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The female detective as the child who needs to know. Saga Norén as an example of potent yet dysfunctional female detectives in contemporary Nordic Noir

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Abstract: The global popularity of Nordic Noir, such as the Danish/Swedish production Broen, The Danish production Forbrydelsen, its U.S. and U.K. remakes, the Danish/Swedish production The Millennium Trilogy seems to depend on its insistent interest in a set of maladjusted female detectives. The by now seven seasons of the U.S production Homeland have a similar focus. In this essay, we argue that the struggle these female protagonists endure between extreme potency on the one hand and shameful psychic problems on the other is linked to how these female detectives represent the female position in film in general. Turning to traditional and ongoing discussions in feminist film theory, and combining queer studies and sociological and psychoanalytic perspectives with recognition theory (Felski/Coplan), we ask how we as spectators relate to these women in terms of recognition. In line with that, we ask whether these female detectives should be considered feminist icons who challenge traditional gendered poses on film, or whether, due to their dysfunctionalities, they came to represent some kind of otherness that we sympathize with but also fail to identify with.

The global popularity of Nordic Noir seems to depend in no small part on its insistent interest in a set of peculiar, maladjusted female detectives, such as Saga Norén in Broen, Sarah Lund in Forbrydelsen, Lisbeth Salander in The Millennium Trilogy, Kahina Zadi in Midnight Sun (Midnight Sun), Miranda Hilmarson (Top of the Lake: China Girl) or Carrie Mathison in Homeland. Some would describe them as dysfunctional, some would even speak of their suffering a sort of mental disability or mental illness, as we discuss below.

One of the interesting things about these female detectives is that they differ from typical representations of women in film. They seem to be enrolled in

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a constant struggle between a stereotyped masculine potency, on the one hand, that lead us to think of them as disguised men – or women who really are men, as we have seen on film many times before (Kärrholm, 196) – and shameful dys-functionalities on the other. This struggle seems to be linked directly to the way these female detectives represent, or actually fail to represent, the female or male position in general. The female detective functions extremely well at her job as detective while being inadequate and maladjusted when it comes to other areas, mainly in relation to communicative, social and emotional skills. She seems to fail in the social scene, interestingly enough, mainly because she is unable to understand and perform her expected gendered position. In relation to the traditional and ongoing discussions within feminist film theory, and queer studies, one of the inevitable questions seems to be whether these female detectives, due to their dissenting and ambivalent position as not female but not man in women’s clothes either, come to represent a development within female representations on film.

In other words: Have these contemporary female detectives finally been given their own gaze, as earlier feminist critics might have argued, following Laura Mulvey’s 1975/1999 intervention? Do they perform what Judith Halberstam identifies as “female masculinity” (Halberstam), a gender position that actually breaks with the binary gender system of patriarchy? and would it thus be reasonable to talk about them as “feminist icons”? Or do they on the contrary come to represent female masculinity as “the place of pathology” (Halberstam 1998, 9).

Since contemporary Nordic Noir is taking the lead when it comes to the creation of these unfit female detectives, this article will mainly focus on how the detective Saga Norén from the Danish/Swedish TV series, Broen, comes to represent a new set of rules for the depiction of women in Nordic Noir.

Our article will examine how well Saga fits into the typical detective representations of the genre but we will also dwell on comparisons with the UK version of Broen and other contemporary female detectives. Combining processes of recognition, social-role analysis, queer studies and psychoanalytic perspectives, we will discuss whether these female detectives accord with the traditional depictions of the detective and with women in film or whether something new is on the loose.

1 The influence of Mulvey’s psychoanalytic polemic, “Visual Culture and Narrative Cinema” has been well documented, as has E. Ann Kaplan’s more sociological expansion of Mulvey’s examination of the predominantly male gaze in Hollywood Cinema in her Women in Film: Both Sides of the Camera.
Feminist icons?

