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Feminisms in Pop Final

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A Hacking Job Worth Dying For:

Victims and Vigilantes in the Dragon Tattoo Series and Steubenville, Ohio

When Stieg Larsson was a young man living in Sweden, he witnessed a group of his friends gang rape a young girl. This event changed him, and he spent his life regretting his inaction towards the crime—he even approached the girl later and apologized for not having acted, to which the girl responded: “I will never forgive you.”¹ That girl’s name was Lisbeth. Decades after this instance of onlooker passivity, thousands of miles and a continent away, a similar incident occurs in the small town of Steubenville, Ohio. A girl is raped while unconscious by multiple young men. This happens in a party scenario with onlookers just like Larsson and, again, no one does anything. The real Lisbeth becomes a fictional Lisbeth Salander, a hacker seemingly created to right a real wrong. The hacker group Anonymous chimes in by unearthing incriminating evidence against the popular and protected Steubenville rapists. At the end of *The Dragon Tattoo* film series, Lisbeth finally sees justice after a life of pure hostility. In March 2013, two men are convicted of the rape of Jane Doe. Justice is finally served to

¹ Patricia Yancey Martin, “State Complicity in Men’s Violence Against Women.” *In Men Who Hate Women and Women Who Kick Their Asses: Stieg Larsson’s Millennium Trilogy in Feminist Perspective* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012), 39.

Lisbeth Salander and Jane Doe, but in neither case is it an easy feat. The *Dragon Tattoo* series and the Steubenville rape case serve to remind us that, as much as we would like to forget it, we still live in a rape culture. A feminist critique of the Swedish films questions how necessary it is for viewers to see rape on screen when it is ever-present, but cases like Steubenville serve to remind us that sometimes the public (and the justice system) has to see it to believe it. Both the films and Steubenville show us how “seeing it” through physical evidence is the best way for victims to be believed and justice to be enforced, otherwise we recede into a culture of shamelessness that fosters passivity towards violence against women. In the end, the takeaway from both these stories is that, when it comes to rape culture, it is time we take matters into our own hands.

In the original *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* book (aptly titled *Men who hate women* in its original Swedish) Stieg Larsson prefaces each section with a statistic on violence against women. Part two opens with: “Forty-six percent of the women in Sweden have been subjected to violence by a man.”² These statistics serve as bookends between chapters but also connect a fictional narrative to a pressing reality. The Swedish film adaptations do not quote these statistics, but the realistic way in which they are shot (particularly the second and third films, directed by Daniel Alfredson) are enough to arouse a similar discomfort with the fact that we live in a rape culture, still. In her review of the final film, critic Manohla Dargis writes that Alfredson’s work “is again essentially functional ... He doesn’t prettify the violence in either movie, which might be

² Kristine De Welde, “Kick-Ass Feminism: Violence, Resistance, and Feminist Avengers in Larsson’s Trilogy.” *In Men Who Hate Women and Women Who Kick Their Asses* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012), 16

unintentional but makes them feel more honest.”³ This honesty is carried through in the narrative by the sheer amount of women who are either survivors of rape or victims of violence by men: the first film focuses on Harriet Vanger’s story—her abusers (her father and brother Gottfried and Martin Vanger) are serial killers responsible for dozens, potentially hundreds of rapes and murders. The second film, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, focuses on a different sexual abuse storyline: that of government officials hiring illegally trafficked prostitutes. The main survivor story, which is sprinkled across the trilogy but resolved in the third and final film *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest*, is Lisbeth Salander’s. In this film, we are finally given access to the full picture of her past—with sexual abusers ranging from her own father, her caretaker at the mental hospital she was committed to and, of course, her most recent state-appointed guardian. Part four of the novel *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* opens with this statistic: “Ninety-two percent of women in Sweden who have been subjected to sexual assault have not reported the most recent violent incident to the police.”⁴ But this is not just about Sweden: the success of the books, and what led to its highly anticipated American adaptation, lies in the universality of these percentages. In the United States, this percentage is still high, at about sixty percent.⁵ One of those sixty percent *could* have been Jane Doe, the victim at the center of the Steubenville rape case, had she not been told of the images and tweets posted online about what happened at the party she

³ Manohla Dargis, “In Trilogy’s Finale, Tough Girl Rages Against Villains of Society,” *The New York Times*, October 28, 2010, accessed December 4, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/29/movies/29girl.html>.

