Rape in the news: on rape genres in Swedish news coverage
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ABSTRACT
This article deals with narratives of rape in Swedish newspapers between 1990 and 2015. Though perpetuating myths and stereotypes about rape, rapists and rape victims, the main argument is that the narratives of rape in the news are diverse. This diversity is analysed in terms of different genres—narratives of “the lonely pervert”; “the sex slavery rape”; “the celebrity rape”; and “the suburb rape.” Genre will be used as a cultural analytical means to elaborate on the meanings of news reports of rape and the societal functions and effects of these meanings. It is exemplified how some genres form debates that push changes in national legislation or encourage proactive engagement in city planning on the local level, whereas others are characterised by questioning or justification. In the case of the celebrity rape, the sex slavery rape and the lonely pervert rape these genres produce narratives that hide patriarchal structures by “monstering” the perpetrator or by questioning the very existence of the specific rape. In the case of the suburb rapes the patriarchal structure is hidden behind a discussion of other structural problems.

Introduction
This article deals with the meanings, functions and effects of rape reports in Swedish newspapers between 1990 and 2015. News coverage of rape has consistently been proven to reproduce previous news narratives, using familiar themes that are repeated over time (S. Elizabeth Bird 2003; Stevie Simkin 2013). Extensive research on news narratives of rape shows that these narratives perpetuate myths and stereotypes about rape, rapists and rape victims (R. Martha Burt 1980; Barbara Barnett 2008; Renae Franiuk, Jennifer L. Seefelt, and Joseph A. Vandello 2008; Stephanie Bonnes 2013; Nancy Worthington 2013; Deb Waterhouse-Watson 2016). The most commonly used narrative tool is the way that victims are described as either deserving or innocent; presented as virgins attacked by monsters, or promiscuous women who brought the rape upon themselves and could therefore be blamed (Helen Benedict 1992; Meryl Aldridge 1995; Anneke Meyer 2010; Shannon O’Hara 2012). Perpetrators of sexual violence are regularly described as “beasts” or “perverts” and as such distanced from “ordinary men” (Paul Mason and Jane Monckton-Smith 2008; Priscilla Boshoff and Jeanne Prinsloo 2015).

Though I certainly agree that news coverage of rape perpetuates stereotypical narratives of rape, rapists and rape victims, the main argument of this article is that
the narratives of rape in the news are diverse. Indeed not all those accused of rape are described as beasts or perverts. Instead it is apparent that beasts and perverts are constructed as perpetrators of particular “types” of rape, while other “types” require that perpetrators of a different kind are produced. This diversity of available, but still stereotypical, narratives of rape will be discussed in relation to different rape genres.

The concept of genre should be understood not primarily as a tool for distinguishing between different types of narratives but as an analytical means to elaborate on the connection between the cultural meanings of rape and the societal functions and effects of these meanings. Within academic disciplines such as ethnology and folkloristics, there is a long tradition of understanding different genres as both productive and functional, and interpreting them with a focus on their cultural meaning and purpose (Inger Lövkö 1996, 111). This definition opens for an analysis of how genres work within a specific cultural context, rather than of their form and content alone. The concept of framing has long been central to the understanding of news narratives, meaning in this sense that the news media provide a frame of reference that enables the audience to comprehend the particular narrative (c.f. Kenneth Dowler 2006). The concept of genre is intended to complement this analytical tradition by describing how broader cultural processes are set in motion as a result of how different rape cases are framed in news production. Thus the ongoing framing of rape in the media is seen as initiating, or maintaining, the cultural processes that forms rape genres. Genre will be used to highlight a variety of functions that rape coverage seems to fulfill in society. By describing how rape is framed within different genres, the purpose is to problematise these functions.

“News” in news coverage does not necessarily refer to reports about something that is actually new. Instead the goal for newspapers and other media actors is to succeed in producing “continuing news”—coverage that can go on beyond the first interest in the actual rape case. To be able to produce continuing news, British sociologist Meryl Aldridge argues that news media is “function driven” in the sense that it needs to ascribe the specific rape case a societal function, for example by demanding in editorial comments that “something must be done,” simultaneously suggesting what this something might be (1995, 665f). More specifically, a certain “problem” or a certain “lack” in society needs to be identified (other than the rape itself) that is possible to feel indignation about. American media professor Robert M. Entman claims that the identified problem points to this function in that it includes a causal interpretation (What is the reason for this problem?), a moral evaluation (Who is to blame?) and a treatment recommendation (What is to be done about it?) (Robert M. Entman 1993). In this perspective, the actual rape only becomes a minor part of the news narrative—something that triggers the identification of a “problem” and sets a specific “function” in motion. This is in line with how the concept of genre will be used in this article.

