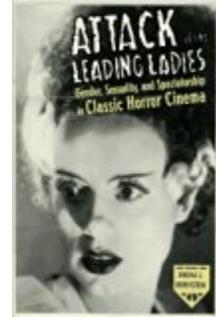


Rhona J. Berenstein. *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. xvi + 274 pp. \$67.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-08462-8; \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-08463-5.

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The Horror Film and Gender Issues

Analysis of the American predilection for horror films has gained legitimacy in the last two decades. Horror films, we have been told, lend themselves to layered interpretation. Collectively their undeniable appeal derives from a shared ideology, seen by critics such as Robin Wood as representative of a “collective dream.” But horror films are also capable of invoking individual response through identification with that which is portrayed upon the screen. Attempts to understand spectator reaction and interaction have, within the last decade, subjected horror films to increasing gender analysis. Traditionally these gender inquiries have subscribed to the spectatorship of a predominantly male, sadistic-voyeuristic viewership.

In *Attack of the Leading Ladies*, Rhona J. Berenstein examines the gender dynamics of the classic age of Hollywood horror cinema, circa 1931-1936. While the author accepts some of the gender constructions argued by previous investigators such as James B. Twitchell and Carol Clover, she rejects too rigid an interpretation of viewership, particularly that which casts sadistic male viewers as archetypal spectators (pp. 36-37). Further, she rejects the assertion that female audience members are necessarily masochistic, cowed, and passive, or that the horror story being related focuses primarily upon heterosexual desire. Berenstein contends that gender is less a barrier in classic horror films than it is a “permeable membrane” where interpretations of gender become blurred (p. 3). Berenstein dubs this fluid state of gender identification and role playing “spectatorship-as-drag.”

Naturally such assertions must be buttressed by psychoanalysis of the audiences involved, and Berenstein wastes no time delving into this in chapter two. The reader is reassured that gender behaviors are frequently conscious or unconscious costumes, and that switching these costumes might be more feasible in the darkened performance space of the theater (p. 38). This is a difficult, sometimes tendentious chapter kept manageable only by the author’s skill as a writer. Chapter three examines the marketing of classic horror and speculates upon whether reviewers and promoters gave their prospective audiences cultural clues on how to behave at the screenings. The final three chapters support Berenstein’s thesis through the dissection of three sub-genres of classic horror. The chapter on hypnosis films examines what might lie behind the putatively passive, masochistic female gaze. The last two deal with mad doctor movies, which were ostensibly representative of homosocial behavior, and jungle-adventure films, which exhibited contemporary social-racial constructions and fears.

This book should find a ready audience in the fields of gender and gay and lesbian studies, but it should also prove useful to those with an interest in the cultural implications of horror films. Overall, *Attack* is a nicely argued, well-researched, witty disquisition that deserves notice and makes good on its stated purpose to offer new insights into classic horror cinema.

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