⁴ De Welde, “Kick-Ass Feminism,” 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*

attended (and blacked out during) in the small football town in Ohio.⁶ Unlike Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, Steubenville is a town of about 18,400 with a declining population.⁷ Yet, the problems that plague Stockholm in the films and Steubenville in reality are the same: there are a lot of men there who hate women.

Criticism of the Stieg Larsson books (also known as the *Millennium Series*) came largely from feminist scholars who felt that they simply serve as a reminder that “nowhere is safe. Just as we might encounter sexual harassment and assault at any moment of our lives, no matter where we are, such novels remind us that we cannot escape that reality, plunging us directly into it when we least expect it.”⁸ Of course, the films that followed only reinforce the commonplace nature of assault, Dargis herself writing that the success of the Swedish films shows that “danger is familiar business for women” and “proves that women in trouble never go out of style”⁹ Yet, both the books and films have some feminists asking the question: “Can’t we challenge the rape culture we live in without reproducing its disturbing and violent imagery?”¹⁰ The answer is: no. No, we cannot. Why? Because of Steubenville.

⁶ Kristen Gwynne, “How Anonymous Hacking Exposed Steubenville High School Rape Case,” *Truthout*, January 12, 2013, accessed December 4, 2013, <http://truthout.org/news/item/13878-how-anonymous-hacking-exposed-steubenville-high-school-rape-case>

⁷ Juliet Macur and Nate Schweber, “Rape Case Unfolds on Web and Splits City,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 2012, accessed December 4, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/17/sports/high-school-football-rape-case-unfolds-online-and-divides-steubenville-ohio.html>

⁸ Abby Ferber, “Always Ambivalent: Why Media is Never Just Entertainment.” *In Men Who Hate Women and Women Who Kick Their Asses* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012), 12

⁹ Dargis, “In Trilogy’s Finale, Tough Girl Rages.”

¹⁰ Ferber, “Always Ambivalent,” 12.

Before 2012 made Steubenville a household name to feminist and mainstream news outlets, the industrial city was proudly praised by locals as “hometown to the Rat Pack crooner Dean Martin [and] the pornographic movie actress Traci Lords.”¹¹ It was also well known for having a powerhouse football team with (as we now know) a *little too much* power.¹² The reason why this case had so much media attention was not because rape is uncommon—as we have established, rape is far *too* common: in fact, 1 out of 6 American women has been the victim of rape or attempted rape.¹³ The reason why Steubenville became popular is that there was overwhelming evidence of the rape, ranging from tweets, Instagram photos, and even a video in which one of the participants, Michael Nodianos, describes what just happened to Jane Doe, laughing psychotically at how the girl was “so raped right now” and “deader than a doornail.”¹⁴ Martin Vanger, the serial killer in *The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo* coldly explains why he rapes and kills women, saying that it’s for “the sex, mainly ... [the death is] only a logical consequence of the rape.”¹⁵ When asked why, Vanger says, “Why not?”¹⁶ When Nodianos is asked “What if that was your daughter?” he responds, “If that was my daughter, I wouldn’t

¹¹ Macur and Schweber, “Rape Case Unfolds on Web and Splits City.”

¹² Eli Epstein, “How the Steubenville Rape Case Became a Web Storm,” *MSN News*, January 8, 2013, accessed December 4, 2013, <http://news.msn.com/us/how-steubenville-rape-case-became-a-web-storm>.

¹³ RAINN, 2012, <http://www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/sexual-assault-victims>.

