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# THE POWER OF LAUGHTER TO CHANGE THE WORLD: SWEDISH FEMALE CARTOONISTS RAISE THEIR VOICES

by Ylva Lindberg





The objective of this study is to situate and analyze the voices of contemporary Swedish women humor cartoonists, whose art often demonstrates original and challenging views of the relationship between men and women.<sup>1</sup> This attracts new groups of comics readers, particularly young women. These female cartoonists thus contribute to changing the perception of comics in Sweden, where the medium and industry are seen as a male-dominated field that produces material for young men.<sup>2</sup> In order to provide a deeper view of this feminist current, I will restrict the study to two writers and artists whose strips display aesthetic innovation as well as incisive humor: Nina Hemmingsson (born in 1971) and Liv Strömquist (born in 1978). Two of Hemmingsson's albums, *Jag är din flickvän nu* (*I am Your Girlfriend Now*, 2006) and *Mina vackra ögon* (*My Beautiful Eyes*, 2011), and one of Strömquist's albums, *Prins Charles känsla* (*Prince Charles' Feeling*, 2010) are the subject of this study.<sup>3</sup>

The analysis uses a literary studies framework and links the works to a cultural context, in order to show that Hemmingsson and Strömquist's success stems from the fact that their albums are not mere objects of entertainment and recreational reading. On the contrary, these writer-artists contribute to the development of comic art in Sweden, combining text-types and images which are not traditionally associated with comic art.<sup>4</sup> Their works are loaded with sometimes contradictory significations on different levels, allowing for several possible interpretations. This study stresses the aspect of transformation, not only of traditional comics aesthetics,<sup>5</sup> but also of a society marked by its own historical gender norms. These features are studied by drawing on literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's thoughts on medieval society and on psychiatrist Frantz Fanon's ideas about the relation between the colonized and the colonizer.

## TRANSMEDIAL PRESENCE

Nina Hemmingsson and Liv Strömquist are chosen as the object of study here because they were the first among the recent wave in Sweden of female humorists and cartoonists to capture the

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a translated and slightly revised version of an article that was originally published in 2012, as "Le Pouvoir sur le rire et sur le monde." *Recherches féministes* 25(2): 43–64.

<sup>2</sup> Hammarlund 2012a.

<sup>3</sup> Strömquist's album was published in French in 2012 (*Le Sentiment du Prince Charles*, Rackham), and parts of it have been published in English in the anthologies *From the Shadow of the Northern Lights* vols. 1 & 2, by the publishing house Top Shelf. This article references the Swedish-language editions and all translations are my own.

<sup>4</sup> Nordenstam 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Lindberg 2014.



attention of a wider public. They have received much media attention as artists, and their art has been circulated in various channels. In recent years, Strömquist and Hemmingsson have appeared on prime time programs and literary shows on television. Hemmingsson's comic strips and single-panel drawings are regularly published on the cultural pages of *Aftonbladet* (one of the most widely read Swedish tabloids) and Strömquist is a regular presenter on a popular public radio station. In 2008, one of Hemmingsson's albums and excerpts from Strömquist's work were put together into a play, which was first performed in Helsinki, Finland.<sup>6</sup> Liv Strömquist's own play, *Liv Strömquist tänker på dig* (*Liv Strömquist is thinking about you*), was performed in 2014 in Stockholm.<sup>7</sup>

Both writer-artists have also won several awards: in addition to being awarded prizes from within the Swedish comics community in 2007, Hemmingsson received the 2012 Karin Boye literary prize for both the brutality and sensibility of her poetry, which indicates that critics are not averse to conceiving of comic art as literature. Also in 2011, Strömquist was the first winner of the Swedish tabloid *Expressen*'s new satire award, "Ankan" (The Duck), for her development of feminist comic strips, as well as two literary prizes, in part for her capacity to offer visibility to marginalized groups. Recently, in 2015, Strömquist received the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*'s cultural award for her latest album, *Kunskapens frukt* (*The Fruit of Knowledge*, 2015), where she humorously explores the female sex and taboos about menstruation.<sup>8</sup> These examples of recognition in different cultural fields indicate not only a growing interest in comic art in Sweden, but also a changed perception of what comic art can be.

In addition, the recognition of Hemmingsson and Strömquist is a testimony to the recent acceptance of women by comics publishing houses. Since the 1980s, Swedish female humorists have worked actively to be visible in the cartoonist landscape, with early contributions from for example Cecilia Torudd (born in 1942) or Lena Ackebo (born in 1950).<sup>9</sup> Torudd has earned esteem with her strips about a single mother of two teenagers (*Ensamma mamman* [*The single mother*] 1988). Ackebo, more avant-garde, has not systematically introduced feminist themes, but satirizes the standards and the ways of typical Swedish life. In addition to producing several albums,

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<sup>6</sup> Teleman 2010, 19.

<sup>7</sup> The play is based on the albums *Einsteins fru* (*Einstein's wife*, 2008), *Prins Charles känsla* (*Prince Charles' feeling*, 2010), *Ja, till Liv* (*Yes, to Liv*, 2001). "Liv" means "life" in Swedish.

<sup>8</sup> A French translation by Rackham, titled *L'Origine du monde*, is scheduled for May 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Strömberg 2010, 83, 86; 1999, 27, 44.



Ackebo has published strips in the daily press, tabloids, and in the comics anthology *Galago* since 1984.