The aim is to describe the implicit meaning of different genres initiated and maintained in Swedish news coverage of rape and reflect on their societal functions. How and why are a variety of societal problems conjured, established and debated using different genres of rape? And as a consequence, what (stereotypical) narratives of the rape, the rapist and the rape victim are produced to support these genres and trigger their function? The genres discussed in this article are “the lonely pervert rape,” “the sex slavery rape,” “the celebrity rape” and “the suburb rape.” These genres should be
understood as cultural constructs maintained by the framing of rape in the news media, not as a way to understand actual rapes. On the contrary, when naming the genres the aim was to create a distance from the typology of rape used in, for example, crime statistics. The point is thus not to argue for a separate understanding of different “types” of rape, but exactly the opposite, to question the distinctions and typology suggested in news coverage. With reference to Entman, analytical questions are posed, such as what is identified as the “problem”; who is to “blame”; and what is described as the “solution” within news genres of rape? As will be shown, with Swedish genres of rape the range of such problems covers “legislation,” “immigration,” “city planning” and “state feminism,” among others. It will be argued that these problems work as a way to avoid talking about rape.

A problematisation of the relation between genre and function is relevant from a perspective that strives to end rape, since the solution of a particular problem is dependent on it being articulated as such (Pierre Bourdieu 1999, 280f; c.f. Gabriella Nilsson 2009, 2010). If the problem is never identified as “men raping,” then the solution can never be “stopping men from raping.” Instead rape genres works to maintain the status quo. Drawing from the respective work of the French cultural analyst Pierre Bourdieu and the American anthropologist Allen Feldman on how the negative aspects of society are silenced and suppressed, and applying their somewhat similar concepts of symbolic violence and cultural anesthesia, from a feminist perspective it becomes possible to analyse how the maintenance of the status quo within rape genres takes part in the (re)production of hierarchies in a patriarchal society. With the concept of symbolic violence Bourdieu aims to describe those practices and processes that work to hide the structural reasons for subordination, injustice and oppression (Bourdieu 1999). In a similar way Allen Feldman uses the term cultural anesthesia to describe those practices that work to hide the pain structurally inflicted upon the Other in modern society by making the Other’s pain inadmissible into public culture (Allen Feldman 1994). In this article, the processes highlighted with these two concepts are viewed as parallel and intertwined. This means that the rape genres simultaneously supports the process of subordination and hides the experiences and consequences of being subordinate. More specifically the two concepts will be employed to highlight the tendency to avoid talking about rape in rape genres.

Methods

Methodologically the article is based on an ethnographic content analysis, which means that the methods for selecting, retrieving and analyzing the news coverage of rape are integrated in an interactive and reflexive way (David L. Altheide 1987). As described above the emphasis is on discovering the meanings and functions of rape genres, rather than describing the content or mere quantity of different variables in news reports.

Somewhat simplified, Sweden has four major national newspapers; two morning papers and two tabloid papers. The analysis draws on an overview of news reports published in one of the tabloid newspapers Expressen between 1990 and 2015. The decision to select this particular newspaper for the initial search was above all for practical reasons—full texts of the news articles for the complete period of time were accessible online through the Swedish media database Retriever Research. That was not
the case with the other three newspapers. It could be assumed that the coverage of rape is particularly high in newspapers of this type, however it should be noted, that the narratives discussed in this article are tabloid versions of rape that might not necessarily correspond to the representations of rape in other newspapers.

Combining the search terms “rape” and “court,” and excluding the term “child,” the aim was to get a broad coverage of rape cases, and simultaneously avoiding the extensive reporting about child sexual abuse that I knew from my previous research (Nilsson 2009). The search resulted in a total of 1041 news articles, normally distributed between 20 and 40 articles per year, and with a tendency of an increasing number of articles per year after the year 2000. Some particularly hyper medialised cases resulted in peaks with up to 90 articles in some years. Regarding these cases additional searches were conducted in the other three newspapers as well, but the analysis in this article is based mainly on reports published in Expressen.

Within ethnographic content analysis the aim is to be “systematic and analytic, but not rigid” (Altheide 1987, 4). This perspective involves a reflexive movement between data collection, coding, and interpretation, as well as an acceptance of the fact that categories and themes emerge throughout the study. Only after the first summary review of the articles, the pattern, of what was later analysed as different genres, was revealed and came to form the basis for the further coding. With Entman’s description of problem, blame and solution in mind, various meanings and functions of the different rape cases covered in the selected articles were identified, resulting in a set of categories. These categories were designated the suburb rape (25 different cases); the lonely pervert rape (30 cases); the sex slavery rape (10 cases); the sex-murder (7 cases); the celebrity rape (10 cases); the Casanova-rape (5 cases); rape in the capacity of the professional role (20 cases); rape against a particularly vulnerable person (10 cases); and finally the funny rape (5 cases). Not all but most articles were categorized as belonging to a genre. The definitions and denominations of different genres have been developed analytically parallel to the readings of the texts and should be seen as abstract constructions rather than descriptions. In this article, four genres have been selected for further analysis—the suburb rape; the lonely pervert rape; the sex slavery rape; and the celebrity rape—as these genres contain the most hyper medialised cases. Below the results of a close reading will be presented.

