


Book Reviews

Rikke Schubart, *Mastering Fear: Women, Emotions, and Contemporary Horror* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 384 pp., \$117 (hardback), ISBN: 9781501336713.

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Rikke Schubart's new book, *Mastering Fear*, focuses its attention on the adaptive nature of horror for women and on the female protagonists of a myriad of horror film and long-form television narratives. It envisions contemporary horror as a "playground," employing a working hypothesis that "horror is play, and [because] play is adaptive and beneficial, so is horror" (1). It is a text uniquely directed toward female interest in horror cinema, but also toward a greater understanding of the conflicting repulsion and joy generated by effective horror narratives as they raise emotions on both sides of the spectrum while pursuing intellectual queries that relate to real-world gender conversations.

The consistent goal of Schubart's textual analysis is to answer the basic questions "What is the nature and function of horror?" and "What is its appeal to women?" (4). She creates parameters for her analysis by mainly focusing on contemporary horror from 2000 to 2016, allowing her to create anecdotal parallels between other likeminded studies. Overall, the analysis uses two theoretical frameworks: bioculturalism and Schubart's term *evofeminism*—a hybrid of the evolutionary nature of bioculturalism married to multiple iterations and discussions of feminism. This last term supports her ongoing conception of horror as a "dark stage," one that has a special appeal to women because it challenges gender expectations and norms (4).

A great strength of the book is Schubart's embrace of "anecdotal evidence" in her analysis. This gives the text an intellectually conversational approach akin to the feeling of lengthy discussions with a friend or colleague. The overall text is of tremendous value to both horror studies and gender studies. Schubart organizes the chapters chronologically to move through developmental stages akin to psychologist Erik Erikson's life stages, each of which he believed had "distinct conflicts one must solve to move successfully to the next stage" (10). She introduces her anecdotal analysis by first covering a litany of academic perceptions of horror cinema from a gender-specific perspective. Much of this discussion is handled in the "Defining Horror" section of the In-

roduction, prepping readers for the new perspectives on contemporary horror analysis while also providing them with rich texts to further their interests. In presenting these multiple theoretical points of view, Schubart is able to frame *Mastering Fear* as a text that does not argue with previous notions about horror but rather interacts with them.

The first chapter asserts that, in seeing horror as a “dark stage where characters may die horrible deaths,” the audience is simply playing with fear (15). There is an intellectual curiosity at play, questioning the effects on the audience as well as querying the societal and cultural interests and reactions that we have to horror narratives. In a section titled “Emotions,” Schubart outlines the origins for her “dark stage” metaphor, delving into neuroscientist Antonio Damasio’s work to establish emotions as an intellectual construct and laying the groundwork for her interest in horror cinema as a playground for curiosity about fear. In crafting this discussion, Schubart also effectively short-circuits “assumptions about body, sex, and performance” as *ideas*, addressing theories of social constructivism—the notion that “gender is learned” (32)—and essentialism (that differences between men and women are innate and located in the mind). In highlighting these theories, Schubart asserts that assumptions of horror as a natural domain for men but not for women is a fallacy, as horror “may be less determined by sex than by age and personality” (3). She does a good job of balancing her interests and motives with exceptional research and references to multiple scholarly points of view, effectively opening multiple theoretical inroads for her to explore from cognitivism and phenomenology to ethnopsychology and neuroeconomics. Even so, there is a danger of overwhelming the reader in theory without balancing it against consistent meaningful references to contemporary horror films, an aspect that is missing from the first chapter’s focus.

The next two chapters begin the anecdotal analysis and focus first on child horror heroines in *Pan’s Labyrinth* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006) and *Let the Right One In* (Tomas Alfredson, 2008). Schubart draws attention to the subjects of magic and fairy tales and the role they can play in subverting expectations in contemporary horror films. With regard to *Pan’s Labyrinth*, for example, she states that “the use of four genres—fairy tale, horror, the fantastic, and the melodrama—generates a multivocality which has created disagreement” between our apprehension of the film’s two depicted realities (75). Schubart’s analysis also makes a canny comparison between her concept of play-fighting and the type of “boy’s game” displayed in *Let the Right One In*. As she states midway through Chapter 3, “one of the benefits of play fighting is that it teaches animals to interact in social situations *without resorting to violence*” (83). Comparing the types of play-fighting between animals and humans, we see that play-fighting teaches animals how to calibrate their response to avoid real fighting, while in humans “[neuropsychologist Victor] Nell . . . argues

cruelty is adaptive because it can be used to dominate others” (84). Important discussion points are also raised regarding gender fluidity, existential despair, commentaries on assumption made on gendered appearances, and the ethics of vengeance.

The next two chapters, located within the section entitled “Teen & Emerging Adult,” focus on both werewolves and vampires as an evolving metaphor over the past eighty years. Chapter 4 considers multiple contemporary werewolf texts with specific female representations as exemplars of both identity horror and social horror. Schubart references Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous Feminine* (2003) and its relation of the female teenage body as “a playground for bodily wastes . . . beautiful on the outside/corrupt within” (109). In analyzing the werewolf subgenre, she makes note of the contemporary practice of self-conscious horror, where the tropes of the horror genre are subverted with pointed reversals of typically male-driven horror scenarios, such as men who suffer lycanthropy as a curse rather than a werewolf story liberating a horror heroine from her gender. This allows self-conscious horror to underline both the celebration and the tragedy of this reversal. Schubart pays particular attention to the modern female werewolf and their transformations in response to a seeming ecological rebalancing away from patriarchal rule. She closes the chapter by underlining the idea that lycanthropy works differently for female protagonists, that it “transforms the body not into that of a ‘man,’ but into a new species,” (126) no longer being “just” a woman, but a change to “a world no longer restricted by gender” (102).