The success of this generation of women humorists and cartoonists has been important in encouraging the young female illustrators of today.<sup>10</sup> However, not only because sales were down, but also because comics editorship was male-dominated, women's creativity was restricted throughout the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> But in 2009, the editors at *Galago* (founded in 1979 and run by men), the currently most prestigious of Sweden's independent comics publishers, officially and radically redressed this imbalance. They devoted themselves to equally publishing fifty percent women and fifty percent men.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, a study by the Association des Critiques et des journalistes de la Bande Dessinée (ACBD) shows that, in 2010, twelve percent of cartoonists in France were women.<sup>13</sup> When compared to the publication of comics in Sweden, this figure starkly illustrates the latter country's greater egalitarianism with respect to gender. For example, among the writer-artists of the ninety-four comics albums published in Sweden in 2011, fifty-eight percent were men and forty-two percent were women. In addition, excluding anthologies, six publications were male-female collaborations and a dozen albums by the female writer-artists tackled feminist themes.<sup>14</sup>

In a review of *Galago's* 2012 comics anthology, *Rayon frais. Une anthologie suédoise de la bande dessinée* (Les Requins marteaux, 2012), the French daily newspaper *Libération* referred to the publisher's balanced and profitable gender representation.<sup>15</sup> The 2012 volume shows that *Galago's* choice to make concerted efforts to establish greater gender equality is an on-going process that has opened up for young writer-artists and feminist humorists, such as Nanna Johansson (born in 1986), Loka Kanarp (born in 1983), Sofia Olsson (born in 1979), and Sara Granér (born in 1980). Although Strömquist and Hemmingsson penetrated the market earlier, they have also benefited from this recent change.

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<sup>10</sup> Several female comics networks were formed in Sweden around 2005, such as Polly Darton and Dotterbolaget. The aim of these comics collectives is to encourage female writer-artists to work together and support each other. Among their many activities, they publish fanzines and joint albums.

<sup>11</sup> Strömberg 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Klenell 2010; Kuick 2010. It is worth noting that *Galago* is roughly the Swedish equivalent of the Éditions de L'Association, the most prestigious of the independent French comics publishers (founded in 1990 and run by men). L'Association annually publishes more than *Galago* and has a larger readership, but it cannot claim the same gender equality; see Strömberg 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Alfeef 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Hammarlund 2012b.

<sup>15</sup> Loret 2012.





In Hemmingsson and Strömquist's work, several techniques and interpretative levels come into play to create a forceful message. For example, Strömquist articulates feminist messages underpinned by complex theories from different scholarly disciplines. Her fairly traditional-looking strips, which address both men and women, are textually dense in a way that invites intellectual activity. This academic feature is contrasted with recycled news images and personalities from the gossip press. She also uses collage techniques and reworks famous paintings, for example works by Gustave Klimt and Frida Kahlo.<sup>16</sup> Hemmingsson, for her part, admits that she is not an avowed feminist, whilst acknowledging, perhaps despite herself, that her texts and images are strongly linked to Strömquist's project.<sup>17</sup> Her main concern seems to be to acknowledge the image and its capacity for conveying messages, since Hemmingsson's images sometimes have the structure of traditional art to the detriment of the text, which appears much sparser. Hemmingsson and Strömquist's aesthetic choices effectively push the limits of the definition of comics and join current theoretical reflections about layout and the importance of considering the page as an aesthetic entity.<sup>18</sup> Their artwork is more playful than serious, but their contributions to Swedish comic art cannot be ignored.

## WOMANHOOD AND THE USES OF THE CARNIVALESQUE

Literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin and his positive grotesque, introduced in his text on *Rabelais and His World* (1968),<sup>19</sup> has attracted many feminist researchers.<sup>20</sup> The most likely reason for the strong link between Bakhtin and feminist studies is that in his thinking about the aesthetics of the Renaissance and the Rabelaisian universe, it is possible to find alternative interpretations of the female body, which has been exposed, ridiculed, repressed, and exploited for centuries. In recent research on female artistic expressions, the positive grotesque is adopted to explain the paradoxical poetics of the "gurlesque," created in the intersection of neat feminine girlishness and limitless burlesque aspects.<sup>21</sup> Bakhtin's grotesque is also associated with female humour and comic art. For example, feminist scholar Anna Lundberg's doctoral thesis (2008) is the most consistent analysis of Swedish women's humor, and comics scholar Frederik Byrn Køhlert offers

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<sup>16</sup> Nordenstam 2014 further discusses Strömquist's techniques.

<sup>17</sup> Teleman 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Groensteen 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Cited here as Bakhtin 1991.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. Arthurs 1999; Bowers 1992; Isaak 1996; Rowe 1995; Russo 1994; Zemon Davis 1987.

<sup>21</sup> Glenum & Greenberg 2010.



an insightful exploration of the Canadian comics artist Julie Doucet and her transformative representations of women.<sup>22</sup>

In Hemmingsson's work, it is precisely such a rewriting of the female body that is at stake.<sup>23</sup> In the following, the basic functions and representations of the carnivalesque and the grotesque are explained and exemplified, in order to make clear how they are applied in the analysis.

The recurring themes of the carnivalesque and the grotesque in Bakhtin are designed to reveal subversive movements within a dominant structure, forces that come from the bottom of society. A civilization needs the carnivalesque and the grotesque, because they loosen up and even disintegrate rigid structures by transgressing the boundaries imposed by social conventions.<sup>24</sup> Paradoxically, the dominant structure strives to retain the aspect of carnival and limitlessness in society so as not to disturb the established order. In this binary entity (dominant/feudal – rebel/serf), both aspects are responsible for a function: the dominant/feudal aspect is responsible for the *closing* function, while the rebel/serf aspect is responsible for the *opening* function. Both aspects are recognized as useful for a dynamic society, since together they keep a balance between static order and developmental chaos.<sup>25</sup>

Feminist activities can easily be illustrated by the concepts of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, as they seek to overturn standards and established codes. From this point of view, the feminine is the principle of *opening* and progress, while the masculine represents the principle of *closing* and regression. In this regard, it is important to observe that, contrary to the English translation of Bakhtin, the title in Swedish puts forward the *history of laughter* (*Rabelais och skrattets historia*). Indeed, the disturbing force of the carnivalesque is precisely this liberating laughter. Female humorists make use of the laughable and comical aspects innate to the Rabelaisian grotesque, in order to get across a message. When Lundberg and English scholar Kathleen Rowe address Bakhtin's carnivalesque and grotesque, they emphasize the baseness of the body, the openings and actions of which cause laughter while creating links to life.<sup>26</sup> In the manner of Gargantua and Pantagruel in Rabelais, the women represented and analyzed by Lundberg and Rowe use bodily openings (e.g. genital organs, mouths, nostrils) that offer

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<sup>22</sup> Lundberg 2008; Bym Köhlert 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Lindberg 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Bakhtin 1991, 70; Goldberg 1996, 154.