**The lonely pervert rape**

Of all rape genres, the narrative of the lonely pervert is undoubtedly one of the more “classic” ones. “A bitter cold night this winter, a rapist put a rusty knife against the throat of Annika, 23. He forced her clothes off and raped her. Her wounds have not yet healed” (Expressen 20/7 1992b). Strange, aggressive and with unmet desires the lonely pervert lurks in the park or in the dark alley, awaiting a woman on her way home.

“The rapist has attacked at least three women recently. Yesterday he was out on the prowl again. With a knife hidden in his hand, he pursued a young woman and assaulted her at a bus stop” (Expressen 16/7 1994).

The lonely pervert throws himself on the victim, rips her clothes and carries out the rape with excessive violence.
“The police interrogations with the 30-year-old are a scary reading. […] With rage he throws himself on the women and threatens to kill them if they do not meet his demands” (Expressen 12/6 1992a).

When finished the lonely pervert runs off into the dark, leaving his victim bleeding on the ground, only to repeat the same act the next time his deviance become impossible to control. For years and years the same pattern is repeated, striking fear into the city district or city that is his territory. “In recent weeks, the man has been putting horror in Vasastaden in central Stockholm” (Expressen 16/7 1994).

Though generally marked by the use of excessive violence—“Hagamannen” [the man in Haga], one of Sweden’s most written-about serial rapists, actually bit the ear of one of his victims in 2005—the dominant understanding of the perpetrator of these rapes seems to be that of a mentally ill sexual pervert. “I am like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde,” convicted rapist and sex murderer Dariusz Ledzion explained to the newspaper (Expressen 30/8 1997b). “People carrying out serious sexual offences often have a strong preoccupation with sexuality and an inability to control their aggression,” a Swedish psychiatrist is allowed to explain the matter with reference to another Swedish serial rapist, in various newspapers referred to as “Sweden’s worst-ever serial rapist,” Niklas Eliasson. With a similar focus on mental status Eliasson’s lawyer declared in the same interview that “[t]here was a feeling and an inner voice that urged and triggered him to attack women” (Expressen 23/1 2011a). In spite of the excessive physical violence, with this description of the rapist, rape is produced as a sexual deviance, not as an act of violence. Allen Feldman writes that society makes violence disappear through, for example, different media practices that widen the distance between the viewer and the viewed and thus shaping cultural anesthesia by reducing the capacity to see and perceive (Feldman 1994). Transforming physically and sexually violent acts into sexual deviance and mental illness could be seen as one such practice.

In research on news narratives of rape, the process of establishing the lonely pervert as rare and deviant, thereby separating him from “ordinary men,” is termed “monstering.” Aldridge writes that in the world of the tabloids “there are only monsters and the rest” (Aldridge 1995, 671). “Last week, I woke up after a nightmare of him leaning over my bed with those evil black eyes pointing at me,” says Annika, 23, a victim of assault rape (Expressen 20/7 1992b). Thus, “those evil black eyes” in this quote play an important role in this separating process.

One way of “monstering” the lonely pervert is with reference to the extremity of the acts themselves, such as the excessive violence, as well as the large number of assaults over the many years. “Hagamannen” was convicted on six charges including attempted murder, aggravated rape, rape and attempted rape, crimes conducted over a period of seven years; “Sweden’s worst-ever serial rapist” was convicted of 14 charges including aggravated rape, attempted rape, unlawful threat, assault, sexual assault and attempted robbery conducted over a period of five years. Hence there were many years for the newspapers to create the image of a monster, and as a consequence increasingly contribute to the fear felt by the women living and working in those areas where attacks occurred.

However, another way of “monstering” the perpetrator is with reference to the “Otherness” of his personality revealed by the victim’s descriptions and by others upon
his capture, emphasising what it is in his habits, appearance or identity that separates him from “ordinary men” (Peter Chippindale and Chris Horrie 1990). “Already in school, many of the other pupils were afraid of him, and gave him the nickname ‘Knife-Niklas’,” Niklas Eliasson is remembered by his former classmates (Expressen 8/3 2011b). The coverage of “Sweden’s worst-ever serial rapist” produced the narrative of Eliasson as a child of divorced parents who had had difficulties in the relationship with his mother. He had left school early with incomplete grades and a problem with drugs and alcohol; had already started drinking at the age of 12 and had smoked cannabis regularly since he was 17. Additionally it was mentioned that he had watched pornography and played the computer game World of Warcraft up to the point of addiction (c.f. Svenska dagbladet 7/3, 2011; Expressen 8/3 2011b). It is apparent that in this example, “Otherness” is evoked not so much by the “extreme,” but by traditional markers of social exclusion or class. This suggests that when news reports are not explicitly using the extreme acts as the basis for “monstering” the perpetrator, there is a lack of narrative tools for evoking the image of the monster’s personality and background that go beyond stereotypical social categories such as class, ethnicity or race. Extensive research shows that, internationally, racial stereotypes in particular are a central feature in the practice of “monstering” (Ella Cockbain 2013).

The problem with “Hagamannen” however, compared to “Sweden’s worst-ever serial rapist,” was that he too-much resembled the ordinary man—he was the beloved father of two who took pride in his work. Only upon his capture was it revealed that he had led a double life.

