

David Fincher's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*

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The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo is the latest from director David Fincher, whose work includes a number of popular films: *The Social Network* (2010), *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), *Fight Club* (1999) and *Seven* (1995).

Fincher's new film is based on the crime novel of the same name by Swedish author Stieg Larsson (1954-2004) and was adapted for the screen by Steven Zaillian, the writer behind such films as *Schindler's List* (1993), *Gangs of New York* (2002) and *Moneyball* (2011). An impressive international cast, including Daniel Craig, Rooney Mara, Christopher Plummer, Robin Wright and Stellan Skarsgård, has been assembled to bring the work to life.

As the film opens, journalist Mikael Blomkvist (Craig) has just been convicted of libel against corporate CEO Hans-Erik Wennerström (Ulf Friberg), likely the result of a trap set by Wennerström. Disgraced in the media and out of his job at *Millennium* magazine, Blomkvist is summoned to the island mansion of wealthy industrialist Henrik Vanger (Plummer), ostensibly to write Vanger's memoirs, but in reality to solve a decades-old mystery.

Forty years before, during a dinner party held at his mansion, Henrik Vanger's beloved niece Harriet mysteriously disappeared. She was never seen or heard from again. Extensive police investigations into the matter proved fruitless. The girl simply vanished.

Adding to the mystery, in each of the 40 years since her disappearance, Vanger has received by mail on his birthday a gift of pressed flowers mounted in a picture frame, exactly like the gift which Harriet presented to

him each year prior to her disappearance. Vanger believes that Harriet was murdered and her killer is sending the pictures to torment him.

Blomkvist reluctantly agrees to try and solve the mystery, and is eventually joined in his efforts by an unusual assistant. A young computer hacker with a troubled history, Lisbeth Salander (Mara) is a brilliant but disturbed detective who dresses in mostly black punk-rock chic, with any number of piercings and tattoos. The unlikely partners will slowly begin to uncover the truth behind Harriet's disappearance, as those with an interest in keeping it a secret try to stop them at any cost.

From the beginning, Fincher and his team do a good job of setting out an intriguing story. Fincher has a distinct visual sensibility and a good sense of pacing. The film is suspenseful and compelling without resorting to cheap effects. The director's work tends to avoid the quick cutting common to many of today's Hollywood films, and viewers are given time to contemplate the images and sequences playing out before their eyes, to orient themselves within the world of the film.

Real thought has been put into the imagery and its expressive capabilities. One recalls the cold and sterile quality of the modern home of Martin Vanger (Skarsgård), the current CEO of the family's Vanger Industries, and the gray despair of the older family members' mansions—the Nazi brother Harald living in the shadows, the lonely Henrik. Henrik Vanger brags of his company's former industrial might, which produced most of the railways in Sweden. Now, he complains, they only make fertilizer.

One also gets a sense of why the franchise—Larsson's original trilogy of novels and their Swedish film adaptations from 2009—has found such a large

following. In Fincher’s film, which is well-crafted and pervaded by an atmosphere of intrigue, one encounters numerous wealthy executives—who have apparently made their fortunes through criminal acts and secret combinations—and the intelligent investigators—not police or FBI—who uncover their secrets and fight to bring them down. Why such a story and related themes would find an audience today is no mystery at all.

Unfortunately, there are significant elements in the film and in Larsson’s work with which one has to take issue.

We wrote in a previous comment on Larsson’s work that “One is struck by the violence in the novels. The author depicts scenes of rape, torture and various forms of mayhem in graphic and gratuitous detail, without artistic distancing or much critical insight. One might go so far as to say there are even hints here and there in Larsson’s work of the repugnant ‘torture porn’ genre of horror films. (The Swedish film version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* follows its source in that respect.)”

Unhappily, Fincher’s film continues the trend. When we first meet Lisbeth, she is a ward of the state whose finances are controlled by an attorney appointed as her guardian. The attorney uses his powerful position to exploit and sexually assault the young woman in his care. The lengthy scenes graphically depicting the most brutal acts carried out against Lisbeth, and the no less brutal revenge she exacts against her guardian, are deeply unsettling to watch.

When it comes time to deal with killers, rapists and other anti-social personalities (and Fincher has dealt with them more often than not during his career), a preoccupation only with the physical brutality of their actions has real consequences for the art and for viewers. Nowhere in Fincher’s films does one find any real sense of the social and psychic make-up of an individual capable of such acts. On the contrary, a great deal is obscured by the filmmaker’s approach.

Most disturbing of all is the extent to which audiences are asked to identify with—and be entertained by—the bloody and remorseless acts of vengeance carried out by Lisbeth on her attacker. There is no hint that such actions may have any consequences for Lisbeth’s own psyche beyond utter satisfaction. In fact, the character is something of a superhero, a feminist

vigilante figure through whom the audience is invited to live vicariously. The promotion of such sentiments does no one any good. The filmmakers appeal to and encourage some of the worst instincts in their audience. The bankrupt perspective of identity politics finds expression here.

Whatever Fincher was able to accomplish in the earlier portions of *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* has largely been scrubbed away by the end. None of it adds up to very much, ultimately. Half of what *is* there simply turns one’s stomach.



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