¹⁴ Katie Baker, “Anonymous Leaks Horrifying Video of Steubenville High Schoolers Joking About Raping a Teenager Deader Than Trayvon Martin,” *Jezebel*, January 2, 2013, accessed December 4, 2013, <http://jezebel.com/5972553/anonymous-leaks-horrifying-video-of-steubenville-high-schoolers-joking-about-raping-a-teenager-deader-than-trayvon-martin>

¹⁵ *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Film. Directed by Niels Arden Oplev. Stockholm: Zodiak Entertainment, 2009.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

care. I'd just let her be dead.”¹⁷ How very Gottfried Vanger of him. It is important to note that Nodianos was *not even* one of the rapists—although he does mention the names of both convicted men, Trent Mays and Ma'lik Richmond, in the video. Disturbing as the twelve-minute video of the jock is, it was essential to justice, as “the case became national news because graphic cell-phone photos and video ... spread on social media.”¹⁸ As Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine stated, such recordings have created “an electronic barrier that divorces us from shame,”¹⁹ and ultimately demands accountability.

The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest culminates in the final trial in which Lisbeth Salander and relevant parties are questioned about her past and current mental state. Peter Teleborian, the man who was in charge of Lisbeth's mental health during her childhood, testifies against her, stating that her “so-called autobiography lacks all credibility” because “it includes statements about people that are outlandish. In all, the material exemplifies the paranoid schizophrenia [she] suffers from.”²⁰ He specifically mentions her writing on the “alleged” rape by her guardian Nils Bjurman, arguing that the “descriptions, with all the excessive detail, are a classic example of the bizarre delusions generally displayed by children.”²¹ He also calls her “delusional” and “reality-challenged.”²² Later in the trial, Lisbeth's lawyer reveals the evidence of the Bjurman

¹⁷ Baker, “Anonymous Leaks Horrifying Video.”

¹⁸ Erin McClam, “As Rape Trial Opens, Prosecutor Says Girl Was ‘Too Impaired to Say No,’” *NBC News*, March 13, 2013, accessed December 4, 2013, http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/03/13/17286184-as-rape-trial-opens-prosecutor-says-girl-was-too-impaired-to-say-no

¹⁹ Tracy Connor, “Steubenville Case: Four More Charged, Including Superintendent, Volunteer Coach,” *NBC News*, November 25, 2013, accessed December 4, 2013.

²⁰ *The Girl who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*. Film. Directed by Daniel Alfredson. Stockholm: Nordisk Film, 2009.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

rape: a video recording that goes on for two hours. The judges only need to watch it for a few moments to understand what went on. The lead judge then asks Lisbeth why she recorded this assault, and she responds: “This was the only way to get evidence. The only way to make him stop.”²³ Lisbeth’s vigilante tactics for acquiring evidence echo the methods used to unravel Steubenville. Jane Doe’s story was also repeatedly deemed nonsense. A football coach, for example, stated that “the rape was just an excuse” because, “What else are you going to tell your parents when you come home drunk like that and after a night like that? ... She had to make up something.”²⁴ Although Jane Doe herself is not a hacker, she (fortunately) had hacker allies. A blogger, Alexandria Goddard, heard of her case and unearthed a deleted Instagram photo of the night of the rape, which was then disseminated by hacker group Anonymous and caught the attention of the mainstream media, and is now the infamous photo we think of when we think of the Steubenville rape case.²⁵ This image, along with deleted tweets by witnesses of the crime, became public knowledge and elevated the case to national status: the unabashed aggression of the Steubenville football players having sealed the deal.

The important distinction between the fictional narrative of the films and the reality of Steubenville is in the perpetrator’s attitudes towards the crimes: in the films, the rapists (Martin Vanger, Nils Bjurman, and even Peter Teleborian) do everything in their power to keep their sexual crimes private; with Steubenville, the football players instantly publicized photographs and tweets concerning the rape.²⁶ Furthermore: the athletes only

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Gwynne, “How Anonymous Hacking Exposed Steubenville.”

²⁵ Epstein, “How the Steubenville Rape Case Became a Web Storm.”