“For his close family their whole world collapsed when he was arrested. The safe and respectable supportive father was suddenly in police custody—suspected of the rapes that had kept an entire city in fear for years. At first, the family didn’t want to believe it. It just couldn’t be him” (Aftonbladet 23/4 2006).

During the trial his lawyer Leif Silbersky made an effort to describe him as “more than just a monster,” stressing that “there is another side” to “Hagamannen” (Aftonbladet 18/6 2006). This whole situation made it problematic to paint the picture of evil in a compelling way. Even during the search there were some difficulties in the process of “monstering,” as the descriptions of him given by the victims were “ordinary Swedish-looking.” His “normality” was a puzzle. Mona Livholts, the Swedish scholar in social work, in her book about “Hagamannen” describes how this put the media in a dilemma; should they wallow in this uncertainty of what a monster looks like, or should they exploit the small signs of “Otherness” that were, after all, at hand? Faced with these options Livholts argues that the latter came to dominate: his footprints revealed a perpetrator with “unusually small feet,” a fact that for some time was emphasised in the narrative about his rapes (Mona Livholts 2007).

One important function of the lonely pervert rape is obviously the desire to sell newspapers. However, I would argue that the focus on rarity, severity, and “Otherness” in the news reports about rapists—even where no other “deviating traits” except small feet could be found to distinguish good from bad—hinders discussions about the causes of rape. As O’Hara writes, “if the perpetrator is a devious monster, rape becomes a random act of violence rather than a societal problem” (2012, 257). Clearly, the repeated rapes, the terrifying stories of the victims and the police hunt are of major news value, but the following trial might not be. Confessions are common and the
forensic evidence normally extensive (Keith Soothill and Sylvia Walby 1991; Aldridge 1995). These cases thus call for a different argument on “what must be done” than for instance a more effective criminal justice system. What then, is identified by the media as the “problem” in this genre?

At first, the lonely pervert might appear as a moral guardian who, through the fear he causes among women, sets the limits of their mobility in time and space. However, it is not the actions of the women raped by the lonely pervert that are questioned, either by the media or society in general. These women are never implicitly thought of as “deserving,” but easily produced as ideal victims (Nils Christie 2001). On the contrary, with this genre all can agree that women need to be able to move safely in the public space. As a consequence two potential “problems” could be suggested. First the problem that women are prevented from moving about due to the existence of rapists (where the solution, then, would be to try to end rape). Secondly the problem that women are raped due to the lack of light in isolated places where rape can take place. Of these two problems the latter seems to dominate, possibly since it opens for a more constructive space for action. “If assaults can be prevented, no price is too high to renovate the walkway,” said some Swedish politicians in response to the reports of a rape (Nacka Värmdö Posten 21/5 2012). From this perspective the lonely pervert can be countered with different technical innovations and changes in city planning. Bushes can be cut down, dark passages and walkways illuminated. Without darkness and seclusion, the rapist is made powerless and disarmed (Carina Listerborn 2002). Making the geographical territory of the serial rapist more “safe,” becomes a concrete way of handling rape at a local level without needing to address the politically problematic issue of gender and violence (Dowler 2006). However positive proactivity might be, the changes in city planning could be viewed as examples of symbolic violence, facilitating the maintenance of a state of cultural anesthesia. More specifically, the lonely pervert thus functions as a leeway for non-violent men that widens the distance between the rapist and themselves.

The sex slavery rape

Surprisingly many narratives of “sex slavery rape” turn up in the Swedish news coverage, with similar headlines such as “I was a sex-slave in Stockholm” (Expressen 22/10 1999); “Here is where the sex-slaves were hid” (Expressen 6/6 2000d); “They kept her as a sex-slave” (Expressen 19/5 2005a); “Kept as a slave by a murderer” (Expressen 15/8 2008c); and “Held as sex-prisoners” (Expressen 5/2 2009a). It is usually revealed how a grown man in some kind of power position—as a result of profession, class, age or relationship—has held captive one or several young women, and subjected them to extreme, sexually sadistic actions. “One woman testifies that she had been tied with duct tape and forced to drink urine from a glass” (Expressen 6/8 2005b).

“For several years, the two women were living under ‘slave-like’ forms. [...] The man punished them in different ways. One way was to beat them over the palms and soles with a metal shoehorn. Another was showering them with the sometimes scalding hot and sometimes icy water. At one point, he carved his initials on one of the women’s body with a knife” (Expressen 5/2 2009a).
The scene of this internationally recurring narrative could be “a hidden apartment at the back of the house,” a “torture chamber in a shed in the garden,” a “concrete bunker” or, more specifically, “the sex-cottage in Vrangelsro” in the Swedish countryside (Expressen 3/4 2011d). The women subjected to sex slavery rape are daughters, wives, victims of trafficking or young girls with a record of self-harm who have been promised financial compensation (c.f. Expressen 5/4, 2001; Expressen 5/4 2010d). Thus narratives of rape and prostitution are mixed together in a complex way.