<sup>25</sup> Bakhtin 1991, 57; Belleau 1984, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Lundberg 2008; Rowe 1995.



pleasures and give life (intercourse, eating, and defecating) to create their own space and to influence the world.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, by looking at the positive and cheerful aspect inherent in the carnivalesque and the grotesque as transposed onto the woman, we can transform our ideas about femininity in an expansive way – the female can be much more than what normative tradition claims. Still, the female is often defined as the negation of the male; as the influential Swedish feminist historian Yvonne Hirdman has noted, “to be a man is to not be a woman”.<sup>28</sup> Against such determinist masculine efforts to devalue women, the carnivalesque and the grotesque serve to propose alternative functions to the various figurations of the female gender.

However, the analogy between the historical and literary theory of Bakhtin and feminist theories requires some explanation. In Bakhtin’s text, the interdependence between the carnivalesque and the dominant structure is necessary to maintain social stability. Still, the Renaissance, Rabelaisian world is far from a dream of gender equality, insofar as women probably could not make their voices heard more than during other epochs.

Women’s exclusion from the process of making gender is illustrated by literature from the 19th century,<sup>29</sup> when the romantic grotesque took shape. In the romantic era, the grotesque changed, and what was collective and humorous, became subjective and intimidating. It grew distant from the carnival and from its positive and transformative function, and became the opposite, or even the negation, of the sublime and the ideals to which the romantic subject aspired. In this context, when the grotesque was associated with the feminine, the comical turned into horror and tragedy. The joyful grotesque definitely lost its place and function in the romantic-realist aesthetics of the 19th century. In this context, the woman became the very definition of nothingness, a kind of personified negation. Examples include the madwoman in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Clarissa’s imprisonment in Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748), and the tragic blind woman in the Swedish feminist Fredrika Bremer’s *Famillen H\*\*\** (1830–31). In these fictions, women are constantly excluded, mutilated, repressed or trapped, which is confirmed by the well-known literary analyses in literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The*

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<sup>27</sup> Lundberg 2008, 55; Rowe 1995, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Hirdman 2001, 54–57.

<sup>29</sup> Björk 1996, 22.



*Madwoman in the Attic*.<sup>30</sup> (1979). In contrast to the Rabelaisian grotesque woman, the grotesque and romantic woman is tragic, monstrous and alienated, on the brink of madness.<sup>31</sup>

The contrasts between the Renaissance and the Romantic grotesque are also stressed by Bakhtin, who corroborates his argument by drawing on literary critic Wolfgang Kayser and his work *Das Grotteske in Malerei und Dichtung* (1957). Bakhtin is struck by Kayser's narrow interpretation of the grotesque, which he finds reduced to an imagery with dismal, dreadful, and frightening tones. He observes how Kayser distances the grotesque from its true nature, which is to be inseparably linked to the popular culture of laughter and joy, and from the integrating carnivalesque perception of the world. The grotesque in this way becomes aesthetically diminished and drained of its original force. The most flagrant transformation from the Renaissance to the Romantic grotesque is, according to Bakhtin, the feature of alienation, where the familiar suddenly becomes strange and hostile.<sup>32</sup>

Both Rabelaisian and romantic-realistic notions of the grotesque are still present in contemporary artistic expressions as reminiscences of a Western cultural history. These aesthetics of the grotesque make it possible to perceive two different uses and interpretations of the grotesque in contemporary art; on the one hand, it signifies opening, the creation of life, laughter, and the realities of being human; on the other hand, it expresses the total denial of joy, action, productivity, intelligence, and sociability. Because of these cultural streams, the aesthetics of the grotesque is today ambiguous, and shows capacity for inversion, which is observable in Hemmingsson's stories, as if the representation of the modern woman was marked by these two aspects.

## DEPTH AND SURFACE

In Nina Hemmingsson's works, these two aspects of the grotesque – as it appeared in the Renaissance and in the Romantic era – are used by the writer-artist to create her skeptical humor. An example of the use of human physical baseness and the grotesque appears already at the beginning of her album *Jag är din flickvän nu* (*I am Your Girlfriend Now*, 2006). In a full-page panel (figure 1), a slightly worried blond woman occupies the left side, holding her male companion's hand. The couple is in a bar and the man is drinking wine. In the first speech bubble

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<sup>30</sup> Gilbert & Gubar 1979.

<sup>31</sup> Lundberg 2008, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Bakhtin 1991, 55–56.



the man presents the blond woman to a brunette on the panel's right side: "Hi. This my wife." The brunette responds: "Yup. And this is my armpit."<sup>33</sup> The woman's speech is accompanied by her raising her left arm and pointing to all the black hairs in this intimate and perspiring part of her body.



Fig. 1: The encounter between the Romantic sublime and idealized woman and the Rabelaisian joyful grotesque (Hemmingsson 2006: 5)

On one side, we have the traditional woman: silent, submissive and enigmatic; on the other side, the woman who speaks, and who opens up the body to destroy a specific social convention that is perceived as oppressive. This act may seem aggressive, but is actually liberating. The dark woman apparently frightens the blond woman and the latter seems to express a certain disdain toward the former. In fact, it is possible to interpret this scene as embodying the Romantic sublime and idealized woman and the Rabelaisian joyful grotesque. The brown-haired woman does not accept the superficial politeness of established social codes and denounces them with a liberating gesture that instantly reveals the deep meaning of the sentence, "This is *my* wife"; that the man treats the wife as if she were a part of his body. Thus, the brunette subtly turns the grotesquerie back on the man.

