

## IT'S A FINE LINE BETWEEN SADISM AND HORROR

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HORROR FILMS now occupy a prominent position in popular culture. They are available on most streaming services, promoted enthusiastically in mainstream media, and viewed by fans from increasingly varied demographic groups. It is an exciting time for horror, in fact, with new voices creating films from perspectives not previously included within the genre.<sup>1</sup> For some, however, the violence in horror films deserves scrutiny, and the need for such scrutiny is all the more pressing given their increasing status and availability. Horror films may have gained widespread acceptance, but are there not risks involved for those who enjoy simulations of intense violence for entertainment?

In answer to this question, Ian Stoner has provided a thought-provoking defense of the kinds of violent horror films that raise concerns for those who are suspicious of how they might affect our moral capacities.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Stoner offers reasons to reject a type of argument that Gianluca Di Muzio and I have each put forward that watching horrific violence as a form of entertainment risks harm to the reactive attitudes required for agents to exhibit a well-functioning moral psychology.<sup>3</sup> Stoner makes persuasive points in his defense of horror films, and he is correct that most horror films are examples of morally permissible forms of entertainment. Yet my aim will be to argue that he has overstated his case for the permissibility of viewing extreme violence as entertainment. Thus, my position remains that at least *some* instances of creating or viewing horror films ought to be considered morally problematic. The details of particular cases can be complicated; nevertheless, I argue that we ought to

- 1 Jordan Peele (*Get Out*, *Us*, *Nope*), for example, has added a prominent African American voice to the typically white landscape of horror films, but other filmmakers, such as Ana Lily Amirpour (*A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*), Jeff Barnaby (*Blood Quantum*), and Remi Weekes (*His House*), have also gained critical acclaim presenting horror themes from the perspectives of Iranians; Indigenous Canadians; and African refugees in the United Kingdom.
- 2 Stoner, "Barbarous Spectacle and General Massacre."
- 3 Di Muzio, "The Immorality of Horror Films"; Woodcock, "Horror Films and the Argument from Reactive Attitudes."

remain mindful of risks to our reactive attitudes when we consider these details and ask ourselves why we enjoy viewing horrific imagery.

To begin, it is important to identify the argument at stake in this discussion, since there are a number of objections one might have to films categorized within the horror genre. One might claim, for example, that horror films exhibit misogynistic tropes, or that they contribute to the stigmatization of persons with disabilities.<sup>4</sup> These objections are important, but they are not the principal concern that will be the focus of this discussion. The principal concern at stake here is the impact that fictional scenes of violence might have on the psychology of those who view this material as a form of entertainment. It is a concern about how deriving enjoyment from fictional depictions of suffering might affect an agent's underlying dispositions for sympathy, compassion, and so on. Importantly, it is not the concern that those who view horror violence will become more likely to engage in this same type of behavior. Instead, the concern is that the moral psychology of agents who take pleasure in violent imagery can be harmed in more subtle ways that are difficult to measure via concrete empirical methods.

The argument I presented to defend a precautionary approach with respect to this concern is the *Argument from Reactive Attitudes* (ARA). Stoner summarizes it as follows:

1. It is *prima facie* morally wrong to view, or to facilitate viewing, those features of a work of art or entertainment that encourage the corruption of reactive attitudes that are necessary for human agents to develop and maintain a well-functioning moral psychology.
2. Taking pleasure in murder, torture, dismemberment and other acts of horror violence can threaten the proper functioning of our sympathetic attitudes.
3. Therefore, it is *prima facie* morally wrong to view, or to facilitate viewing, horror films.<sup>5</sup>

The ARA articulates the hypothesis that agents who enjoy watching fictional acts of horror violence risk damaging their capacities for understanding and

4 Prominent discussions of gender and horror include Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"; Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws*; Freeland, "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films"; and Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film*. Discussions of disabled persons in horror films include Smith, *Hideous Progeny*; Sutton, "Avenging the Body"; and Hall, "Horrible Heroes."