The notion of the maladjusted detective is certainly not a new phenomenon in Nordic Noir. The two most famous male detectives in Nordic Noir, Kurt Wallander and Martin Beck, are both characterized as not only melancholic, depressive and introspective but also challenged when it comes to their private lives. They both live alone after their divorces and they both have problematic and unresolved relationships with their grown-up children. They tend to drink and smoke too much, they suffer from various lifestyle-related diseases (abdominal pain, diabetes, chronic colds, and finally for Wallander, Alzheimer’s disease). The traditional male detective actually acts, feels and looks like these female detectives, since they both seem to be maladjusted and suffer from different physical and mental diseases. What they also have in common, though, is their manic working routines and their superlative skills as detectives, which appear to be somehow connected to their inability to adapt to the social rules of society. The male detective’s lifestyle diseases and manic working methods are often read as symbolic manifestations of, on the one hand, the defected and inadequate neoliberal state and, on the other hand, postmodern masculinity in crisis (Tapper 2010). As Shane McCorristine points out in his article “The Place of Pessimism in Henning Mankell’s Kurt Wallander Series”:

Wallander’s place in Swedish society is like his place in his own family: non-ambitious, ambivalent and alienated. The collapse of the family structure in much recent crime fiction cannot be stressed enough, for it is the central indicator of how the detective mirrors his place. In the work of Mankell, Arnaldur Indriðason and Rankin, for instance, the detective is a divorced middle-aged man who has a troubled young daughter who is drawn towards her dysfunctional father. The father’s guilt over his failure as a parent merely disguises the remarkably Oedipal structure of this type of crime fiction. (Mccorristine 2011)

Some of the same characteristics apply to the famous British detective Sherlock Holmes, who according to Sara Kärholm is the very definition of the classical detective, someone who is extremely intelligent, a bit paranoid but also “en vidareutveckling av flanören som litterär gestalt” (Kärholm 2011, 55). In contrast to the melancholy detective such as Wallander and Beck he appears eccentric and almost autistic. In BBC’s post-modern version (2010–2017) for example, Holmes appears dauntingly potent but at the same time emotionally blunted, hyper alert,

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2 In the British BBC version of Wallander, the detective Wallander suffers from recurring melancholy and he might even be considered to be clinically depressive. In the Swedish version (2005–2011) the melancholy is much lighter and elusive.
As with Wallander and Beck, Holmes’ dysfunctionalities seem to be the very reason for his potency. Like them, he is not distracted by ordinary attachments, enabling him to keep trying to puzzle out the intricacies of a case. These male detectives, then, are brilliant not in spite of their outsider position but because of it. But what happens when we compare these male dysfunctional detectives with the now quite common female ones?

Looking at Saga Norén from the Scandinavian version of Broen (2011–2015), it is clear that she at first glance embodies an otherwise typically masculine genre ideal. Unlike the female detectives in the film and TV-versions of the Scandinavian femi-crime wave such as Anna Pihl (DK), Dicte (DK), Modus (S) and Fjällbacka Murders (S) – she is not torn between family life and career (Klitgaard Povlsen 2010, 44) and she shares the traditional male detective’s inability to sustain and nourish a normal family life. Like many of the other female detectives in contemporary Nordic Noir she lives on her own without any children. In many ways Saga is presented as a female version of Sherlock Holmes since she is hyper intelligent and extremely skilled. Her name “Saga” is a Nordic name that, as Tobias Hochscherf and Heidi Philipsen point out, “refers to a saga, which, at a basic level, is a story about larger-than-life Nordic heroes” (Hochscherf 2017, 139).

Saga is also, like Holmes, challenged in regard to her social skills, and she seems to suffer from an undiagnosed Asberger Syndrome. However, the female detective in contemporary crime fiction, unlike her male counterpart, is often implicitly diagnosed: Saga is just one example, as we have seen. A few other examples are Lisbeth Salander (The Millennium Trilogy), who has Asberger Syndrome; Sarah Lund (Forbrydelsen/The Killing), who seems to be Autistic; Kahina Zadi (Midnatssol/Midnightsun), who is a cutter and Carrie Mathison (Homeland) who is Bi-Polar. If Carrie Mathison is the only one properly diagnosed within the storyline, the other characters imitate the classical symptoms, which contemporary audiences can easily perceive as mental problems. However, one of the important differences between Holmes and these female detectives is that while Holmes is very proud of his otherness and points out that other people are simply stupid, these female detectives try to hide their illness and feel ashamed of their otherness. They actually want to be normal women but they are unable to fix themselves. In season four Saga even seeks out a psychologist because she wants to learn how to be a better and more emotional woman. You could argue that what these female detectives all have in common is that they do not understand the position of the Other, which according to the Danish philosopher Kirsten Hyldgaard is the classical position of the mad subject (Hyldgaard 2014, 12–22). This of course affects the spectator’s potential identification process since it is difficult to identify with someone who is “lost”. Saga is not able to read us or understand what we
expect from her (as Others) and we are not able to read her either — among other things because it is almost impossible to read her facial expressions.