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<sup>33</sup> Hemmingsson 2006, 5.



Throughout her work, Hemmingsson shows a predilection for such inversion of social roles and domination. In connection to this contrast, she expresses the contradiction between the sustained and neat appearance of the socially acceptable woman and her interior. This recurrent theme, a linking of depth and surface, stresses the need to make space for the grotesque woman from the romantic era, who is now frightening and who must be hidden, while associating her with the joyful and positive grotesque of Rabelais. Hemmingsson said in an interview that the aim of her endeavor is to show the whole human being, reconciling negative and positive aspects as well as reversing them.<sup>34</sup> This objective is evident in a cartoon where a man happily exclaims, upon seeing the woman standing opposite him, “Oh, how beautiful you are! You shine brighter than the sun.” The woman smiles and says: “Eh... Thank you.” However, a caption inserted in the middle of the page, with an arrow pointing to her belly, explains that hidden inside is “the most compact darkness in all of Northern Europe” (Hemmingsson 2006: 22).

The two above examples highlight Hemmingsson’s simultaneous use of the carnivalesque and Rabelaisian grotesque as well as the romantic and tragic grotesque. These two aspects, or genres, of the grotesque tend to coexist with two major missions in Hemmingsson’s work: to let the depths come to the surface and to blur the boundaries imposed by social conventions. In the following example, the carnivalesque dominates the tragic and romantic, because the rebellious body is even more accentuated. It is a strip composed of four panels in which the first contains the title of the story: “Three examples of socially unacceptable answers to the question: ‘Would you like to dance?’” Each panel depicts a seated couple with two glasses of wine. In each panel, it is assumed that the man has asked the titular question. In the first panel, the woman responds, smiling: “Yes, I bet my large intestine [roughly: ‘my bottom dollar’] that I dance better than that last shrew you called a girlfriend. Well, wanna go for a spin?” In the second panel, she responds, again smiling: “Dance? Not really. But if you give me a knife I can cut my wrist to the beat of the music.” Finally, in the third panel, the woman responds, still smiling: “I guess so, but my specialty is oral sex. Cheers!”<sup>35</sup>

As in Rabelais’ world, these examples focus on the baser aspects of the physical body, such as the digestive system, sex and pleasure, strong language, and violence, which simultaneously serve to degrade and renew stereotypical interaction between man and woman. The physical body, impossible to suppress, bothers and offends by its reality.<sup>36</sup> The subversive actions and utterances

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<sup>34</sup> Teleman 2008, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Hemmingsson 2006, 23.

<sup>36</sup> Bakhtin 1991, 308.





of the body allow the woman to make her own place in the world, freed from the yoke of macho rules and outdated traditions.

## HEMMINGSSON'S PHYSICAL WOMEN

The carnivalesque body, liberating *and* feminine, arises not only textually in the speech bubbles, as in the example above, but also through the images. At first glance, the physical appearances of the characters in Hemmingsson's albums are striking. The noses of both men and women look like snouts, while their hands and feet rarely have more than three fingers or toes, similar to those of some animals. Animal features are recurrent in the work of several Swedish female cartoonists of the latest generation, and it is probably most visible in Sara Granér's work. Although Hemmingsson integrates the animal aspect in a more subtle manner than Granér, there is no doubt that humans and animals are set on the same level. The central passage of Hemmingsson's album *Mina vackra ögon* (*My Beautiful Eyes*, 2011) contains images without traditional panel borders that cover the entire page. Animals appear frequently in this part, as in a true bestiary: a hare, a dog, a cat, a horse, and a butterfly. In this way the animal line is strengthened, recalling the Rabelaisian carnival where human physicality is expressed through the bestial.<sup>37</sup> However, for Hemmingsson, the co-presence of humans and animals underlines a meditative mirroring of each other, rather than the rampaging bestiality of Rabelais' carnival.

At the center of this imagery, the reader finds the main character, the author's *alter ego*. She has squared black hair and eyes without pupils that resemble buttons sewn with visible stitching. Her body is represented as fairly chubby and her mouth resembles her vagina, a connection that is well illustrated by one of the images in which she crosses the street, disguised in an animal costume (her hood has two pointed ears) that leaves her genitals exposed (np). There is a sense of confusion in these images, as if they indicate an abolition of boundaries between humans and animals, between the admirable sublime and the despicable low. These opposites are represented simultaneously, no doubt to show a way toward the acceptance of the bestial aspect closely linked to the Rabelaisian grotesque. For women though, this aspect is still surrounded with taboos and influenced by the romantic view of the female as either sublime and accepted or grotesque and unacceptable.

This part of Hemmingsson's album is less comical because the images invoke deep human emotions. Hemmingsson's style is expressionistic, with images focusing on the psychological

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<sup>37</sup> Bakhtin 1991, 312.



states of the characters, including contemplation, joy, desire, and tenderness, but also anxiety, sadness, and destructiveness. Laughter changes here into serious feelings that the reader has to take into account, in order to fully savor Hemmingsson's spectacle of a grotesque woman posing in black, like a distorted diva à la Sarah Bernhardt, or a woman with a rabbit cap masturbating in a red armchair (np). In summary, the presence of the carnival-like opening brings to the surface the romantic, tragic, and dark sides of the grotesque, while changing them into something positive and worthy. The twilight woman of the 19th century enters the stage here, demanding to be seen. Fixed under the spotlight, she claims her right to exist fully and positively. As Hemmingsson says in an interview, she does not understand why women must be represented in a favorable light, as they were in the Swedish 1980s "women can" campaign; instead, she asks herself why society has to brand women with this type of propagandistic words, as if women's competence were strange and a deviation from the norm.<sup>38</sup> In addition, while a man can be obnoxious, sexually obsessed, and alcoholic, and still remain whole and respected, a woman must conceal her socially unacceptable personality. Hemmingsson's illustrations both show this split and try to reach for a reconciliation through the linking of the Rabelaisian grotesque with the Romantic one.

