

Comparing Reviews of
The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo

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In 2011, director David Fincher released his adaptation of the Swedish novel *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson. This crime novel has become somewhat of a global phenomenon, spending 126 weeks on *The New York Times* paperback bestseller list before Fincher's film was released ("Best sellers," 2011). The novel had been previously adapted to the screen as a Swedish miniseries and film. Fincher's version, as critics noted, has many significant deviations from both the book and previous film adaptation. James Berardinelli (2011) of *Reelviews* (<http://www.reelviews.net>), A. O. Scott (2011) of *The New York Times*, and Dana Stevens (2011) of *Slate.com* were mixed in their reviews of the American representation of Larsson's novel. While all these reviewers seemed to agree that Larsson's original novel was convoluted and somewhat shallow, they disagreed on whether Fincher's film was able to overcome weaknesses in the original story by developing characters more effectively and complexly onscreen and by generating a striking mood through scenes comprised of cold, gloomy visual effects and intense soundtracks.

Quality of the Story

The trio of critics agreed that Fincher had a challenge developing a film from Larsson's book, at least one that would hold moviegoers' attentions. Berardinelli (2011) expressed the challenge well when he described the original story as "convoluted" (para. 5). Scott's review (2011) confirmed this assessment, remarking on Larsson's "heavy-footed clumsiness as a storyteller" (para. 4). These are interesting critiques considering the success the novel and its two sequels have had among readers worldwide. As Stevens (2011) noted, "the book's massive success remains perplexing" (para. 1). Given the shortcomings of the novel, these critics each focused on how Fincher's directorial choices either overcame or exacerbated the flaws in the

original story.

At its core, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is a mystery-thriller, so the film's plot must maintain suspense while also doling out a mixture of curiosities and clues. Here, two of the critics show striking disagreement. Berardinelli (2011) represented the favorable view, a view calling attention to screenwriter Zallian's effective reworking of the story: "Zaillian has surgically altered Larsson's book for the screen by cutting, adding, and changing where necessary. The final result is a coherent, well-developed murder mystery" (para. 5). Contrast Berardinelli's view with Scott's (2011), which took director Fincher to task for how he portrayed Zallian's script on film: "There are waves of brilliantly orchestrated anxiety and confusion but also long stretches of drab, hackneyed exposition" (para. 4). Where Berardinelli viewed Fincher's version (and Zallian's screenplay especially) as a much better version of Larsson's original story, Scott highlighted the film's poor pacing and development. As further analysis will show, however, much of how the plot is perceived depends on its codependent development of the central character, Lisbeth, and its coordination with the dark atmosphere created by Fincher using visuals and sound.

Sound and Visual Aesthetics

The area where the three critics agreed most concerns the movie's visual backdrop and musical score. Berardinelli (2011) believed the movie's use of the winter scenery and "gloomy interiors" fit the dark message Fincher sought to deliver (para. 3). Stevens (2011) and Scott (2011) also both appreciated the gloomy landscapes and visual aesthetic of the film, as well as the sound effects and music. Scott praised Fincher's ability to "[evoke] invisible, nonspecific terrors lurking just beyond the realm of the visible" (para. 6). And Stevens credited Fincher with doing a good job using the "tense, discordant score by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross of Nine

Inch Nails,” even describing the opening scene as a great idea for a music video (para. 9). In general, the critics applauded Fincher’s film artistry with Berardinelli going so far as to call him an film “auteur” (para. 3).

However, both Stevens (2011) and Scott (2011) also pointed out particular scenes wherein the director’s talents become mired in the plot’s weaknesses. For Scott, the result of mixing Fincher’s “style” with what he viewed as clumsy storytelling is “lumbering proceduralism” (para. 4) of the kind available every night on network television. As Scott put it, “We might be watching *Cold Case* or *Criminal Minds*, but with better sound design and more expressive visual techniques.” Scott is referring to the tendency of TV crime shows to turn the most mundane elements of criminal investigation into visually appealing action scenes jumping between close ups of clothes fibers and computer screens. Stevens referred to this technique as “nifty Blow-Up-style business” (para. 7), which she seemingly respects as engaging plot exposition. Yet, she also remarked, “These scenes hint at a satisfyingly moody procedural that this movie never quite becomes.” For Stevens, like Scott, the director’s visual artistry just cannot overcome the shallow plot.

Character Development and Acting

Ultimately, however, the three critics concluded that the foundation of the film rested on the development and portrayal of the central heroine, Lisbeth. Scott (2011) and Berardinelli (2011) found actress Rooney Mara’s portrayal of Lisbeth Salander more than adequate for this film. Scott commented, “Ms. Mara captures [her] volatile and fascinating essence beautifully” (para. 2). Berardinelli was very impressed with the film’s entire cast, particularly Mara, who he thought would receive an Oscar nomination for her role (para. 9). Although Stevens (2011) agreed with Scott in that, the actor looked the role, she questioned Mara’s acting ability by

saying, “It’s hard to tell whether Mara is really good in the role, or just looks good” (para. 8). The views, then, were mixed on the portrayal of this key character.

Any favorable opinion of the portrayal of Lisbeth, however, is undercut by critics’ unfavorable opinion about how the character is ultimately developed, which is yet another element of the film he associated with the weak plot. In particular, Scott (2011) and Stevens (2011) disparaged scenes that either amplify the shallow sensationalism of Larsson’s story—which focuses so much on violence against women—or on scenes that seem to pretend that those graphic depictions of sexual violence did not happen. This incongruence is pointed out in the strange chemistry between Lisbeth and the male protagonist Mikael Blomkvist. Stevens and Scott discussed how the movie’s sex scenes between the main characters seem out of place and in conflict the otherwise empowering depiction of Lisbeth. Scott cited Lisbeth and Blomkvist’s sexual encounter as an example, called it “a failure of nerve [by Fincher] and a betrayal of the sexual egalitarianism Lisbeth Salander argues for and represents” (para. 11). Stevens also found the sex scenes between them out of place, but also awkward, considering Lisbeth’s tortured past and “wretched treatment . . . received at the hands of men her whole life” (para. 7).

Conclusion

In the end, viewers’ assessments of this film may depend most upon whether the dark visuals, soundtrack, and characterization ultimately seem to have some artistic purpose. For Barardinelli (2011), they did. He was the only reviewer of the three to feel that Fincher improved on the novel and earlier adaptation enough to make *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* a worthwhile story. Berardinelli felt that Fincher developed emotionally complex characters compared to the 2009 Swedish version, where he felt they were “little more than caricatures” (para. 3). He observed that “as grim a view as [Fincher’s version] may have of humanity, it

offers a compulsively watchable mystery/thriller” (para. 10). Scott (2011) and Stevens (2011), by contrast, both disagreed with Berardinelli’s generally positive assessment of the main characters’ chemistry and Fincher’s ability to overcome the novel’s weaknesses with audio-visual artistry. While Scott at least lauded Fincher’s creation of dark mysterious scenes and the ability of Mara to portray a gothic heroine, Stevens appeared to be the least impressed with the film overall, especially on account of Fincher’s lingering on the novel’s sexual violence. The key differences between these critics’ opinions of the overall movie really rest primarily on how a film portraying dark themes walks the line between vivid sensationalism and artistically revealing the complexity of human nature.

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