“She was admitted to a residential health care facility where she was treated for self-harm. At the care facility she began to prostitute herself. […] Prostitution became another way for her to harm herself. One of the sex-purchasers called himself Peter. The man ensured her that he had contacts. He could help her get out of the treatment so that she could finally move back home” (Expressen 10/1 2013).

The sex slavery rape has an obvious resemblance to the lonely pervert rape in that it involves a process of “monstering.” In addition to excessive physical violence the basis for this “monstering” is the elaborate sexual sadism and the use of so-called “humiliation sex” (c.f. Expressen 30/1 2010c), or the extremely long period of time the women have been kept prisoner. In the case of Austrian Josef Fritz, he held his daughter captive for 24 years, regularly raping her and impregnating her with seven children, as was revealed in 2008. “Women are slaves to be tortured and humiliated,” one of Sweden’s most written-about “sex slave rapists,” the former police chief known as “Kapten Klänning” [the Captain in a dress], is reported to have told his victims (Café 24/1 2014).

When the identity of “Kapten Klänning” was revealed in 2005 the case was described as the largest scandal ever within the Swedish Police. The foremost reason for this was “Kapten Klänning”’s position as a public advocate for gender equality in society in general and within the police in particular (Expressen 29/1 2010a). He was a media darling, an idol of the women’s shelter movement and the politicians’ protégé, as it said in the introduction to a radio documentary about the case (Sveriges Radio P1, 12/9 2010). The “monstering” of “Kapten Klänning” was achieved by emphasising his many extremely sadistic actions, carried out against particularly vulnerable victims (Expressen 29/1 2010a). The contrast within this double nature—on the one hand the good advocate for gender equality and women’s rights and on the other the sexual sadist whose misogynist language was extreme—formed the basis for the classic narrative of the wolf in sheep’s clothing. The designation “Kapten Klänning” in itself can in this context be understood as part of an emasculation process by which the superior position (through rank, position, “goodness,” competence, popularity etc.) is progressively dismantled and finally turned into the subordinate Other (c.f. Sandrine Boudana 2014, 54).

However the dilemma within news coverage of sex slavery rapes occurs when it is revealed that the single rapist is in fact the leader of a network of acquainted men, a so-called “sex purchase network” (c. f. Expressen 6/8 2005b; Expressen 3/4 2011d). In the trial against another “sex slavery rapist,” named the “Senior manager” in the reports, and seven other men, one of the women told “in detail about her dark memories from the sex network’s secret meetings with rape, group sex, whips and tied women” (Expressen 31/3 2009). This is when the cases of repeated sadistic rapes are transformed into “sex
webs,” webs that keep growing as more and more ordinary men—sports coaches, a successful businessman, a neighbour—are revealed to be involved.

“Once there was a fairly young man there, who they said was the head of a large company. After an hour or so he stopped and said: ‘I have to go and pick up the kids at day care’” (Expressen 29/1 2010b).

Adult, white, middle-class men are found to have had repeated sadistic rape as a shared hobby. This makes the continued process of “monstering” problematic since, with reference to Aldridge, there are only monsters and the rest. This implies that if it wasn’t a sex monster that carried out the rapes, then it must have been “one of us”; or instead the whole event didn’t occur at all. As Aldridge puts it, “[a]ny suggestion that this world is not as solid as it seems, or that the safe bifurcated categories of its fables are fragile too, is best avoided” (Aldridge 1995, 671). Although “Kapten Klänning” was in fact part of a large “sex-network,” the other members of this network were never publicly revealed (Expressen 10/1 2013). Once again it seems to have become important to keep the patriarchal society in a state of cultural anesthesia.

As a consequence, the symbolic violence needed to facilitate cultural anesthesia causes the involved “ordinary” men to vanish from the narrative. Instead it is the victims that emerge: mentally unstable, directionless, underage girls with long records of self-harm, who sell their bodies (c.f. Expressen 10/1 2013). Buying sexual services is prohibited in Sweden, but is it really rape? The news reports seem to hesitate. The circumstances around the arrangements and the details of what actually happened are shrouded in mystery. The individuals involved remain nameless and faceless until the web completely ceases to have existed—no matter what a few women’s rights activists argue. The ordinary men return to their ordinary life. Only the sex monster remains. These sex webs never lead to a debate about why ordinary men crave vulnerable young women’s bodies. What then, are the functions of sex slavery rape in news reports?

One obvious function, similar to that of the lonely pervert, is the possibility to paint good and evil in black and white, thus keeping a firm distance from the violent grey zones of everyday life. However, the sex slavery rapes does not produce the same constructive energy and decisiveness at a local level to make the urban environment safer for women. Paradoxically, one “problem” articulated in the coverage of “Kapten Klänning” was the “gender perspective.” The fact that “Kapten Klänning” had been a gender equality advocate now became a sign of something “extreme,” or rather, another example of his “extremeness,” along with the sadistic rapes. Drawing on a long tradition of portraying feminists as extreme in different ways (c.f. Gabriella Nilsson and Lövkrona Inger 2015), the problematic complexity of good and bad being situated in the same body was moderated. “Kapten Klänning” was a feminist and a sexual sadist, each in (almost) equally bad terms. He was not a wolf in sheep’s clothing after all, but a wolf altogether.