Hemmingsson's expressive drawings focus on the female body with all its emotions and sensations. Thus, they function as a slap in the face of the male gaze, which has been more intensely discussed in comic scholarship since comic book writer Gail Simone's list of "superheroines who have been either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator",<sup>39</sup> and, more recently, with the mocking in media of artist J. Scott Campbell's cover of *Amazing Spider-Man #601* (2009), where Mary Jane is depicted striking as a traditionally feminine and sensual pose when drinking her coffee, alone and at home.<sup>40</sup> Communications scholar Elisabeth El Refaie traces the origin of the male gaze to philosopher Jacques Lacan, and describes its later development by the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, who has used it as a conceptual tool to observe patterns in how bodies are represented and observed on the screen. Three types of looking form the basic model: "from the camera to the scene, from the spectator to the screen action, and from one character to another in the film".<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Teleman 2010, 20.

<sup>39</sup> Simone 1999.

<sup>40</sup> Scott 2013.

<sup>41</sup> El Refaie 2012, 73; Mulvey 1989.





Even though Mulvey is an important referent in film theory, she has been criticized for not taking into account that the viewer actually can choose independently how to look at and interpret the representations. Mulvey's model is linked to the explanation of the male gaze by critic, novelist, and painter John Berger, who explains that it is constituent of a woman's identity. As El Refaie notes: "Women, in particular, are encouraged to look at themselves through the implied gaze of others and to survey themselves constantly. [...] Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at".<sup>42</sup> In other words, women have integrated the male gaze; they know how men look at them and are conscious that there is a male view of the world.<sup>43</sup> When analyzing gendered bodies in contemporary comic art, such as Frédéric Boilet's *L'Épinard de Yukiko* (*Yukiko's Spinach*, 2001), and Edmond Baudoin's *L'Éloge de la poussière* (*In Praise of Dust*, 1995), El Refaie identifies a traditional pattern in the representations of male and female bodies. Women are more often depicted naked and more detailed than men, sometimes with a close focus on different parts of their bodies.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, images that break with this traditional pattern are becoming more and more common, as seen for example in the exposed, fragile male body stretched out on a lawn in Fabrice Neaud's *Journal (1)* (1996).

When Hemmingsson frees women from being represented as stereotypical objects of desire and encourages them to construct their own "look," she joins a recent move among female comics artists to take control of how women are represented and embodied visually.<sup>45</sup> With Hemmingsson, the act of rewriting the image of the woman is rooted in exuberance and carnivalesque pleasure. It is also a physical and sexual act, as shown in one of the stories from the album *Jag är din flickvän nu* (*I am Your Girlfriend Now*).<sup>46</sup>

The first of the six panels on the page shows the head of a woman lying down (figure 2). Her mouth is wide open as she says – in uppercase letters to make it clear that she is speaking loudly – "SUCK COCK." In the second panel, it is significant that we see the bodies of men only from the waist down. Written below are the words: "I WANT TO SUCK COCK. I want to suck you all off." In the next panel, the woman's gigantic face appears. Her mouth is hidden by her hand. The handwritten text follows the contours of her head, as she says: "I suck you off and swallow. Then, I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand."

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<sup>42</sup> El Refaie 2013, 74.

<sup>43</sup> Berger 1973, 46.

<sup>44</sup> El Refaie 2013, 75–79.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. El Refaie 2012, 82–84.

<sup>46</sup> Hemmingsson 2006, 62.



Figure 2: A truly modern Rabelaisian female, transgressive, grotesque and joyful. (Hemmingsson 2006: 62).



The woman's round and smiling face reappears in the fourth panel. She says: "Now you have no more sperm left, and me, I'm happy and fat." The penultimate panel must be read with the last, because the woman, presented in all her splendor in the fifth panel, addresses the men represented in the sixth. She stretches her hand out to the men and asks: "Was it good for you too?" The shy answer of one of the men appears in a speech balloon placed between the panels: "Yes, thank you, maybe a little". The text in the sixth and final panel is located at the top as a last riposte, again in upper case lettering: "AND YOU ARE ALL SO SMALL NEXT TO ME".<sup>47</sup>

This story is comical because of the contrast between this fully carnivalesque woman, huge, open, and joyful, and the small discreet men, well-combed, dressed in their tight pants suggestive of a tiny penis. The caricatured roles are immediately reversed, and, instead of the man, it is the woman with her physical existence that takes and enjoys first, with the natural assurance that "it was good" for the men. She is a powerful and generous woman who dethrones men and captures the world without apologizing. A truly modern Rabelaisian female, transgressive, grotesque, and joyful.

## THE MERGING OF THE POSTCOLONIAL AND FEMINISM

If the physical body constantly invades Nina Hemmingsson's work, Liv Strömquist's is located in a much more intellectual sphere at the beginning of *Prins Charles känsla* (*Prince Charles' feeling*, 2010). In Strömquist's art, the body is replaced by concepts such as love, romance, male independence, hetero-normative sexuality, power, and political interests. Her programmatic message is clear and shameless, in order to make the reader immediately understand the educational project that seeks to enlighten the reader on issues related to the relationship between men and women. The way Strömquist addresses these complex problems is closely connected to a branch of postcolonial theories concerned with the writing and interpretation of history. For the colonized individual, it is important to revisit history, because the past has been interpreted, written, and made official by imperialists. Historian Jan Vansina explains that the history of the African continent defies dominant academic history because it goes against the panorama of predominant ideas forged by European ethnocentric thinking.<sup>48</sup> Because of this dominant interpretation of the world, innovative and interdisciplinary methods are needed to

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<sup>47</sup> Hemmingsson 2006, 62.

<sup>48</sup> Vansina 1992; 1994, ix-xii, 40-41, 56, 58-59.



reconstruct reality. Strömquist's work implicitly recalls Vansina's ideas about constructing new ways of looking at reality and history by using interdisciplinary perspectives.

