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Guns and poses: violent women dominate movies this month

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

Is it me, or are a lot of young women kicking butt on the silver screen lately?

Today, not one, but two movies will be released that promise to deliver female lead characters with a supernatural command of martial arts and some very big guns.

The trailer to the forthcoming *Haywire* opens with a question: "She is our nation's most valuable weapon, so why did they betray her?"

Next, we see actress Gina Carano's character talking to a brute who is trying to coerce her into his car. After he strikes her, she retaliates with a series of sweep kicks, punches and, finally, a slap in the face with a gun that sends his teeth flying.

But that's only the beginning. What follows is a manic montage of Carano's extraordinary acts of violence against men. One is strangled, one is shot in the neck at close range, and another, after being knocked out, gets a steel storefront gate dropped across his abdomen. "You'd *better* run," Carano snarls at the trailer's conclusion.

Kate Beckinsale puts up an equally good fight in the teaser for *Underworld Awakening*. Beckinsale plays -- surprise! -- a "vampire warrioress" (the filmmaker's words) hell-bent on saving the undead from humans who are waging war on all things immortal.

Beckinsale slices the throats of nine men as she slides along the floor. Her roundhouse kicks send others plummeting to their deaths. Her machine guns seem to take care of the other guys who get in her way.

She performs all of these deeds in a leather body suit that appears to be painted on.

Both Beckinsale and Carano don outfits that are as jet black as their short, blunt hairstyles.

It is a look similar to that of Lisbeth Salander, the character played by Rooney Mara in the recently released *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. The film's strong female lead and three scenes of sexualized violence have been vetted throughout the blogosphere.

Like Carano's *Haywire* character, Salander speeds through the film on a sleek motorcycle. Unlike Beckinsale's character, Salander sports nose and eyebrow piercings, and her dark clothing is noticeably oversized.

Aside from shared appearances, these three women also seem to be united in a common vengeance. They are all lorded over by men who threaten them mortally. And rather than being victimized, they willfully become victimizers.

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Nowhere is this role reversal more graphic than in *Dragon Tattoo*. In the movie's most debated scene, Salander, who is a ward of the state, is twice subjected to sexualized violence by the man who serves as her guardian. The second incident is particularly barbaric. Days later, Salander subjects her guardian to an equally savage rape, and then adds to the brutality by tattooing "I am a rapist pig" across his chest.

The film is based on the first novel in a trilogy written by Swedish journalist Stieg Larsson. His career was defined by his relentless fights against racism and right-wing extremism. *Men Who Hate Women* was actually his original title for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

Although that original title leaves little to the imagination, because Larsson died in 2004, his long-term companion, Eva Gabrielsson, still finds herself publicly defending his feminism. Gabrielsson insists Larsson fought passionately against sex trafficking, honor killing and the weakness of Sweden's laws protecting women.

Whether Larsson's feminism is shared by David Fincher, the writer and director of the American film version of *Dragon Tattoo*, remains open to debate, however. Those who have read Larsson's book note that the filmmaker repeatedly diminishes the power and ability of the Salander character depicted in the novel.

Fincher does not give Salander the credit for a key discovery in a murder investigation. He cuts down the role of Salander's female lover. When Salander rescues her colleague, Mikael Blomkvist (played by Daniel Craig), from certain death, she asks his permission to kill the perpetrator. The novel ends with Salander delivering an extravagant gift to Blomkvist, only to see him walking arm in arm with another woman. The movie ends with her vulnerable and heartbroken.

None of these characterizations are consistent with Larsson's book. Fincher does include scenes that demonstrate Salander's photographic memory, mathematical genius and brilliance as a computer hacker. For me, these were the most thrilling images of Salander. And these images are far more plentiful in the book.

The omissions and alterations Fincher makes to the text beg an important question: Just how strong a woman can most American filmmakers and audiences handle?

Since *Dragon Tattoo*, *Haywire* and *Underworld* were all written and directed by men, one also has to ask to what extent all of this violence is eroticized by both the filmmakers and the men (and, no doubt, some women) who watch it.

If January's major motion pictures say anything, it's that a women's strength is found not in her mind, but in the coldness with which she slays her victims and in her capacity for mixed martial arts.

Is the desire to live vicariously through women who beat, violate and kill men a sign that we are losing hope that the playing field between women and men will ever be equalized? Has feminism in film been reduced to such a state that now we can only equate it with revenge?

Rooney Mara was sharply criticized when, in a recent interview, she shied away from identifying her character as a feminist.

Although Mara understands why some people would see Salander as a feminist, she admits, "I never thought of the character as a feminist; I don't think she would characterize herself as that either, you know? I don't think she really acts or does the things she does in the name of any group or person."

When asked if she considers herself a feminist, Mara answered, "You know, I don't even know really quite what that means. I think I'm more like the character, in that sense. I don't really feel a part of any group or anything like that."

Mara's comments about her character may reflect just how confused our culture is about the true marks of feminism. If the actress hasn't learned what feminism is, how can that truth ever be revealed in her portrayal of the character?

I'm not sure I will head to the theaters to see *Haywire* or *Underworld*. But I am glad that I invested three hours of my Christmas vacation in the *Dragon Tattoo* film, if only for the opportunity to discover Larsson's novels and his portrait of Salander.

As has been true for much of the past century, strong, feminist characters tend not to be found in Hollywood movies, but rather in books and, of course, in real life.

Those who are looking for a powerful mind behind their celluloid women of steel may just have to settle for *The Iron Lady*.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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