In one of the very first news reports after “Kapten Klänning” was caught, “a former colleague” complained about his gender interests, stating that “[e]verything was focused on men against women. Equality is important, for sure, but there are so many more areas for the police to work in” (Aftonbladet 29/1 2010). In the same article, in the Swedish context the popular and well-known criminologist Leif GW Persson stated that “Kapten Klänning” had “built his whole career on this nagging about gender equality. It
was his Holy Grail. He was never a real police officer” (Aftonbladet 29/1 2010). The identified “problem” in this coverage seemed to be that just anyone could hide behind the “politically correct” trend of gender equality. The function of this specific case of sex slavery rape was thus to criticise what was thought of as a feminist hegemony, in Sweden often critically referred to as “state feminism.” As an anti-feminist blogger put it with reference to the case: “Nowadays it’s easy for people calling themselves feminists to be successful in any type of field—and so all of a sudden a lot of feminists pop up” (quoted in Nilsson and Inger 2015). The “Othering” of “Kapten Klänning” is thus partly the process of defining him as a feminist and “not a real police officer.” The case of “Kapten Klänning” offered a legitimate tool to question feminism and defend ordinary men from accusations of violence. Surprisingly, “Kapten Klänning” became a way of not talking about men’s violence, but instead an argument for the need to talk less about it, thus strongly facilitating the cultural anesthesia of patriarchy.

The celebrity rape

A similar and equally common genre is the celebrity rape. Did it even occur? Hundreds and hundreds of people are prepared to argue the opposite. They demonstrate, write debate articles, and collect signatures to claim otherwise. The politically significant “truth-teller,” the idolised singer, the internationally admired actor and all the athletes. Talented and beloved role models. Men to look up to, to dream about. Could a rapist really be situated in their bodies?

The celebrity rape is an internationally well represented genre. The list of famous men who have been accused of sexual violence, but who have been publically defended, is long. Woody Allen, Tupac, Roman Polanski, and Bill Cosby are just some of the more written-about celebrity cases. At least before #MeToo, the celebrity rape is thus more than anything marked by the strong opposition raised against the accuser in favour of the accused. “They lie. They are stupid, naive and looking for indemnity and revenge,” the nine girls accusing the Swedish record company director Billy Butt were described (Expressen 19/10 1993b). The woman who dares to claim the guilt of a famous man—the hotel maid, the secretary, the camera assistant, the nanny—should be “pissed on,” “gang-raped” and “left to die from the knife shoved in her pussy,” according to the anonymous defenders of Tupac on social media (see Nilsson and Inger 2015, 186). This makes it clear how strongly this genre is marked by social stratification and inequalities, aside from gender, in terms of class, race and age. In the coverage of the trial against Billy Butt, the case was described as “the miserable story of the gentleman and the maid” (Expressen 30/3 1993a). As a matter of fact, it could be argued that this genre is the very epicentre of the #MeToo-movement.

Central within the genre of celebrity rape is that it reveals a strong need to keep the iconic image of some people unblemished. The need to maintain the state of cultural anesthesia is, more than in any other genre, explicitly expressed, and the symbolic violence is manifested in the form of actual threat. The case of the WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, accused of sexual assault in Sweden in 2010, has generated a whole defence-movement. In Sweden, several cases of celebrity rape turn up in the news coverage—mostly “pop-stars,” “ice hockey-players” and “football-players”—but the more hyper medialised cases concern the above mentioned accusations made against.
Billy Butt and Julian Assange, as well as against the opera singer Tito Beltran. “It’s a farce,” Tito Beltran said as a response to the accusations of him raping a nanny. “They are trying to drag my name, my person and my career in the dirt” (Expressen 12/11 2007). In the Swedish context, the well-known lawyer, Pelle Svensson, described the whole case as a “witch-hunt” that would devastate Beltran’s life forever (Expressen 22/1 2008a).

By definition, celebrity rape could be predicted to enable “continuing news.” In the case of Julian Assange the narrative has been retold for years and years. Aldridge writes that the insatiable quest to reduce equivocality and attain a workable level of certainty is a key to understanding the relationship between the news media and the social negotiation of deviance (Aldridge 1995, 669). However, in the case of celebrity rape this certainty seems difficult to produce. “It has been extremely difficult to see him as a rapist,” one of Tito Beltran’s colleagues, another famous and beloved Swedish musician told the newspapers, questioning the colleagues who supported the nanny in her accusation: “There were never any mentioning about Tito having raped someone! Never rape!” (Expressen 12/2 2008b). Instead the parallel process of “monstering” and “de-monstering” is what appears to generate the continuing news.

Stevie Simkin, the British scholar in drama and film, describes that during the high-profile murder trial of the “celebrity sex murderer” Amanda Knox (“the devil with an angel’s face”) the opinion was divided into direct opposites—those who supported the “beautiful” Knox and believed her to be innocent and those who did not (Simkin 2013, 41). In a similar way the American sociologist Jonathan Markovitz analyses how the coverage of the alleged rape by the black Los Angeles Laker star Kobe Bryant illuminated a bitter division in American society, which brought forth tensions between black masculinity and white femininity (Jonathan Markovitz 2006). The same tension is apparent in the Assange case where a division is created between those who articulate the goodness of the “truth-teller” and those who do not.