Strömquist builds her feminist critique on the assumption that it is essentially the white man who wrote the dominant story from a patriarchal perspective, often excluding women. Strömquist strives to present other shades and interpretations of the past that challenge received ideas about the foundations of society. Her message becomes convincing since she keeps her representations close to real facts. Nevertheless, according to comics scholar Julia Round, comic art "is not a way of telling a story with illustrations that replicate the world it is set in, but a creation of that world from scratch".<sup>49</sup> One method Strömquist uses to recreate the world is choosing crucial historical events or personalities and representing them critically from a feminist point of view, often with a twist that reveals the absurdity in a situation. Since accepted historical facts are scrutinized, transformed, and rendered visually and textually in narrated sequences, it can be argued that Strömquist's world is a variation of what Round designates as "hyperreality."<sup>50</sup>

Round draws on structuralist critic Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1975) and literary critic Rosemary Jackson's works *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), respectively, in order to expose the function of the "hyperreal." She explains that "the fantastic is based around a notion of hesitation between reality and the marvelous, achieved through the co-presence of natural and supernatural elements".<sup>51</sup> Even though Strömquist's album is not inscribed in the fantastic genre, the artist proceeds in a similar way. Without concern for disciplinary boundaries, Strömquist happily blends psychoanalysis, literature, political science, popular history, and culture, by using references as heterogeneous as Nancy Chodorow, Jonathan Swift, Georg Brandes, Whitney Houston, and Ronald Reagan, thus creating characters, situations, and events which are obviously real, but altered and fictionalized in brand new settings. The "hyperreal" puts focus on the relationship between reality and imagination, just as it triggers an alternation between the real and the fictionalized world. In consequence, the "hyperreal" can be seen as a technique that encourages a distanced and critical view on what reality is and could be. It is particularly the reality of male-female relationships that are explored with the magnifying – and satirizing – glass of Strömquist's "hyperreality."

Like a researcher in postcolonial studies, Strömquist locates behaviors, media, and artistic expressions in a political context where the woman, instead of the colonized individual, struggles

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<sup>49</sup> Round 2010, 196.

<sup>50</sup> Round 2010, 196.

<sup>51</sup> Round 2010, 196.



for independence.<sup>52</sup> As for Hemmingsson, Strömquist's woman exists in a context in which she is constructed and defined by man. Her purpose is to break free from this yoke and to draw a less idealistic picture of the female gender. A parallel can be drawn to how the colonized individual has been constructed and defined by the settling society. To change these static relationships seems like an insurmountable mission since, as Frantz Fanon clearly showed in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965),<sup>53</sup> the hierarchal interdependence between colonized and colonizer is very difficult to break with for several reasons. In fact, they are trapped in a paradoxical system.

In the colonial scheme, the colonizing group wants to civilize the colonized individual. Yet, once this is done, there will be no difference to help distinguish between the two, and the former may lose its privileges. The colonizing group thus seeks to perpetuate an image of the colonized as inhuman and inferior, through discursive markers.<sup>54</sup> Conversely, in order to win the esteem of the colonizing group and to attain its privileges, the colonized subject is forced to adapt to the colonizing group's culture, even though this may lead to a loss of the subject's own culture and of individual identity. If the colonized subject refuses the adaptation, he will be despised and rejected by the colonizing group.<sup>55</sup>

The same type of relationship can be observed between men and women in Strömquist's work, which analyzes the behavior of men as a way to keep a higher status and certain privileges. Woman must know how to reflect man's desires and his goals and even admire and support them; otherwise, she will be rejected. In this balance of power, the woman is the most vulnerable. If she does not carefully evaluate what is happening to her at the time she enters into a relationship with a man, she may lose herself and become miserable, pathetic, and deprived of identity. Strömquist especially tries to offer tools to get out of this trap, which encloses both sexes in an unhealthy relationship.

## THE FALSE INDEPENDENCE OF MEN IN STRÖMQUIST

*Prince Charles känsla* opens with an episode entitled "the gang of four," where Strömquist introduces a Chinese political group that was accused of and arrested for the political and

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<sup>52</sup> Coundouriotis 2009, 54.

<sup>53</sup> Cited here as Fanon 1969.

<sup>54</sup> Fanon 1969, 29–85.

<sup>55</sup> Fanon 1969, 117–120. This Manichean scheme continues to keep groups in society apart from each other, according to Azar 2006, in what is there termed "the colonial boomerang."



economic chaos in the country during the Cultural Revolution. Shortly after a presentation of the four sordid faces, however, Strömquist changes track. In the following frameless panel, the narrator's voice alerts us (figure 3): "But let me introduce you to another 'gang of four' that has also exerted an influence on culture! It's the world's four best-paid TV comedians in recent years."<sup>56</sup>



Men jag hade tänkt presentera ett ANNAT "fyra gäng" som påverkat kulturen! Nämligen de fyra TV-komiker som varit världens bäst betalda under de senaste åren.

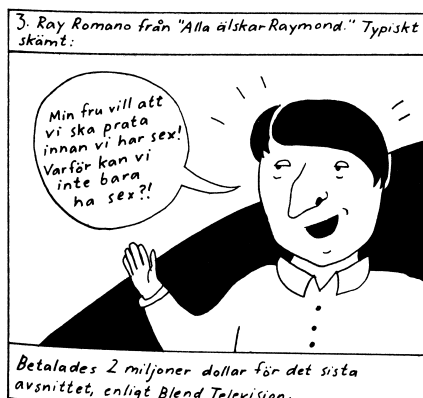


Figure 3: Women are "a pain in the ass" to "the gang of four". (Strömquist 2010: 9)

<sup>56</sup> Strömquist 2010, 9.



Tim Allen, Jerry Seinfeld, Ray Romano, and Charlie Sheen are then introduced, along with their stupendous pay per aired television episode. Thereafter, a sexist joke from each comedian is quoted in a speech balloon or two (Strömquist 2010: 9). According to the narrator, these comedians have a trait in common: in their television series, women wish to have access to their person, through love or relationship, which, for the male comedians, is “a huge pain in the ass”.<sup>57</sup> Instantly and subtly, Strömquist has made a link between geopolitical and male-female power games, since the mentioned TV comedians are not only sexists, but also compared with cruel dictators.