But at first glance Saga is portrayed as both energetic and progressive, and she seems to represent an attempt at changing the stereotypical female roles we often encounter on film. She is portrayed as neither a sexualized object (femme fatale) nor an untouchable and innocent Madonna figure-roles which have, historically, been the two positions women had to choose from.

This depiction of the female heroine in Nordic Noir could very well be understood as a progressive new gender position that challenges the binary gender system of patriarchy and breaks with traditional poses of women in film; as E. Ann Kaplan argued, traditionally women are depicted through the “angel/witch dichotomy” as either self-sacrificing mothers or sexualized femme fatales (Kaplan 1992). Both Saga and Sarah (Forbrydelsen/The Killing) are, as mentioned, portrayed as extremely skilled, focused and ambitious: And their determination and potency are not linked to the male protagonist. In line with these thoughts, the American author, Emma Kennedy, writing in The Guardian just before the last episode of The Killing was broadcast in the US, said that she had “pondered endlessly on a fitting end for Lund, the finest fictional feminist icon ever created. In a TV world where women are consistently being portrayed as only being validated by men's approval, Lund, with her hair scraped back and functional knitwear, has been a beacon for working women everywhere” (Kennedy 2012).

It is (to some degree) obvious that Saga and Sarah, along with a detective such as Lisbeth Salander, break with the traditional depiction of women in film, not because they are strong, skilled and powerful but because they as opposed to other potent women in film such as Lara Croft and Wonderwoman (Mikula 2004, 57–58) seem so uninterested in attracting the “male gaze” (Mulvey 1975/1999). Lisbeth Salander even uses her punk appearance to distance herself from the ”male gaze”.

In many ways, the female detective seems to exist beyond the traditional passive-aggressive seduction strategies between men and women on the screen (and between the screen woman and the male spectator in the audience as theorized by Mulvey). In line with this, because the female heroine is not reduced to an attractive but ignorant side-kick to the male protagonist, she seems to be newly positioned. Saga, Sarah and Lisbeth are in fact the main attraction in each serial, and all three of them are, as noted, portrayed as both potent and independent.

But if these female detectives do not perform a traditional female gendered position, do they actually perform a gendered position that breaks with the binary gender system of patriarchy or do they simply fill out an already established position, that is, the position of the potent male detective?
The female detective as the child who does not know the rules of the symbolic order yet

As pointed out in E. Ann Kaplan’s *Women in Film* “women tend to occupy the ‘male’ position when they become dominant” (Kaplan 1983, 27) and they lose their traditionally feminine characteristics in doing so. Usually not “those of attractiveness, but rather of kindness, humaneness, motherliness” (Kaplan 1983, 29). This characteristic also applies to Saga and Sarah who is as far from kind, warm or maternal as possible. But the interesting thing is that Saga and Sarah also lack sexual attractiveness and their appearance therefore plays an important role in this negation of the female position. They are both in a way uniformed, wearing the same outfit every day and in every episode, Sarah in her legendary Icelandic Sweater and Saga in her worn out leather pants and military boots. Both garments are typically part of the masculine wardrobe, or at least the garments are considered to be androgynous and they fit very well with the consistent rejection of the feminine archetype. Neither of them wears makeup or accessories, which also provides them with a masculine touch. Saga even has a large scar on her face and uses snuff tobacco. Saga and Sarah are, in other words, not depicted as traditional femme fatales; on the contrary, by dressing in an asexual or at least androgynous manner they seem to dodge potential sexual innuendo, but at the same time they somehow step out of the sexual field all together and thereby out of the desired female position – and out of the field of potential identification. The male spectator cannot feel desire for her and the female spectator cannot identify with her. But the main reason for the lack of desire and identification is not linked to how they dress but to their ignorance when it comes to social rules and expectations – also when it comes to their appearances.

Saga does not participate in the otherwise ongoing gendered sexual exchanges – or “masquerade” – because, due to her Asberger syndrome, she does not understand the coded signs or the cultural understanding of sexuality. To Saga, sexuality is not a matter of desire (the desire for something that is constantly being displaced); it is a matter of purely physical needs. In the second episode of season one, Saga picks up a man in a bar because she has an expressed physical need for sex. In this scene it is clear (and in a very explicit way) that she is supposed to imitate our conventional understanding of a phallic sexuality. The interesting thing, however, is that this scene does not portray Saga as a potent and sexy femme fatale or male seducer for that matter, which would be the case if she was a man/woman who knew what he/she was doing. Instead she is depicted as involuntarily inappropriate, comical and even parodic. She stands helpless outside the symbolic order and she is in every way harmless, and not at all like...
the self-assured Holmes in this otherwise potentially threatening situation. Just like Sarah, Saga has no sense of humor or self-irony but that does not mean that the spectator cannot laugh at her. Every time she fails to do what is expected from her the spectator laughs out loud and thereby castrates her potency.

