

Book Review: Female Masochism in Film by Ruth McPhee

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Ruth McPhee's book takes work by Jane Campion and Lars von Trier and seeks to flip the common reductive and simplistic approaches to heterosexual female masochism and focus instead on the ambivalences and intricacies of this type of sexuality and subjectivity. **Jodie Matthews** finds that the book challenges readers in many ways.

Female Masochism in Film: Sexuality, Ethics and Aesthetics. Ruth McPhee. Ashgate. 2014.

Find this book: 

Ruth McPhee's bold *Female Masochism in Film* is the first publication in a new Ashgate series, [Film Philosophy at the Margins](#). In its analysis of the representation of female masochism in such productions as Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009), Jane Campion's *In the Cut* (2003), and Steven Shainberg's *Secretary* (2003), and through discussion of the broader construction of masochism in theory and literature, McPhee's work offers a critique of the 'normative sociocultural narratives that surround heterosexual relationships' (p.150). In other words, how might masochism challenge a dominant cultural straightness?

The film philosophy underpinning the books in this series is Continental rather than cognitive; McPhee's contribution certainly aligns with that approach, with references to Barthes, Bataille, Derrida, Deleuze, and Foucault among the usual theory suspects. Female and female-focused theorists are crucial here, given the subject matter, and Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva's approaches to culture, texts, and the body are frequently deployed.

The book takes its politics seriously: politics of the body, of sexuality, of affect, and of being a viewer. Not that it is necessarily the responsibility of an author to include such a reflection, but the experience of being a reader of a text like this is also worth considering.

As scholarly and objective as the writing is, it is still hard to read descriptions of cutting, breaking, and hurting the female body. This is rigorously theorised, often mechanical, writing about fictional representations of masochistic practices – quite a remove from the body itself – but it is still difficult to cast one's eyes over some passages without placing a protective hand over the body part being sliced, bound, or scalded on the page. One is constantly reminded of being a body (rather than just a mind) that reads. The film viewer may avert her eyes if the imagery becomes too much; the action continues and the viewer eventually looks back. Reading only progresses if the reader does not look away; immersion or arrest are the options.

The book, then, is a challenge in at least three ways: a challenge to hegemonic discourses of sexuality; a challenge to mainstream film-making that constantly reproduces the same old straight, male-focused stories; and a challenge to squeamish readers (amongst whom I must, by implication, count myself).

Rather than sustain chapter-length readings of key films by turn, the book examines various thematic aspects and returns to central scenes from the filmography. McPhee avoids pigeonholing the films selected for analysis, citing the dispersed and pervasive nature of the masochism motif. The themes (for instance 'the masochistic contract', 'sacrifice', 'transgression') are determined largely by the theoretical framework. The literary works on which theorists of masochism draw are brought to our attention, and references to the fiction of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and the Marquis de Sade are weaved through the book.

Chapter 3 of *Female Masochism in Film* brings yet more intellectual, ideological, and ethical challenge. 'Self-mutilation and (a)signification' opens by problematizing the definition of 'harm', particularly regarding the relationship between masochistic pleasure and visible self-mutilation. Rather than see cuts, scabs, and burns necessarily as

signs of violence against the self, McPhee suggests that normative ideas about self-harm are themselves a form of discursive violence against the subject, foreclosing 'alternative systems of meaning' (p.72). There are questions of agency, pleasure, and sociocultural constructions of the body and its limits at stake. Disproportionate reactions to self-imposed bodily damage are articulated within a 'social order that places the integrity and "wholeness" of the human body and mind above all other concerns' (p.76). Using *Girl, Interrupted* (dir. James Mangold, 2000) and *Thirteen* (dir. Catherine Hardwicke, 2003) as examples, McPhee points to one of the implications of this: some types of skin 'are perceived as more precious and vulnerable than others' (p.82). These are provocative ideas that strike at the ideological foundation of the cultures producing these and mainstream movies. Placing emphasis on and questioning the signification of, the self-mutilated body, represented here in film, successfully 'threatens the integrity of the symbolic systems which determine the status of the human' (p.87). In other words, rethinking self-harm as we see it on screen makes us reconsider how we figure and what we do to our bodies, and those like and unlike us.

To return to the experience of the reader, I was left wondering what to do with the destabilised cultural system with which we are left. This is not a response unique to *Female Masochism in Film*, but part of reading any deconstructive work. What *is* a proportionate reaction to self-harm, as a film viewer, film maker, or concerned parent or friend? It would be bizarre for a book like this to offer a prescriptive answer to that question but, nonetheless, this query and others like it are bound up with the reading experience. Thrusting representations from the margins to the textual centre has a politics of its own, and it will be intriguing to see which other works join this one in the series, and how they navigate those politics.

Jodie Matthews is Research Fellow at the University of Huddersfield. Her work explores the historical representation of British Romanies and Travellers. She is interested in psychoanalysis as a philosophical/textual methodology, having studied at Cardiff University's Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory

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