Referring to feminist sociologist and psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow and her theory about the social construction of gender roles, Strömquist explains that being brought up in a family with a strict distinction between what is feminine and what is masculine – in other words, with typical hetero-normative behavioral norms – may cause “mental disorders”.<sup>58</sup> In such environments, the woman takes care of the children, talks to them, and creates emotional links, while the man claims his independence by absence, silence, and professional occupations. In a context where the sexes are polarized like this, the son cannot identify with the mother, but may also not identify with the father with whom he is unable to establish a relationship. Instead, the son must identify with a cultural and sexist construction of masculinity.

At this point in the narrative, Strömquist inserts a panel with additional information, seemingly serving to anticipate critical reactions to the hetero-normative model outlined in the previous sequence. A child says in several speech bubbles that “this kind of family no longer exists”, that “they possibly exist in the most conservative US South,” and that “today, moms and dads both have emotional contact with their children.” In the panel following these remarks, Strömquist provides a rebuttal by citing recent statistics which show that forty-one percent of children speak with their mother when they are sad, twenty-four percent with a friend, and only five percent with their father.<sup>59</sup>

According to this example, there is a problem in the formation of identity which is rooted in what Strömquist describes as the constructed relationship between men and women. This difficulty is comparable with the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, since, much like the colonizer must distance himself from the colonized to maintain his identity as a superior and an imperialist, the man must keep his distance from the woman to construct a male identity. Indeed,

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<sup>57</sup> Strömquist 2010, 10.

<sup>58</sup> Strömquist 2010, 12.

<sup>59</sup> Strömquist 2010, 13.





Yvonne Hirdman has demonstrated how male and female genders, despite movements for equality, have been maintained separate through claims of biological differences.<sup>60</sup> She has introduced concepts like “gender system” and “gender contract”<sup>61</sup> on the Swedish arena, in order to analyze how women are kept excluded and inferior to men. According to Hirdman’s view of the gender system: men become men by defining woman. In consequence, women have neither the power to define man nor themselves.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, it is possible to observe Hirdman, Chodorow, and Fanon’s schemes perpetuated and intertwined in Strömquist’s work, because the cultural construction of the white man in today’s postcolonial world contains an opposition between sexes, as well as an opposition between people. Whiteness scholarship stresses the essentialist fallacy, where the “Western narratives of history tend to project simplistic binaries, such as dominant or subordinate and good or bad,” but also suggests that “men are better than women, and that rich people are blessed while poor people are doomed”.<sup>63</sup> In fact, Strömquist’s didactic exposition serves to uncover these rooted ideas beneath the surface of the male-female relationship, while, at the same time, offering tools to decrypt other forms of relationships built on domination.

Strömquist continues her reasoning by first taking the man’s perspective. If the comedic “gang of four” – Allen, Seinfeld, Romano, and Sheen – suffers from all kinds of contact with women, it is very strange that they nevertheless insist on maintaining relationships with the opposite sex. Here, the narrator suggests a solution by asking a particularly caustic question (figure 4): “Why do men not create exclusively male alternative environments, built on utopian models like the Hundred Acre Wood of Winnie the Pooh or earlier versions of Duckburg?”<sup>64</sup> Strömquist uses an entire page to portray this ideal and purely male world, where identically dressed men are engaged in “typically” masculine activities like building a fire and fishing.

After this caricatured representation of a men’s world, Strömquist, drawing from the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, argues that the so-called independence of man exists solely if a woman supports him. In fact, it is the woman who allows him to act “independently in the

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<sup>60</sup> Hirdman 2001.

<sup>61</sup> Hirdman 1998a; 1998b.

<sup>62</sup> Hirdman 2001, 57.

<sup>63</sup> Syed & Ali 2001, 350.

<sup>64</sup> Strömquist 2010, 16.





outside world”.<sup>65</sup> According to the narrator, referring to Benjamin, this is the effect of mothers not letting go of their sons. Many men have not been given the chance to become independent and act without support from their mothers. In other words, mothers have been too present, ready to assist their sons in all circumstances. Thus, men’s independence in general, and especially towards women, has to be manifested and proved continuously. In their love relations, they repeat the childish relation they had to the women who took care of them. Consequently, the need for woman becomes ambiguous: the desire for her presence is systematically connected with a desire to be apart from her, since she reminds man of the mother who tended to invade his life and would not let him become autonomous. In Strömquist’s view, this seems to be the motive for many male-dominated environments, which are engendered by the controlling support from women, i. e. mothers.



Figure 4: Illustration of men building alternative communities without women (Strömquist 2010:16)

<sup>65</sup> Strömquist 2010, 17.



Despite contextual differences, it is possible to compare this scenario with the colonizer–colonized relationship because, just as the man is comforted by female support, the colonizing group creates stable links with the colonies and colonized to strengthen its status in the world. Thus, the colonizer’s power comes from the support of the colonized. The parallel is clearer in the section of *Prince Charles känsla* titled “Power, lovepower, political interests.” At this point, the narrator poses the question: “Where does patriarchy get its huge pep to just keep going and continue to exist in today’s Western society?”<sup>66</sup> Strömquist finds the answer with the political scientist Anna G. Jónasdóttir. According to Strömquist’s reading of Jónasdóttir, the strength comes from love, because it is fundamental to human existence; Strömquist’s use of the concept “lovepower” draws on Jónasdóttir’s work, in which she introduces the term “lovepower,” which is analogous to “manpower,” because love is an exploitable resource comparable with labor force.<sup>67</sup> The labor force includes men and women and they can create a surplus or a deficit on the market: either there are more people than available jobs, or not enough manpower for the jobs at hand. Conversely, according to Strömquist’s interpretation, only women create a surplus of “lovepower” which is exploited by men. In romantic relationships in general, men exploit the love and care that women are taught to provide in all circumstances. There is therefore an inequality in the division of relationship resources, because they are exploited by only one of the partners, the man. The same observation can be made regarding the colonizer–colonized relationship where the former tries to portray the latter as demanding, while in actuality it is the former who seizes the resources of the latter.