²⁶ Josh Harkinson, “Exclusive: Meet the Woman Who Kicked Off Anonymous’ Anti-Rape Operations,” *Mother Jones*, May 13, 2013, accessed December 4, 2013,

seemed to understand that the publishing of such photos and videos (and the act itself) was wrong *after the fact*.²⁷ Speaking of a different case, the Abu Ghraib debacle of 2004 (in which photos surfaced of US soldiers posing as they tortured and raped Iraqi prisoners²⁸), gender theorist Judith Butler states that this kind of unashamed attitude is a product of two things: what she calls “the digitalization of evil” (meaning the digital documentation of evil acts, such as what occurred in Steubenville), and the “banalization of evil” (the normalization of evil acts and the reason the football players posted rape photos without a second thought.)²⁹ Activist and writer Susan Sontag, also writing about Abu Ghraib, attributes actions like these to a “culture of shamelessness”³⁰ seen in American masculinity, particularly blossoming in environments such as the military, and also arguably reproduced in sports communities such as high-school football teams. But it is not just an American problem—Sontag goes on to compare contemporary incidents of the photography of torture and rape to “German soldiers in the Second World War [who] took photographs of the atrocities they were committing in Poland and Russia.”³¹ In an essay titled “State Complicity in Men’s Violence Against Women,” writer Patricia Yancey Martin argues that Larsson’s own passivity towards such a culture of

<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/05/anonymous-rape-steubenville-rehtaeh-parsons-oprollredroll-opjustice4rehtaeh>

²⁷ Julia Dahl, “Steubenville Rape Trial: ‘These Kids Didn’t Know What They Were Seeing Was Rape,’” *CBS News*, March 18, 2013, accessed December 4, 2013, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/steubenville-rape-trial-these-kids-didnt-know-what-they-were-seeing-was-rape-says-advocate>

²⁸ Susan Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2004, accessed December 10, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html>

²⁹ Judith Butler, “Torture and The Ethics of Photography.” In *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (2007), 957.

³⁰ Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others.”

³¹ Ibid.

shamelessness is reminiscent of the attitudes of the “good Germans” of World War II “who stood by as Hitler and the Nazi party party ... [rounded] up Jews and others.”³² Such is the diversity of men who hate women.

In the final film of the *Dragon Tattoos* series, journalist Erika Berger pleads to vigilante writer Mikael Blomkvist that “no job is worth dying for.” Both the films and the Steubenville rape case show us that women are being violated every day, regardless of the images of violence that we are exposed to, and these cases teach us that images of violent crimes actually help in the enforcement of justice for victims of rape. Without such physical accountability, we devolve into a violent, shameless society that is paralyzed in the face of aggression. To answer to Berger’s beckoning: when it comes to the job of preventing such a world and ensuring the elimination of rape, there may very well be an exception.

³² Martin, “State Complicity in Men’s Violence Against Women,” 39.

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The Girl who Played with Fire. Film. Directed by Daniel Alfredson. Stockholm: Zodiak Entertainment, 2009.

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo. Film. Directed by Niels Arden Oplev. Stockholm: Nordisk Film, 2009.

Anonymous Vs. Steubenville. Online vigilante Deric Lostutter helped expose the cover-up in the Steubenville rape case. Now he's facing more jail time than the convicted rapists. By. One night last fall after getting home from his job as a car mechanic, Lostutter launched his first one, OpEducation, posting as KYAnonymous that the school board had "put the students second and monetary gain first," but now Anonymous was on the case. He included a list of the school board member's family names, cell phone numbers, and home addresses "a bit of hacking known as a "dox" to prove it." For Lostutter, Steubenville had echoes of Westboro, Moore, and his own mother's domestic abuse. Steubenville is a city in and the county seat of Jefferson County, Ohio, United States. Located along the Ohio River 33 miles from Pittsburgh, it had a population of 18,659 at the 2010 census. The city's name is derived from Fort Steuben, a 1786 fort that sat within the city's current limits and was named for Prussian military officer Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben. Today, a replica of the fort is open to the public. The Steubenville High School rape occurred in Steubenville, Ohio on the night of August 11, 2012, when a high-school girl, incapacitated by alcohol, was publicly and repeatedly sexually assaulted by her peers, several of whom documented the acts on social media. The victim was transported, undressed, photographed, and sexually assaulted. She was also penetrated vaginally by other students' fingers (digital penetration), an act defined as rape under Ohio law.