In the UK version of *Broen, The Tunnel* (2013), the Saga figure, Elise Wassermann, is depicted slightly differently in general but especially in the bar scene. She is much more in control of the situation and it is clear that she has done this before. She enters the bar and goes straight for the bartender. Without any kind of introduction, she tries to make sure that she is not wasting any time. The first thing she asks him is: “Do you prefer men or women”? (*The Tunnel*, eps.2). While they talk, she maintains eye contact and it is clear that this is routine for her. The man giggles disarmingly but he does not laugh at her. In the Scandinavian version, Saga acts as if it is the first time she has entered a bar to look for a one-night stand. Elise Wassermann, whose colleagues, by the way, nickname her Sherlock Holmes (*The Tunnel*, eps.3), is less awkward and much more sexualized because to some degree she is familiar with the rules of seduction. Saga is depicted as an amusing ignorant child, whereas Elise is depicted as a maladjusted woman who never-the-less over time has learned to cope socially. The seduction scene is of course atypical since Elise is coming on very straightforwardly, but it is not a comical or parodic scene. This difference becomes very significant if we look at respectively Saga’s and Elise’s facial expressions in this scene.

In the third season of *Broen* Saga gets a new police partner, Henrik, with whom she engages sexually. They do seem, though, to be more like siblings playing than grown-up lovers, and their relationship is framed as somehow incestuous in a number of ways. Most important is the fact that their sexual relationship is depicted as polymorphous and focused only on mutual sexual stimulation. Saga
does not want to see Henrik unless they are going to have sex and she is not interested in any kind of foreplay. For Saga foreplay is needless and unnecessary, she does not comprehend the requirements of the Other. She does not understand “the heterosexual comedy” or “masquerade” (Lacan) or “the performative production of a sexual ontology” (Butler 2006, 47) that she is supposed to perform as a woman (being the Phallus).

As Butler puts it in her reading of Lacan: “For women to ‘be’ the Phallus means, then, to reflect the power of the Phallus, to signify that power, to ‘embody’ that Phallus, to supply the site which it penetrates, and to signify the Phallus through ‘being’ its Other, its absence, its lack, the dialectical confirmation of its identity” (Butler 2006, 44).

Saga does not “reflect the power of the Phallus”; on the contrary she performs the position of the man (“having the Phallus”). As Saga dictates: “Du kan klä av dig och lägga dig”, and “Smek mig inte men jag tar på dig som du vill, jag vill inte kyssas men oralsex går bra” (Broen, Season 3, Eps. 4).

From a psychoanalytic point of view, Saga does not threaten the position of the male and she does not appeal to identification with the female spectator either mainly because her performance appears comical and embarrassing and because her performance is linked to her abnormalities. When we are watching Saga we do not learn that her behavior is quite normal after all – on the contrary, it is being emphasized that her behavior is pathological. In other words, she is considered to be dysfunctional because she is not able to perform her expected position in “the heterosexual comedy”. The same applies to Lisbeth Salander who also represents a very phallic sexuality, a sexuality that the female spectator, due to its link to what is shameful abnormal, is not encouraged to recognize or imitate.

Both Saga and Elise are cut off from the dominant cultural discourses particularly in relation to those associated with their gendered position. They are to some extent pre-subjectivized or pre-oedipal. They do not know and to some degree do not care about what they are supposed to do (according to traditional expectations/the Other) and their understanding of things always relates to practical and physical needs and logical reasoning. They cannot lie and they always respond according to rational reasoning. As mentioned previously they do not understand humor either which turns them into easy targets. They are in many ways caught in our gazes because they are not able to see themselves from the outside.

This also applies to the issue of motherhood. Our heroines do not link the question of motherhood to discursive symbolic expectations but rely on logic alone. For example, in one of the first dialogues between Saga and her partner Martin, he asks her politely about her private life: “Har du nogen børn?”. And she replies: “Varför skulle jag ha det?” Her unanticipated answer tells us that she does not understand the discursive expectations and obligations she is subject to.
in a postmodern society, and it marks her inability to cope socially as a woman. This becomes even clearer through Martin’s response — a response that seems to imitate the spectator’s response: “Det har jeg aldrig hørt nogen spørge om før” (Broen, season 1, eps. 1).