Particularly interesting when it comes to analysing the coverage of celebrity rape cases is the international attention they might generate, something that opens for national discrepancies in the view of what occurred and what did not. The Israeli communication scholar Sandrine Boudana writes that in cases that render global media interest there is a potential for denaturalisation of national taken-for-granted views on the matter. More specifically Boudana argues that the global media landscape has the potential to create a self-questioning that might achieve a distancing where We (citizens of a certain nation) see ourselves as Others (Boudana 2014, 52, cf. Meenakshi Gigi Durham 2015). In the case of Assange this global media perspective is particularly relevant since the accusations against him caused an entire world to call the normally admired Swedish gender equality “exaggerated.” Assange himself contributed to this image by terming Sweden the “Saudi Arabia of feminism” (Expressen 10/3 2011c), making “Sweden” the subject of the “monstering” process, or at least a process of “Othering.” Thus the international coverage had the potential to cause denaturalisation and estrangement in terms of the political achievements that, just years before, had brought about major changes in Swedish legislation.

Boudana writes that the denaturalisation of cases like these requires a response, be it a defensive reaffirmation of the norms, or a re-evaluation (Boudana 2014, 64). For those in Sweden not ready to acknowledge the narrative of the “truth-teller” being
synonymous with a “rapist,” the accusation of Assange opened for a potential questioning of the legislation. “Sweden,” implying “state feminism” in general and an “exaggerated legislation” in particular, was from this perspective identified as the “problem,” simultaneously suggesting that the solution would be to close the case. “Time for Sweden to close the Assange case” as demanded in the headline of a debate article written by retired prosecutor Rolf Hillegren (Svenska Dagbladet 13/1 Rolf Hillegren 2014). Hillegren was convinced that the whole matter was disturbing to the prime minister, the minister of justice and the director of public prosecutions. “The case has already passed the limit of all decency and reasonable proportions,” he concludes. The major objection was Sweden’s continuing loss of prestige in the eyes of the international community caused by the Assange case. The solution suggested in this and similar examples implies a transformation of symbolic violence into actual force.

The suburb rape

One of the more usual genres in the news coverage of rape is “the suburb rape.” In Sweden, from the 1990s onwards, this genre in particular was frequently associated with, and named after the places where the rapes were conducted—mainly deprived suburbs with a high proportion of immigrants. Examples of particularly hyper medialised cases are the Rissne rape (2000), the Tumba rape (2003), the Husby rape (2006) and the Tensta rape (2013). Södertälje, just outside Stockholm, gave its name to “suburb rape” six times during the period from 1995 to 1999 alone.

The suburb rape as a news genre characteristically describe an aggravated gang rape carried out by a relatively large number of racialised young boys against a heavily drunk or otherwise vulnerable equally young girl, either outdoors or in an anonymous apartment. Parking garages, pedestrian subways and toilets are common scenes of the suburb rapes, but they can also involve transportation between different locations by car.

“A 23-year-old man offered the heavily drunk girl a lift home. In the car there were three other men. Instead of driving the girl home, the men stopped on a small road in a nearby forest. They pulled down her trousers and three of the men had intercourse with the girl inside the car, one after the other [...] Afterwards, despite her desperate protests, the men brought the girl to an apartment. In the bathroom she was forced to have intercourse with the men again and again. ‘It just never ended’, one of the men later said” (Expressen 24/4 1997a).

Quite dominant features in the process of “monstering” the boys are their coarseness and explicit negative attitude towards women in general as well as their seemingly total lack of compassion for the victim. In the case of the so called “Rissne rape” it was described how “the defenceless 14-year-old girl was subjected to torture-like abuse by eight boys for almost an hour in the parking garage” (Expressen 5/2 2000a).

“At least three of the boys completed intercourse with the next to unconscious girl. One of them slapped her and repeatedly cried: ‘Wake up, you whore’. After the assault, the boys stole the girl’s cell phone, her wallet and her shoes and left her on the concrete floor” (Expressen 5/4 2000c).

These features have increasingly been utilised in racist rhetoric. In the USA, hyper medialisation of these types of rape cases has revolved around gender and race since the 1980s and 90s (Kristin Bumiller 2008).
“As if the crisis processing and all interviews were not enough, Rissneskolan received the attention of some unwanted political activists on Friday morning. With slogans like ‘Send off criminal migrants!’ and ‘No more rapes! No more multicultural!’ the pupils were welcomed to a new school day by a dozen Sweden Democrats who took the opportunity to give their views on the rape through the distribution of flyers” (Svenska Dagbladet 5/2 2000).

The suburb rape narrative combined with repeated exculpatory court judgments has on several occasions brought about strong feelings and deep debate in the Swedish media, calling for changes in legislation. This genre, more than anything, exposes a discrepancy between a public sense of justice and the courts' interpretation of the law.

