

Rikke Schubart, *Mastering Fear: Women, Emotions, and Contemporary Horror*
(Bloomsbury Academic, 2018)

In the first chapter of her new book, *Mastering Fear: Women, Emotions, and Contemporary Horror*, Rikke Schubart reminds us that rats – socially advanced creatures whose complex communal and mental lives have resulted in their use in countless psychological experiments – engage in detailed forms of play fighting and social play. Rats, Schubart notes, learn many useful skills from this type of play – ‘[m]otor skills, social skills, and abilities that are useful later when they fight, hunt, mate, and interact socially’ (p. 42). For these rodents, then, play is not simply a mode of escapism; it is a vital part of their biological, psychological, and interpersonal development. Conversely, we humans tend to view play in a dismissive manner: we admonish one another to stop playing around; we tell our children that they are too old to play, or that certain toys are inappropriate for their age; the phrase ‘playing games’ suggests deceit and immaturity. Play is, to us, anathematic to maturation. It is regressive and a signifier of arrested development.

Mastering Fear challenges this dismissive view of play, as Schubart makes a case for play as a valuable developmental tool. Just as for the rats described in the first chapter of the book, play can help us to grow as human beings by allowing us to engage with diverse imaginative scenarios where we can learn sensorimotor skills, social skills, emotional robustness, and creativity (p. 11). While such play can take many forms – games, role-playing, sports, and so on – Schubart’s book makes the unique case that horror cinema can function as a challenging and stimulating variety of play. In Schubart’s schema, horror is neither escapism nor, as many critics have argued, a sadistic or sadomasochistic fantasy.¹ According to Schubart, horror is an essentially enriching genre. For all of its grotesquery and its much-maligned brutality, horror is nothing less than a phantasmagoric playground, an imagined realm of celluloid and shadow where we can interact with and perhaps even work through challenging emotions. Even at its most disturbing, when abject iconography and hopeless despair compel us to turn away, to retreat to the warmth and safety of the everyday, horror is emotionally and psychologically elevating. With its often unsettling violence and preoccupation with the darkest corners of the human psyche, horror affords us a unique opportunity to imagine difficult, frightening, or uncomfortable situations.

¹ The sadistic, masochistic, or sadomasochistic pleasure of horror has been touched on by a number of critics, including Carol J. Clover in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1992); Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); and Aviva Briefel in her article ‘Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film’, *Film Quarterly*, 58 (2005), 16-27.

Schubart maintains that horror can therefore be seen as a ‘dark stage’ where viewers can play with fear (p. 15), immersing themselves in terror and giving themselves over to dread. The act of watching and identifying with protagonists who delve or are plunged into the depths of abjection teaches us, as viewers, how to ‘manage challenging emotions and make difficult choices’ (p. 15). As a dark stage, an imaginative playground in which we can sink to the furthest reaches of depravity, horror teaches us to navigate potentially overwhelming emotions such as fear, disgust, and anxiety. Horror, Schubart tells us, is to humans what play fighting is to animals: it confronts us with violence and distress while all the while teaching us how to respond to these sensations in a healthy, or at least acceptable, manner. For women, horror can be especially useful, as its transgressive iconography, monstrous characters, and unsettling narratives create a space in which traditional conceptions of womanhood can be expanded, reconfigured, or even demolished. In this way, horror allows women to ‘re-author negative gender scripts’ (p. 4) and open themselves up to new possibilities, new ways of being.

Mastering Fear is very much a multi-disciplinary work, bridging the chasm between science and the humanities. The theoretical paradigms guiding the study therefore draw on a range of disciplines, from neuroscience and psychology to sociology and literary criticism. Schubart’s writing is dynamic, traversing these distinct frameworks with ease and combining them to produce a nuanced reading of contemporary horror cinema. One of the most engaging facets of Schubart’s study is the manner in which she employs the sociological concept of ‘edgework’ to edify the nature of horror-film spectatorship. Drawing on ideas initially cultivated in the field of sports sociology, *Mastering Fear* foregrounds the notion of edgework – ‘when we do exciting and dangerous activities for fun’ – in order to analyse horror as ‘play with danger’ (p. 47). Edgeworkers are those individuals who tread the boundary or ‘edge’ separating life and death, sanity and insanity, consciousness and unconsciousness, by undertaking potentially dangerous activities like rock climbing, skydiving, high-speed racing, and so on. Those who partake in such pastimes often report that their activities help them to develop and strengthen themselves, building physical and psychic fortitude. Horror, Schubart argues, serves a similar function by confronting viewers with challenging emotions. Even as we witness characters, our fictive avatars, being brutalised, traumatised, or even killed, we as spectators are learning – these limit experiences teach us to master our emotions. In neuroscientific terms, ‘we shift perspective, expand our ego tunnel, increase activity in our neuronal cloud, and tell ourselves the incremental story’ (p. 56). In

doing so, Schubart explains, ‘we learn to master fear’ (p. 56) and, consequently, we discover new possibilities, new identificatory prospects; we discover that we can transcend social scripts about appropriate femininity or prescribed social roles.

Schubart’s study operates according to two central theoretical frameworks: bioculturalism and evofeminism. Underscoring the dynamic interdisciplinarity of her work, Schubart describes the first of these paradigms, bioculturalism, as a theoretical mode that merges the sciences and the humanities by exploring, for example, how human biology adapts to new cultural scenarios and demands. The second of these frameworks, evofeminism, derived in part from evolutionary theory, is Schubart’s own coinage, which she defines as a mode of inquiry that combines ‘truth-based science (bioculturalism) with a politics of equality (feminism)’ (p. 40). Schubart’s evofeminism is broad and inclusive. It draws on all forms of feminism, encompassing first-, second-, third-, and fourth-wave feminisms, as well as employing discourses derived from postfeminism, neofeminism, and ecofeminism. Schubart’s book is therefore ambitious in its theoretical objectives, as the author seeks to unite a range of intellectual strands, drawn together from across the humanities and the sciences. Set against this wide theoretical scope, the range of her textual analysis is more concentrated, more rigidly defined, as Schubart focuses almost entirely on postmillennial texts featuring women. *Mastering Fear* employs these texts as a means of charting female engagement with horror film and television.

The book’s contents are arranged chronologically, reflecting the major phases of a woman’s life, from childhood to old age. In this way, Schubart moves from a stunning section on childhood – where she argues that, by watching the child heroine of Guillermo del Toro’s *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006) push ‘herself over the edge in her play’, the viewer can envision a world free of violent patriarchy (p. 77) – to a thoughtful discussion of older womanhood, in which she constructs *The Walking Dead*’s (2010-present) depiction of Carol as a powerful subversion of the limited, static gender script usually assigned to middle-aged women. In each of these life stages, Schubart argues, horror provides women (viewers as well as characters) with a means of engaging with complex, even disturbing, emotions, an engagement that empowers them to re-author the social scripts that dictate who and what they are supposed to be at each stage of their lives. Over the course of her powerful and original study, Schubart explores a broad array of horror texts, from teen-centred television shows like *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-17) to the harrowing bodily trauma of the New French