Later in the third season her partner Henrik asks a similar question: “Har du nogensinde ønsket at få børn?” and she replies: “Jag är inte interesserad i barn uppfödning, det skulle störa mitt arbete för mycket och jag tvivlar på att jag skulle klara av det” (Broen, Season 3, Episode 9). In season four Saga becomes pregnant with her colleague Henrik but decides to have an abortion. Again, her reasoning regarding motherhood is logical and not emotional and her decisions regarding the pregnancy are not in any way linked to what the Other expects from her as a woman.

But that does not mean that Saga/Elise in any intentional, deliberate or anarchistic way rejects applicable oppressive gender discourses. Like the pre-oedipal child who does not yet know the rules of the symbolic order, they simply do not comprehend these unwritten rules. This ignorant position is very different from the classic position of the male detective, such as Holmes, who is identified as the superior subject or the “subject supposed to know” (Žižek 1992, 57). The lack of knowledge affects the spectator’s response. The spectator does not in any way become morally indignant but reacts as if she is hearing a child saying something funny. With sympathy and compassion but not identification.

The paradox seems to be that, in the case of these heroines, and from a social-role perspective, they are understood as dysfunctional and maladjusted because of their lack of female traits. This likable but also odd and dysfunctional woman (child) seems to us a new, very contemporary, wrinkle in the depiction of women’s roles on the screen.

The detective in the hamster wheel

The male detective is in general known for his obsessive and manic work routines. Usually the detective has no or very little family life mainly due to his obsessive attachments to his job. The same thing goes for the new female detective who literally works all the time, and who does not distinguish between private life and working life. The female detective sacrifices everything for the case; she works like a manic hamster in a wheel while she is on the hunt for the killer in the same way that the male detective typically sacrifices everything for his cases.

In many ways, the criminal or the killer represents the object of desire (a), an object that promises catharsis or salvation, but also an object that is constantly
displaced by another promising object (the next killer). This is why the detective resembles a mad Sisyphus lost in her cog on her hamster wheel. The detective does not realize what Žižek knows, namely that

the real purpose of the drive is not its goal (full satisfaction) but its aim: the drive’s ultimate aim is simply to reproduce itself as drive, to return to its circular path, to continue its path to and from the goal. The real source of enjoyment is the repetitive movements of this closed circuit. (Žižek, 5)

The interesting thing is that Saga actually seems to be enrolled in this psychoanalytic logic of desire even though she does not understand, follow or comprehend the logics of desire when it comes to her own sexuality. In many ways the killer seems to function as a substitute for her sexual desire since the constant, restless hunt for the killer becomes the very aim of the drive. In season three Saga is dismissed because she is accused of the murder of her own mother. Saga immediately loses direction in her life and falls apart completely – she even comes to imitate the melancholy detective (Kärholm 2011, 61–63) and considers killing herself – mainly because her life suddenly seems empty now that she has lost her chase or her object of desire. Seconds before she jumps out in front of a train, she is saved by her partner Henrik who gives her a new case to solve. She is in other words saved by the creation of a new object of desire. The last season (4) ends with Saga voluntarily leaving her job as a detective indicating that she is now, due to a healed trauma, saved from this destructive manic behavior.

This leads us to another aspect of the detectives’ manic work routines: the cultural idealization, but also fear, of “mania” in general. In Broen we never see Saga do anything but work; she is working in her home, while she eats, while she walks (reading), in her bed and in the kitchen. As mentioned above, in season three Saga even falls emotionally apart because her boss Linn forces her to take some time off. In Bipolar Expeditions. Mania and Depression in American Culture (2009), the anthropologist Emily Martin investigates the cultural life/representative of mania and depression and argues that “mania is linked to something powerful, not just to something disordered” (Martin 2009, 177). She adds that “mania is valuable because of its association with motivation and productivity (…), is even ‘an asset in the workplace’” (Martin 2009, 191).