“With the Supreme Court’s judgment, there is created a gap between rape and sexual exploitation. Either you have been forced to have sex or you have been too drunk to be able to perceive any sexual approaches. In between, no crime has taken place. This puts great responsibility on the women to protect their sexual integrity” (Expressen 5/5 2004).

The problem, as articulated in news coverage and debate both, is thus the court acquittals; the blame lays with the judges of the court and the legal system; and the call for action is directed towards the legislation. An obvious function of suburb rape in Sweden has undoubtedly been to push forward major changes in the law, as implemented in 2005, in 2013 and in 2018. This implies that in opposition to previously described genres, when referring to the suburb rape there is not the same need to maintain cultural anesthesia.

The question is why this genre in particular brings about such a strong desire to protect girls and women from rape. With the American media professor Nancy Worthington’s analysis of the Richmond gang rape one answer could be that the severity of the violence opens for narratives that go beyond rape myths and racist stereotypes and triggers the community to come to terms with gender violence (Worthington 2013, 117). However, as described in the section about sex slavery rape above, the young age of the victims and the particularly rough nature of the acts does not necessarily arouse sympathy for the girls. When the violence is too extreme to even comprehend, one reaction rather seems to be to question the very existence of the event. Instead I would argue that the explanation must be sought in the place that is used to name the rape—what Worthington terms the “Rough Town”—and the group of people associated with this place in terms of class, ethnicity and race. Thus in news reports on suburb rape the “gang” in “gang rape” should not be understood as just any gang. Instead, by definition it is implied that these gangs consist of groups of racialised boys. Worthington writes that “gang rape,” in fact, becomes a metaphor that marks individuals, groups and whole communities as “Other” (Worthington 2013, 104, cf. Durham 2015).

Thus, an analogue relation between “gang rape” and “the suburb” is constructed that produces an image of the rapist without the need to actually describe him. The process of “monstering” the rapist simultaneously becomes a process of “Othering” the whole suburb. Richmond and Rissne both work as metaphors for violent crime, invoking the discursive intersection of ethnicity, race and class that conjures images of poverty and brutality (Worthington 2013, 116). By actively situating the rape in the suburb, that is, not just mentioning the place where the rape occurred but exploiting the connotations of this place as an implicit explanation of rape, a coherence is created between rape and
other societal problem narratives such as immigration, segregation and “culture.” With reference to the Rissne rape, one journalist writes:

“For the nationalities from the Middle East, some work remains before they achieve gender equality. The view on rape that used to be common in Sweden—that the woman herself is blamed—is still quite common among men from Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. But that view on women will be unable to survive” (Expressen 9/2 2000b).

In this way, rape becomes a symbol of societal failure on a more general level, allowing a debate that goes beyond the often infected gender conflict (cf. Cockbain 2013, 25, Boshoff and Prinsloo 2015). Instead the narrative of the suburb rape becomes part of the “black poetry” that, according to Swedish ethnologist Per-Markku Ristilammi normally forms the basis for the negative suburb narrative (Per-Markku Ristilammi 1994).

**Conclusion**

A rape report in the news media is never simply a rape report. As the American sociologist Gaye Tuchman argued back in 1978, news frames create and shape knowledge by ascribing ideological traits to events, individuals and spaces which maintain the status quo (Gaye Tuchman 1978). The aim of this article has been to analyse how news coverage of rape produces different genres by identifying societal “problems,” apportioning “blame” and suggesting “solutions.” It has been exemplified how some coverage triggers debates that push changes in national legislation or encourage proactive engagement in city planning at the local level, whereas other genres are characterised by (sometimes international) questioning or justification. In some rape cases the uncertainties about how to distinguish good from bad simply become too problematic and disruptive, forcing the whole matter to disappear. In the case of the celebrity rape, the sex slavery rape and the lonely pervert rape it could be argued that these news genres produce narratives and identify problems that explicitly hide patriarchal structures either by “monstering” the perpetrator or by questioning the very existence of the specific rape. In the case of the suburb rapes the patriarchal structure is hidden behind a discussion of other structural problems. “It’s a shame we have to be racist in order to recognise the rights of raped women,” Cockbain quotes a news commentator (2013, 25).

Generally put, some genres open for the possibility to talk about rape while others, on the contrary, work as a means to avoid talking about rape. These processes within news coverage of addressing versus not addressing rape have been discussed in relation to Feldman’s concept of cultural anesthesia and Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence. It could be suggested that rape coverage is an expression of the continued need to facilitate patriarchal structure with different practices where the vulnerability of the subordinate, in this case the gendered conflict of women’s exposure to men’s rape on a general level, is forcefully suppressed and actively forgotten. Regardless of rape being explicitly addressed or not in news reports on rape cases, it seems rare that the “problem” is identified and articulated as men raping; the “blame” is never put on “men” as a category; and as a consequence, the “solution” is hardly ever presented as working to stop men raping. This means that despite examples of changes in legislation being a direct consequence of massive coverage and debate in the media, news coverage of rape above all works to maintain the status quo.
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