

# The Revolt of Women in Horror Flicks

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a review of

*Stepford Daughters: Weapons for Feminists in Contemporary Horror* by Johanna Isaacson. Common Notions 2022

Johanna Isaacson, a professor of English at Modesto Junior College, presents a thought-provoking and exhaustively researched addition to contemporary horror criticism in *Stepford Daughters*.

The book will be useful to any graduate students working with feminism, film, and popular culture, though anyone looking for interpretations of modern horror movies with an emphasis on queerness and womanhood will find it an engaging read.

Isaacson covers a wide range of movies throughout her 187-page analysis, including American blockbusters like *Hereditary* (2018) and *Get Out* (2017), while also offering insights into lesser-known international works, such as the original *Dark Water* from Japan (2002), as well as the Polish film *The Lure* (2015).

The use of the term *Stepford Daughters* is integral to the main thesis of the project, which is to offer new ways of looking at horror after *The Stepford Wives* (1975), by analyzing female or genderqueer characters as daughters who rebel against patriarchal forces rather than continue the cycle of objectification under the male gaze.

Isaacson skips past the 1980s and 1990s, as these decades of teenage slasher films like *Friday the Thirteenth* (1980) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) offer little fertile ground for feminists, and instead focuses on movies after the mid-2000s, though the book is organized by subject area rather than chronologically.

Her approach is influenced by Marxism, and includes four chapters focused on domestic spaces, unfair wages, service and emotional labor, and finally, teenagers who face an uncertain future. While the *Fifth Estate* is critical of Marxism as a belief system, Isaacson avoids soapboxing and uses Marxist theories to deconstruct capitalism and traditions related to male dominance, making her work still useful for anarchists or anyone else who wants to disrupt the current status quo.

Isaacson begins her introduction with a fierce attack on “lean in” feminism, a concept created by a Facebook executive in 2013 which basically states that women need to become complicit in the machinery of capitalism in order to obtain personal power or monetary success.

This position has also been critiqued by many others, with bell hooks going so far as to call it “faux feminism,” so Isaacson invents her own term to invoke the opposite sentiment, what she calls lean out feminism.

Lean out feminism invites the viewer of these horror movies to realize that the systemic problems of capitalism and gender inequality are so intertwined that “social injustice cannot be dismantled by a single person,” thus a wider lens is necessary for seeing these issues in their totality. We must lean out to see the bigger picture beyond the individual.

Throughout the next four chapters, Isaacson uses a formulaic approach that helps frame each of the movies through a series of specific points of analysis. She states why a film fits with the chapter’s theme, provides a brief synopsis of the plot that is rife with spoilers, and then brings in the writing of contemporary feminist/anti-capitalist thinkers to further prove how everything fits with her lean out philosophy.

For example, she interprets the Australian movie *The Babadook* (2014) as a critique on the idea that women's reproductive labor is a "free and spontaneous resource," as evidenced by the main character Amelia's struggles as a single mother. She uses Melinda Cooper's criticism of contemporary family values along with Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed's notions of "the power of abjection" to prove how female flesh in the film is viewed as inherently lustful, carnal, or filthy.

Isaacson then adds a section on queer discourse, considering how the Babadook monster (or any monster) is also a representation of queerness, and the relation of monstrosity/queerness will continue as a secondary theme throughout her other analyses. With over twenty different movies viewed under this scrutinizing lens, both casual moviegoers and avid horror junkies can find something that interests them.

A minor weakness is that the book does not contain an appendix, and considering how thorough Isaacson is in covering as many feminist philosophers as possible, this may lead some of her readers to hunt around after finishing it, searching for that section where she mentions Jack Halberstam, Sarah Ahmed, or Luce Irigaray.

However, there is another major issue that I found myself grasping at throughout the text. I could not locate the weapons that are mentioned in the subtitle, *Weapons for Feminists in Contemporary Horror*. Isaacson mentions briefly near the final pages, "The most important weapons offered in this book have nothing to do with watching movies. Rather, they are weapons of defense against the gas-lighting forces that would frame our most beautiful gestures as monstrous. In becoming monster[s], we consider what reproductive labor might look like if we did it for ourselves."

This statement brings to mind not a weapon, but a tool—such as a mirror—as Isaacson points out with great success that these horror movies can be useful in forcing the male gaze to self-reflect on its own destructive tendencies.

The notion of using weapons remains a problematic area for feminists, as to engage in any form of violence conflicts directly with many core values related to its principles. There's a breakdown in language here not unlike that between the heptapod aliens and the humans in the science fiction film *Arrival* (2016) related to the terms weapon/tool, as the writer Charlotte Shane points out in the essay, "No Wave Feminism," in *Can We All Be Feminists?*

Feminism itself is a practice, a tool, a weapon, an insight.

Perhaps Isaacson is right to call each of her precise points of analysis a weapon. After all, a hammer is a tool if you're pounding nails, but not necessarily when you're smashing skulls.

However, unlike the work of anarchists like Peter Gelderloos, this book is not an active guide for how to disrupt patriarchal, authoritative forces, and exists more as a series of doorways into how contemporary horror films can offer explanations or alternatives for women living under the real-life terrors of gender inequality and masculine dominance.

Still, I would have liked the book even more if it had practical application and less analysis—and some razor blades hidden between the pages.

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