillain in this story. He even shoots his own daughter several times and buries her (alive, as it turns out). It is when Lisbeth faces her father and his ally, Lisbeth's half-brother Niedermann, that the trilogy is most similar to American action film.

Niedermann brings to mind 1980s action heroes, especially those of Arnold Schwarzenegger, most prominently in the *Terminator* films. Niedermann is a giant, presented as an almost robot-like fighting machine; he has a neurological disorder rendering him incapable of feeling pain. Lisbeth's strength is presented as biologically related to these two

³ Related to Schubart's critical analysis of the Daughter stereotype, which she sees as not subverting traditional gender roles at all, is the often ambivalent reception of Lisbeth among feminists: does Lisbeth truly subvert gender roles? See, e.g., the essays collected in King and Smith (2012). For a discussion of masquerading female characters as subversive, see Brown (2011: 20ff).

villains. Perhaps it is this kinship that enables her to rise from the grave in which her father has dumped her and, as the last survivor or Final Girl of the horror film, seek out the monsters for a final confrontation (cf. Clover 1992). Half-dead from numerous injuries, she has a go at her father with an axe in a sequence that is far removed from sober, politically minded social critique: this is the Millennium trilogy turned slasher film. Even in the novel, she is described as looking “like something from a horror film” (Larsson 2015a: 560). Indeed, in the novel (but not the film), the fictional elements are carried one step further in Niedermann’s distorted vision of the seething Lisbeth, covered in her own blood and dirt, as a vicious mythological creature:

the creature on the floor was no girl, but a being that had come back from the other side of the grave who could not be conquered with human strength or weapons known to man.

The transformation from human being to corpse had already begun. Her skin had changed into a lizard-like armour. Her bared teeth were piercing spikes for ripping chunks of meat from her prey. Her reptilian tongue shot out and flicked around her mouth. Her bloody hands had razor-sharp claws ten centimetres long. He could sense her eyes glowing. He could hear her growling low and saw her tense her muscles to pounce at his throat.

He saw clearly that she had a tail that curled and ominously began to whip the floor (2015a:561, emphasis original).

In addition to the adoption of action and slasher film motifs, the story also draws on other genres and conventions. Lisbeth alludes to Pippi Longstocking, a child superhero with supernatural powers – she can even lift a horse! There are direct references to the Longstocking stories in the trilogy. For example, when Lisbeth buys a luxury flat under a false name, the doorbell says V. Kulla; Pippi’s house is Villa Kulla. Additionally, the characterization of Lisbeth borrows from the countercultural hacker chick of science fiction film as well as the first feminist private investigators, models of “independence and resistance,” as Barbara Fister argues (Fister 2013: 42; see also Povlsen and Waade 2009). In sum, Lisbeth’s characterization, even in the novels and the Swedish adaptations, draws on myriad conventions from a range of fictional genres, such as action, slasher and exploitation film, science fiction, and crime stories.

These fictional conventions are fantastical, in contrast to the realism typical of Swedish crime fiction. The trilogy as a whole is socially realistic and makes claims to truth, as social realism typically does (Vaage 2017). For example, the Millennium trilogy can be seen as a critique of the welfare state in revealing its corruption, and in particular in its focus on the violence towards women in contemporary Swedish society. In spite of the critical edge of this trilogy, its fictionality is flaunted through the character Lisbeth Salander. The range of allusions to clearly fictional genres constitutes a self-reflexive element through which this work advertises its status as fiction. Thus, the spectator is encouraged to enjoy the extreme retribution for which Lisbeth is responsible: fictionality is what supplies a license to do so. This is the fictional relief at work.

A similar mix of social realism and the fantastic is found in *Let the Right One In*, a film scholars identify as a critique of the failings of the welfare state reminiscent of the Millennium trilogy. Whereas Lisbeth took on various action heroine conventions, in *Let the Right One In* a vigilante vampire is needed to set things straight. The 12-year-old Oskar is severely bullied at school in a social realist coming-of-age drama with firm roots in Scandinavian film culture. However, into this tale of social realism an eerie supernatural element is introduced: things change when the vampire Eli moves in next-door. Eli befriends Oskar, urges him to fend for himself, and assures him that if things turn really bad, she can

help him. Empowered by this friendship, Oskar turns violent and hits one of his bullies. When the bullies retaliate, it is Eli who acts as the story's final avenger in the film's splatter-film-style justice sequence. Rochelle Wright points out that the film "simultaneously draws on and departs from common themes and motifs of indigenous Swedish film as well as vampire film tradition, combining elements of the horror film, the coming-of-age story and the realistic socio-psychological drama" (Wright 2010: 56).