## (RE)SHAPING THE WOMAN AND THE PAST

Strömquist also adopts the perspective of women to inquire why it is that women want to be with men who keep emotionally distant and who seize their resources.<sup>68</sup> In this case, it is psychoanalyst Lynne Layton who provides an answer because, in Strömquist’s reading of her, women have never been able to identify with the father in the sexist and hetero-normative family. Therefore, she does not have access to such “male” characteristics as independence and agency. In addition, in imitating her mother, her self-confidence comes only via the relational, i.e. by meeting the needs of others [Figure 5].

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<sup>66</sup> Strömquist 2010, 111.

<sup>67</sup> Jónasdóttir 1991.

<sup>68</sup> Strömquist 2010, 18.



Figure 5: The strength of the patriarchy comes from love that women have learned to provide in all circumstances (Strömquist 2010: 36-37)

When a woman is not confirmed by her relationships, she becomes frustrated and desires to act as a man, namely by “putting your own needs before those of others,” “being absorbed by your own interests, without concern for the feelings of others,” “having a strong need to be alone,” and “sleeping with everybody you meet, without responsibility for their feelings”.<sup>69</sup> However, it is taboo for women to behave in this way in a culture divided along gender lines. Hence, in order to gain access to such masculine behaviors, the woman must be bound to a man who embodies everything that patriarchal society denies her.

The colonized are subject to similar constantly reproduced patterns of structural oppression, for example when they observe the exportation of their resources to the colonizers’ countries. This is a source of constant frustration that requires valves to evacuate the tension. As the dominant group refuses to see the Other, the colonizers can only relate their own camp, while wishing for the same privileges possessed by the colonizing group. To gain access to the same freedom as the

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<sup>69</sup> Strömquist 2010, 21.



colonizer, the colonized can similarly try to find a partner from the colonizing group, but they can also adopt the same methods as the colonizer, despite the taboos, and exploit the earth and others in turn. As extreme as these generalizations may be, the polarization remains, anchored in social roles and by the shared history of women's emancipation and colonialism.<sup>70</sup> Thus, Strömquist manages through humor to draw attention to what is fundamentally dysfunctional in human relations on a global level.

Indeed, Strömquist challenges women and men to open their eyes both to contemporary relations of domination and to those of the past, in order to understand how their codes and standards have evolved. For example, she explores what she calls "sexual property" in different historical periods and cultures.<sup>71</sup> With the objective to reveal the constructedness of our sexual codes, for example the traditional conception of woman as man's property, she puts forward Viking mythology which, according to Strömquist, says that Frey, wife of Odin, had several men, but not the reverse, and that Frey made love with four dwarves to obtain a beautiful jewel.<sup>72</sup>

In connection to this reversed view of male domination, Strömquist also writes that, during the romantic era when nationalism was in full swing, the Swedes wanted to show the world their glorious and heroic past through literature. Several writers undertook to rewrite the mythology and sagas and radically changed the women's behavior, so that it corresponded to the ideals of the time. For her part, Strömquist revisits the past in order to retrieve the versions that include women and emphasize their contribution to history. It remains a comic and light rewriting, in contrast to the historical and feminist writing of, for example, writer Assia Djebar, whose works are often solemn and tragic. Nevertheless, these two authors have the same project when they strive to unearth past women's voices in order to show their participation in history. Although colonization is not at the center of Strömquist's story, she nonetheless interrogates, both humorously and seriously, the writing of history and the white male's monopolization of it.

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<sup>70</sup> Even though their aim is to challenge Western feminism and its often ethnocentric perspective, some scholars in postcolonial feminism can agree on a stream of universalism concerning this matter, in order to show the complexity of women's emancipation throughout the world. See for example Ray & Korteweg 1999.

<sup>71</sup> Strömquist 2010, 57.

<sup>72</sup> Strömquist 2010, 62-63.



## CONCLUSION

Hemmingsson and Strömquist have carved their own space in the media landscape of comic art in Sweden and their works appeal to many readers. Their humor is not pure entertainment: it is also, overtly or covertly, educational without being moralistic. Both writer-artists strive, albeit through different means, to create comics that make us laugh while honing our critical thinking about the world. Laughter functions in both works as a necessity, in order to address serious, and sometimes violent, critiques of persisting gender inequalities. The heaviness of the messages is systematically lightened up by their individual techniques of replicating reality in humorously absurd ways, making the reading less offending. Nevertheless, a literary studies framework has been fruitful to unfold the analyzed works' deep anchorage in a Western culture and in a postcolonial world. The underlying connections to these contexts in the comic albums show, on the one hand, that woman's role and status, as well as her body, are affected in the present by conceptions of womanhood in literary history and, on the other hand, that male-female relationships present similarities with other types of relations of domination, for instance between the former colonizer and the former colonized.

In this way, both writer-artists use comic art as a congenial medium to get across controversial and feminist messages. If Hemmingsson concentrates her art on specific situations in daily life, enhanced with sparse but striking dialogues, Strömquist offers longer sequences of explanation and argumentation for her personal but pregnant interpretations of circumstances surrounding the male-female relationship. Hemmingsson seeks first to show women as they are, without restrictions and taboos of the patriarchal world. Her way of presenting the farcical and carnivalesque body through text and image frees women from prejudices about the feminine and lets them inhabit reality. Strömquist, for her part, is slightly more demanding of her readers: she urges them to observe the irrational in the male-female relationship by humorous and ironic analyses of history and contemporary society. Thus, the importance of humor in their works does not outshine their feminist and political messages. On the contrary, these Swedish feminist and comic artists are exercising power through laughter, with the objective to change their readers' world view.



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