We may understand this as a neoliberal interpretation of “mania” where personal liberty maximized by limiting government interference in the markets puts far more responsibility on the individuals who have to work harder with less government support services, putting more stress on them. This neoliberal interpretation of “mania” or manic characteristics fits very well with the new female detective, who is cherished for her uncompromising and competent devotion to her job
The female detective

while at the same time she is stigmatized for exactly the same reasons. As Emily Martin puts it: “Mania is as much an object of horror and desire” (Martin 2009, 4). In many ways the manic detective comes to represent a symptom of a neoliberal state who has lost its grip in the constant pursuit of growth just as the melancholy detective, as Tapper points out “förkroppsligar krisen för sitt kön utan också för nationen” (Tapper, 49). In the depiction of the female CIA agent Carrie Mathison (Homeland) the ambivalent depiction of mania becomes very explicit. Carrie, who is diagnosed within the storyline as “mood disordered”, is always on the brink of being either brilliant or paranoid. Her mood disorder sharpens her skills as an agent. She is most competent when she is not taking her medicine (i.e. when she is in the space between sanity and madness); she is always working and “never done” as she puts it (Homeland Season 1, eps. 3). At the same time, she is always somehow too much; she is always under suspicion and has to hide her illness in order to keep her job. While Holmes’s mania and paranoia is idealized by his surroundings, Carrie’s mania and paranoia is always also suspicious.

When it comes to her representation of the female detective/agent she is, as mentioned before, like Saga, depicted as a child who has not learned (or cannot) learn the social order of things or who does not – at least when she is manic – understand the demands of the Other. In the first season, her oedipal mentor Saul disciplines her and punishes her when she disobeys and he thereby interpellates her as an unruly, rebellious, uncompromising child. At the same time, she is understood to be extremely potent and competent. In other scenes she is portrayed as an androgynous “buddy”: “You are a pretty good drinking buddy” (Homeland, Season 1, eps. 7) as her lover Brody points out, or she is portrayed as a phallic mother (in season 4 she gives birth to a child (Brody’s) but she is not able to take care of the child and she leaves her in her sister’s care). But the phallic position is not a classical one since Carrie (due to her mental dysfunctionalities), is more likely to be understood as a child who, like Saga, does not yet know the rules of the symbolic. Her unfixed and blurry position, as neither disguised man, phallic femme fatale or angelic mother becomes clear when she is contrasted with other stereotyped female representations, such as the femme fatale Allison or Brody’s beautiful and innocent wife, who functions as an angelic mother – or the male agents for that matter. In much the same way, Saga’s unfixed position becomes even more significant when she is being contrasted with the sexy flirtatious Danish colleague, Pernille, in season two or the soft and motherly wife of Martin (Mette) in season one and two, women who, unlike Saga or Carrie, are able to perform the “heterosexual comedy” (Lacan) and who support the Phallus.

Concerning the representation of gender, Carrie comes to represent something unfinished, dysfunctional and almost alien (inhuman and superhuman at the same time). Carrie is inhuman/superhuman because of her extreme diffuse
and irrational behavior patterns, but also because of her superior astuteness; Saga contrariwise is read as inhuman because of her rational and almost robotic ways of thinking, which is expressed bodily through her stiffened facial expressions. As mentioned earlier, Saga seems to suffer from an undiagnosed Asberger syndrome (significant difficulties with social interaction and non-verbal communication—body language, facial expressions and eye contact—combined with limited and/or repetitive behaviors and interests). Saga is not directly diagnosed within the storyline which means that the sense of dysfunctionality is structurally linked to her misfit gender representation and not to the specific mental illness. At the same time her behavior is linked to a more general deviant behavior. In other words, Saga’s performance is not understood as subversive in any positive way, but rather as an example not to follow.

Saga is mainly understood as dysfunctional because she is a woman who occupies the male space, also when it comes to her personalization of autism. As Lucy Townsend from BBC News underlines:

> Autism was once described as a manifestation of an ‘an extreme male brain’ – the theory being that maleness involved a predisposition for mechanistic or logical thinking. Paediatrician Hans Asperger first defined the form of autism which now takes his name after observing boys with regular intelligence and language development, who nevertheless displayed autistic traits. He originally believed that no girls were affected by the syndrome, although clinical evidence later caused him to revise this. (Townsend 2015)

This might be one of the reasons why Holmes’s autism is depicted as omnipotent while Saga’s autism vice versa makes her impotent. But it is through the eyes of her surroundings that we, as spectators, sense that she is weird or wrong (as a woman). We come to feel that not only is she autistic, like Holmes, she is also not as a woman supposed to be that manically attached to her job and she is not supposed to work all the time. She is conversely supposed to be invested in her personal life as a mother and/or a wife, and since she is not, she is represented as disabled and dysfunctional. This is why we, as female spectators, fail to identify with her. In film and TV-versions of the Scandinavian femi-crime wave such as Anna Pihl (DK), Dicte (DK), and Fjällback Murders (S) the lesson is completely different. Here “det centrale problem er, at kvinder skal lære at forvalte deres køn og moderrolle professionelt, når de er på arbejde” (Klitgaard Povlsen 2010, 44).