Within the broader tradition of horror, J. M. Tyree argues that horror film comments allegorically on historical trauma; he quotes Nina Auerbach, who asserts that each age "gets the vampire it deserves" (Auerbach quoted in Tyree 2009: 32). The 1980s was a time of economic decline in Sweden, and in *Let the Right One In*, "set in 1982, the failures of the welfare state are apparent in [the fictional low-income council estate] Blackeberg's collection of lonely figures, including Oskar and his mother" (Crofts and van Rijswijk 2015: 253; see also Hakola 2015). Oskar is bullied and isolated – the Swedish "Nanny state as empty nest," as Tyree puts it, unable to take proper care of its inhabitants (Tyree 2009: 35). Crofts and van Rijswijk argue that Eli is an impossible figure in this social realist setting, without whom Oskar's hope of justice is slim (Crofts and van Rijswijk 2015: 269).

In the *Millennium* trilogy and *Let the Right One In*, then, the social realism typical of both Scandinavian crime and the coming-of-age story is combined with clearly fictional, fantastic elements. This is how the vigilante avenger is integrated into Scandinavian film culture. I have explored the *Millennium* trilogy in greater detail, because Eli is obviously a fantastic character – she is, after all, a vampire. In both cases, it is the introduction of elements borrowed from international film culture and American commercial film in particular – though the vampire did, of course, originate in Europe—that seems to open up and allow for enjoyment of vigilante revenge. The avenger is a clearly fictional character with a combination of supernatural and/or superhuman characteristics.⁴

3. Vigilantism and Fictionality

However, we are still in need of an explanation: Why is it important to make the vigilante undeniably fictional in this context? Perhaps it is because when viewers engage with a story that they know is fiction, they rely heavily on moral intuitions and emotions and bracket the principled moral reasoning they feel obliged to make use of in real life (Vaage 2013, 2016). According to the so-called dual-process model of morality, there are two routes a moral evaluation can take: one a quick-and-dirty intuitive route and the other a slower and more cognitively demanding route through rational deliberation (see e.g., Greene 2013). I want to suggest that when engaging with works neatly categorized as fiction, people rely heavily on the intuitive route. Indeed, the difference between moral evaluation in real life and in relation to fictional stories is emphasized by vigilante narratives such as the *Millennium* trilogy and *Let the Right One In*: whereas the majority of Scandinavians support the humane penal system in principle, in fiction they might still allow themselves to be stirred to righteous anger against the wrongdoer and to enjoy punishment in the subsequent justice sequences. Making the vigilante avenger a clearly fictional character, a fictional relief who draws on conventions from action and vampire genres, facilitates such enjoyment of severe punishment.

These might not be moral emotions of which we are particularly proud. The relative lack of literature on antipathy towards the villain in stories and the enjoyment of punishment

⁴ In her discussion of female action heroes, Lisa Purse points out that powerful female characters appear most frequently in films with either a comical and/or fantastical setting, thus setting "the potentially culturally disturbing possibility of female agency and physical power at a distance from our everyday contemporary reality" (Purse 2011: 81). It is beyond the scope of the present paper to discuss the gendered aspect of these Scandinavian avengers.

of such characters is one indication that this is an aspect of our emotional engagement with fiction that we are not keen to acknowledge. Carol Clover makes a related point in her discussion of rape-revenge films such as *I Spit on Your Grave*, reminding us “that lots and lots of the movies and television dramas that we prefer to think of in higher terms are in fact funded by impulses we would rather deny”; indeed, she celebrates the progressive potential of this particular film because it “closes all the intellectual doors and windows and leaves us staring at the *lex talionis* [law of retaliation] unadorned” (Clover 1992: 151). Stripped down to its grim two-part structure, this classic rape-revenge film viscerally exposes the horror of rape and the protagonist’s undiluted rage as she seeks retaliation. Another way to put this is that it is difficult to escape from extreme emotions and intuitions when watching rape-revenge film, such as the pleasure of witnessing violent punishment.⁵ Thus the rape-revenge film might confront the spectator with intuitions and impulses ordinarily unacknowledged or denied.

Anecdotally, in discussions with students, both in Norway and the UK, my inquiries about enjoyment of revenge sequences usually elicit a nervous giggle, suggesting to me that the students do perhaps enjoy them but are not sure whether it is acceptable to admit this. We have been taught not to revel in antipathy, righteous anger, and vindictive retribution. The nervous laughter may point to the presence of emotional responses about which we do not really know how to talk. The dual-process model of morality can explain the response: by granting oneself a fictional relief through film, we may enjoy severe punishment intuitively, although rationally we do not endorse it. Asked about this, students feel conflicted and giggle nervously because they cannot justify or defend their response rationally.