Social horror frames the analysis of vampirism in Chapter 5 with *The Vampire Diaries* (The CW, 2009–2017) as a case study, and Schubart uses animalistic tendencies and territorial aggression to highlight the predatory nature inherent in our societal structure. The overarching analysis of horror as play is revisited when Schubart discusses sexual selection theory in order to further her argument that gender stereotypes and balance are not assumed in contemporary horror cinema. Psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett is referenced for his concept of “emerging adults,” young persons who are in a phase after adolescence but before commitment. Schubart mobilizes constructs important to emerging adults—love, work, and worldviews—to help underline her interest in contemporary horror as a “playground” that is “adaptive and beneficial” (1).

Chapter 6 opens by referencing Erik Erikson’s claim that “the existential crisis in adulthood is to become a numinous adult” (154). If this crisis is not solved, the individual will be caught in “a regressive and hostile reliving of the identity conflict” (154). Schubart posits that adulthood—represented here with “identity horror films” such as *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010), *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008), and *In My Skin* (Marina de Van, 2002)—is akin to entering into a pitch-black hole where protagonists “unable to fit society’s gender script and unable to follow the meta-narrative . . . turn to self-injury” (154). Concomitantly,

she considers our responses to such masochism via a distinction between *core disgust* and *moral disgust*, whereby she asserts that moral disgust is culturally specific while core disgust is equal across cultures. Schubart engages in a fascinating discussion of how disgust may have developed in humans, while, evolutionarily speaking, animals live without this emotion, the implication being that acquiring moral disgust protects us against “things that are dangerous to us in our culture” (156). What is considered good or bad varies between cultures based on complexity, and, as psychologist Rachel Herz states: “We have to learn what is disgusting” (157). In turn, then, the value of these films is ameliorative: “When we watch, we widen our moral circle, we become less disgust sensitive, and we become less anxious” (176).

Chapter 7 again references Barbara Creed—this time via her notion of the abject maternal. While Creed’s analysis was in reference to male fears, Schubart continues her interest in bioculturalism by examining the representation of real mothers and motherhood. At the same time, she is interested in deconstructing the more abject view of the mother, referencing Jane Ussher’s notion of society that scrutinizes the mother through a “gynaecological-obstetric gaze” (179). That gaze views the maternal body as abject and monstrous and the mother as reduced to an animal state through the process. These two viewpoints frame Schubart’s analyses of *Inside* (Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo, 2007), *Grace* (Paul Solet, 2009), and *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014), which together examine the trauma surrounding birth and maternal expectations as well as the scripts surrounding motherhood that color our perceptions.

Schubart opens Chapter 8 by citing Sylvia Henneberg’s work illustrating middle-aged and older women as faring badly in fairy tales; they are often cast as the “evil witch, the self-sacrificing mother, or ineffectual crone” (206). The focus of this chapter is on an extensive examination of the character of Carol from AMC’s *The Walking Dead* (2010–). An important aspect in the deconstruction of Carol is in the zombified wasteland that has destroyed the Westernized concept of home and with it many of the scripts regarding gender roles and expectations. Schubart sees Carol and her evolution over the seasons as being beyond the subversion of gendered stereotypes and as a “re-authoring” of the notions of a middle-aged woman in contemporary horror narratives. Chapter 9 continues the discussion of this “re-authoring” by looking at Jessica Lange’s characters through the FX series *American Horror Story* (2011–). Lange’s characters draw attention to “age as a negative script for the middle-age woman” (230). Age anxiety is a theme connecting all of Lange’s characters, and Schubart draws attention to the nature of the anxiety in referencing Susan M. Behuniak’s notion that “society constructs aging as dying” (235).

For her last chapter, by examining old women in contemporary horror Schubart first mentions that “old horror heroines” are rare if nonexistent, and

so she instead chooses to focus her final analysis on supporting roles from the Showtime series *Penny Dreadful* (2014–2016). It is poignantly noted that Erikson believed stage eight, “old age,” to not be a real stage because it did not lead to a new phase of life. Old age is once again viewed as a negative social script, and contemporary horror continues to portray it as such. The focus on these supporting characters is explained as being due to the fact that they are “active initiators,” who continue to develop as they age and who reframe the idea of conventional horror stereotypes. Schubart concludes the chapter by coopting the term “The New Woman” from author Sarah Grand and repurposing it into “The New Old Woman,” as an “independent, lethal, professional, wise and caring figure,” in order to encapsulate the supporting roles of the witch Joan and the alienist Dr. Seward (269).

Schubart’s overall interest in the “dark stage” has been to see emotional engagement and insight within each life stage of contemporary horror heroines. Her wish is to display horror’s potential for facilitating “new and unforeseen ways of being in the world” (273). Horror is a way to discuss the dark and traumatic without risking oneself and to become conscious of the social constructs of gender scripts—that “gender is in our mind” and can be rewritten. Schubart’s work is playful, inviting, and, for those of us who enjoy the “dark stage” as much as she does, makes the exploration of trauma and the extreme a vastly intriguing playground to explore.

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