Whenever Saga fails to fulfill the social codes her colleagues giggle, laugh or gasp and sometimes they even point directly at her strange behavior. In season two one of her colleagues snaps the following at her in anger: “När man träffar dig förstår man att nåt är allvarligt fel med dig”. In the third season her colleagues call her “mærkelig” (odd) and “anderledes” (different). In the US version, the colleagues and superiors even discipline her (Sonya) to make her fit into the ideal
representations of a woman. With this in mind, Saga does not represent what Hamberstam identifies as “the healthful alternative to what are considered the histrionics of conventional femininities” (Halberstam 1998, 9). Rather, she seems to represent female masculinity as “the place of pathology” (Halberstam 1998, 9).

Identification or sympathy?

The differences between the traditional male detective and the new female detectives is, as described above, not so much brought to light by their specific characteristics or their stereotyped detective lifestyles – in this respect, the female detectives are similar to the male detectives – but mainly through the differences in their connection to the spectator’s gaze. The differences are brought to light by the gazes and the comments from the supporting characters because unlike Wallander and Beck who come to represent the spectators’ gaze, Saga and Sarah are mainly seen through the eyes of others, and in Saga’s case, in season one and two, mainly through the male partner, Martin. This is very much like the dynamics of Sherlock Holmes where Holmes, as Sara Kärrholm points out, is seen through the eyes of Watson (Kärrholm 2011, 57). However, while Watson is addressing Holmes with an admiring and impressed gaze, Saga’s partner Martin looks at Saga very differently. It is important to notice that we as spectators encode the narrative events through the point of view of Martin, just as Watson represents the point of view of the spectator in Sherlock Holmes.

Usually Martin laughs out loud when Saga exceeds the social codes and the spectator tends to laugh with him, which makes it very clear and significant that Martin’s gaze is synonymous with the spectator’s gaze. We are not supposed to identify with her and we are not supposed to desire her either. Martin even tells her that she is not his type. It is important to notice that Martin’s gaze is not a hostile or angry gaze, but an indulgent and loving gaze that actually, as mentioned before, puts the female detective in the child’s position. He protects her, as when he tells a male colleague at the Swedish police station to stop harassing Saga by using irony that she does not understand (Broen, season 2, eps. 3). Martin rebukes Saga and corrects her when she makes mistakes within the social order or when she exceeds sexual boundaries between the two of them, but he also educates her and trains her. For instance, he tells her not to lie because she is not very good at it (Broen, season 2, eps. 2); he tells her not to laugh at people’s jokes, again because she is not very good at acting sincere in these situations (Broen, season 2, eps. 2); and he advises her on how to respond to her boyfriend’s emotional needs. Through Martin’s gaze (the spectator’s gaze) Saga becomes the child who must
learn the social codes. She is the child who does not know the rules of the symbolic order yet. Saga’s partner Henrik (season 3) does not laugh at her or educate her the same way, and his interest in her is much more ambivalent since he himself seems to be a bit peculiar (he has photographic memory, takes a lot of different unknown pills and seems to be carrying around a severe trauma, just like Saga). Yet he still seems to carry the gaze while Saga remains the object of the gaze. As spectators, we notice how Henrik experiences Saga’s behavior, how he becomes surprised and puzzled when she responds in unexpected ways. He nicknames her “Wiki” because she is always referring to lexical explanations rather than empirical explanations. Even though Henrik is just teasing her with her nickname “Wiki”, we as spectators come to understand that she must represent some sort of otherness. As mentioned before, she becomes almost inhuman because of her rational, slightly robotic ways of thinking. Henrik is also, as mentioned earlier, the male protagonist who saves Saga when she is falling apart. He is, in other words, the one who repairs her trauma. Saga is traumatized by a terrible childhood that eventually led to her sister’s suicide. The female heroine coping with a traumatized childhood is a well-known motif in both Noir and Melodrama, as Yvonne Leffler argues: "Salander represents a common fantasy of being abused, mistreated and weak, but still strong and capable, an ideal transformation from being the object of violence to being its acting subject” (Leffler 2013, 62). Not unlike Saga, Lisbeth Salander is depicted as a child who has not yet grown to adult size. She is dressed as an unruly teenager, lacks manners and socialization and her sexuality is, like in Sagas case, unfathomable and in many ways promiscuous or pre-oedipal. Salander is, as Leffler argues, a grown version of Pippi Longstocking:

The depiction of Salander-as-Pippi serves to show that her anti-statist and immature behavior at the beginning of the story is a dead-end operation, and that if she wants to obtain justice, she eventually needs to become a legal Swedish citizen. (Leffler 2015)

Salander is not only, like Saga, understood as a child who needs to know or learn, she is also focalized in a similar way. Zoë Brigley Thomson points out in her analysis of the novels that "Lisbeth is often described as being a blank canvas from which investigators try to extract answers. Teachers and psychiatrists who try to elicit a response from Lisbeth or force her to open up are met – to their great frustration – with a sullen silence. Unlike the traditional noir plot Lisbeth is never broken up by these detectives, and so they project onto her their theories about her psychological and sexual motivations” (Thomson 2013, 149). Or as Yvonne Leffler states about the focalization in the novels: “she is depicted by external focaliza-
tion, her speech is reduced to an absolute minimum, she is the silent woman of melodrama” (Leffler 2013, 63).

In the film version Salander is still silent and she is mainly seen through the eyes of the male detective Blomkvist who, although he engages with Salander sexually, sees her as a loved child he needs to protect from the paternalistic society.

The idea behind the spectator’s identification with the male protagonist is to create a distance between the female detective and the spectator. In Broen we examine the dysfunctional woman from a distance while she makes one mistake after the other within the social order, and we distance ourselves from her through our simultaneous laughter with the male protagonist or through our registration of her sense of otherness. Within this line of thought, the dysfunctional detective is certainly not understood as “the maker of meaning” (Mulvey 1975/1999, 834), a potent performer of “female masculinity” (Halberstam 1998, 9) or the “subject who is supposed to know” (Žižek 1992, 57); on the contrary, she is still understood as “the passive bearer of meaning” (Mulvey 1975/1999, 834) or the “subject who needs to know”.

But does the lack of identification process between the dysfunctional female detective and the female spectator mean that there is no possible recognition going on? In Beyond the Bridge Hochscherf and Heidi Phillipsen claim that “the unwieldy role as well as the reiterated attempts to highlight her otherness, however, makes it difficult to sympathise with her, just as she cannot easily sympathise with others” (Hochscherf and Philipsen 2017, 139). We would argue, though, that it is through the lack of identification that we come to sympathize with her. Not in spite of, but precisely because of the othering of Saga, the fact that we cannot identify with her, we come to think of her as the child who needs to know; we do not feel through her, we feel for her. As Amy Coplan points out in her distinction between sympathy and empathy: “Sympathy involves caring about another individual – feeling for another. It does not as such involve sharing the other’s experience” (Coplan, 145).

If you dig into newspapers, blogs and Twitter it is clear that Saga is a loved character, as a woman writes on Twitter: “I love her because of her autism in the same way that I love my sons because of theirs” (National Autistic Society, Twitter). It is important to stress that for women (or men) diagnosed with autism the recognition process of course is suspected to be rather different. In an article from 2015 about female autism, women say “they recognize aspects of themselves in Saga”, and they ”welcome her high profile role” (Townsend 2015). To female spectators in general she is not a role model but an exposed woman. Due to her autism, it is not necessary for us to judge her (neither as male or female spectators) and we are therefore able to embrace her and accept her. Thus, the figure of Saga seems to elicit non-identititarian dimensions of recognition.
Rita Felski stresses that “our sense of who we are is embedded in our diverse ways of being in the world and our conflict with others” (Felski 2008, 30), and the fact that Saga is different and does not look, act and feel the way we do still affects us and our sense of who we are. The Other is not an absolute stranger in that the stranger originates in ourselves. As Sara Ahmed emphasizes: “The stranger is produced not as that which we fail to recognize, but as that which we have already recognized as ‘a stranger’” (Ahmed, 3).

The conclusion must be that the dysfunctional female detective does not appeal to female identification and she therefore does not function as a feminist icon. But on the other hand we do not as spectators simply misrecognize the dysfunctional female detective. Due to her dysfunctions and her undeveloped childish otherness she comes to represent “that which we have already recognized as ‘a stranger’” – a figure or a position that we sympathize with but also fail to identify with.

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