Jonathan Haidt, a proponent of the dual-process model for real-life morality, would perhaps say that the students are morally dumbfounded. Haidt and colleagues explain how one can sometimes condemn acts that one intuitively perceives as wrong when there is nothing morally wrong with the act in question rationally speaking. The respondents are morally dumbfounded when they try to find rational-sounding reasons to justify a response that simply is not rational (Wheatley and Haidt 2005; see also Haidt 2012). In a similar manner, my students probably perceive the punishment as morally right intuitively, but on closer inspection, they cannot justify their response, and the puzzled giggling ensues.

The important role played by fictional elements in vigilante narratives could also explain the difference between the endings of the two stories discussed here. Let the *Right One In* exhibit clear-cut vigilante revenge in its final justice sequence, in which Oskar’s bullies are killed by Eli. This ending fully adheres to the vigilante narrative pattern: as pointed out by several critics, Eli’s revenge is indeed perceived as just. I propose that it is the clearly fantastic nature of the avenger that makes us perceive it as such. I doubt the spectator would have enjoyed watching a realistically portrayed human being tearing Oskar’s bullies to shreds or seeing Oskar himself killing them single-handedly. Perhaps a film with such an ending would have left its spectators bewildered and shocked from having witnessed a human being’s descent from victim to aggressor. In their interesting discussion of this story, Crofts and van Rijswick argue that Oskar transforms as his innocence is corrupted; the revenge goes beyond self-defense (Crofts and van Rijswick 2015: 260). Although Oskar apparently condones Eli’s actions – in the film’s final sequence we see him happily leaving Blackenberg with her – it is also essential that it is not Oskar himself who kills.

Interestingly, in the last installation of the Millennium trilogy, Lisbeth leaves it to the legal system to punish her aggressors. Admittedly, she does not do this by choice, since she is imprisoned and must prove that she did not murder three people. Nevertheless, in Lisbeth’s story, justice is ultimately restored by the law. For the trial, Lisbeth again masquerades.

⁵ For a careful discussion of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* as a rape-revenge film, and enjoyment of Lisbeth’s revenge, see Henry (2013).

Indeed, in the Swedish adaptation, she puts on her most fantastic cyber-punk costume: her black hair in a defiant mohawk, she sports dark make-up (blackened eyes and black lipstick), numerous long metal chains and spiked collars around her neck, spiked belts around her hips, tight, shiny, metallic pants and platform boots. In the novel, Blomkvist is reminded “of a vampire in some pop-art movie from the ‘60s” (Larsson 2015b: 588). Lisbeth is thus perhaps at her most fantastic when her case is tried before a judge in a court of law. Donning this outfit might be a strategy to bedazzle her opponents and to make them believe that the case will be easily won, since she is clearly crazy and her claims outrageous (Bergman 2012). Alternatively, it might be an expression of the strength required of Lisbeth to trust the law. Having repeatedly suffered injustice in the law’s name, facing her tormentors in a courtroom and relying on a judge to make the right call must be the hardest thing Lisbeth has ever had to do. Her greatest victory is perhaps to make the judge listen; she wins.

As a little emotional treat for the spectators, after the trial Lisbeth the violent avenger is back when she stumbles upon her villainous brother Niedermann and a final fight between them takes place. Despite this one last act of violence, Lisbeth’s character arc leaves her in a state of relative normalization: in the first novel/film, she transforms from realistic victim to fantastic vigilante avenger, but the story ends with some degree of hope that she might settle down as a regular citizen. Although one can imagine more fantastic adventures in wait for Lisbeth the action hero, one can also hope that, as a regular human being, Lisbeth will find peace and be able to live her life rather than having to fight for it. In contrast to Eli, who is an entirely fantastic character, Lisbeth is a composite character, partly human and realistic, and partly taking on some action hero conventions. Thus, whereas the ending of *Let the Right One In* is in line with the vigilante pattern, the ending of the Millennium trilogy is more complicated and points to the ability of the law to ultimately get things right.

One might speculate that the degree to which a vigilante must be portrayed as clearly fictional, or even fantastic, depends on cultural context. In some cultural contexts, enjoyment of punishment might be less taboo than in Scandinavia. Bacon’s historical overview points to the vigilante in Western films, such as *Shane* (Stevens 1953), and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ford 1962), and also in the later *Dirty Harry* films. In particular, the geographically expansive setting and the ideology encouraged in the American Western film could hardly be more different from contemporary Sweden. Additional research on the function of the vigilante avenger, the rewards he or she offers the spectator, and the variants of this narrative pattern across cultural contexts would enhance cognitive and moral analyses of these phenomena. Similar studies of vigilante avengers in other cultural contexts that compare fictional depictions to the dominant views on punishment in that culture as well as empirical studies of the audience’s view on punishment and enjoyment of justice sequences in fiction would either support or invalidate the suggestion I have made in this paper: that clearly fictional conventions facilitate Scandinavians’ enjoyment of the excessive punishment in *Let the Right One In* and the Millennium trilogy.

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