5 Stoner, "Barbarous Spectacle," 513. This presentation of the ARA is helpful as a starting point; however, it does not accurately reflect the argument that I put forward as the ARA. The premises are quoted from my work, but the conclusion is a *prima facie* claim about all horror films that I do not assert. My conclusion is that the potential for harm to our reactive attitudes is a *useful standard* for evaluating horror films (Woodcock, "Horror Films," 311, 320, 323).

sympathizing with suffering in the real world. This may strike some as alarmist, but the concern driving the ARA is worth considering if the violence at stake is presented in ways that invite or encourage sadistic responses from viewers. Consider, for example, a hypothetical film that contains intense, realistic scenes of torture and extreme violence. If this film is created in ways that encourage viewers to enjoy the cruelty depicted or to set aside sympathy for its victims, then it is reasonable to consider the possibility that the film is inviting harm to its viewers by affecting their reactive attitudes in ways that persist after the film is over. Given this possibility, the ARA claims that we have moral reasons to avoid contributing to this type of harm. It suggests that we ought to take a precautionary approach to creating, promoting, or viewing films like this hypothetical example if other, less risky options are available for our enjoyment. Stoner is not persuaded that this precautionary approach should be applied to horror films. He argues that *whatever* horror film is proposed for analysis, the ARA offers no compelling reason to believe that watching violence for enjoyment carries any potential to negatively affect our moral capacities. I am not as optimistic about this conclusion.

Yet before we dig into the details of this disagreement, it is worth emphasizing that Stoner and I agree on some important points related to the ARA and horror films. First, Stoner acknowledges that we should consider the implications of choices that might compromise our moral capacities. For example, he argues that one ought to avoid working in a slaughterhouse if one has reasonable evidence that this type of work results in damage to one's reactive attitudes.<sup>6</sup> To add recreational examples, I would argue that one ought to renounce a kung fu academy or a hockey league if it encouraged aggressive "us versus them" thinking and seemed to be undermining one's capacity for fairness. Moreover, I would argue that this is an intuitive precautionary outlook that most of us would adopt even if we lacked concrete empirical data *proving* that our kung fu academy or hockey league was having a negative effect on our character. In these kinds of practical situations, decisive empirical evidence is not required to adopt the precautionary view that immersing oneself in toxic norms is not worth the risk of these norms spilling over into other aspects of one's life.<sup>7</sup>

Second, Stoner is correct that the ARA should not apply uniquely to horror films. Other genres, such as black comedies and action movies, can similarly

6 Stoner, "Barbarous Spectacle," 513.

7 It will certainly be difficult in these kinds of practical situations to specify what counts as reasonable grounds to believe that our reactive attitudes are at risk. For now, I set aside this question and note only that clear empirical evidence is not necessary when recreational choices are at stake. Clear empirical evidence *is* important for making decisions about censorship or consumer boycotts, but a much lower standard of epistemic warrant is required to take a precautionary approach to entertainment choices among easily available alternatives.

have negative effects on our reactive attitudes if they invite harmful responses from viewers. This is important to emphasize, since Stoner presents the ARA as a comparative argument that singles out horror films as *prima facie* wrong compared to other types of films. My presentation of the ARA explicitly denies this claim.<sup>8</sup> The ARA is best understood as a wide-ranging argument about the potential damage to our moral faculties that can be applied to films of any particular genre.<sup>9</sup> Applying the ARA to horror films is especially interesting because the violent imagery they present can reach such disturbing extremes, but films in this genre are not the only ones with the potential to undermine our moral capacities.

Finally, Stoner is correct that many, if not most, horror films are morally permissible according to the ARA. Films involving monsters, for example, invite their viewers to have reasonable reactions to the horrific imagery presented—for example, disgust, curiosity, suspense, or anticipation. In fact, many of these films encourage viewers to engage with their content in ways that promote compelling meditations on trust (*The Thing*), faith (*The Exorcist*), consumerism (*Dawn of the Dead*), adolescent love (*Let the Right One In*), grief (*The Babadook*), identity (*Annihilation*), and corporate greed (*Alien*). Others examine the bonds of friendship and family in ways that promote curiously wholesome social norms (*The Conjuring; It; A Quiet Place*). Even so-called slasher films are normally designed to create identification with the victim protagonists so that viewers are not vicariously invited to endorse the violence presented in the films (*Halloween; You're Next; Hush*). The victim-oriented appeal of such films is puzzling, as so much work examining the aesthetics of horror has revealed.<sup>10</sup> Yet it is clear that the ARA should not be interpreted such that all horror films are condemned as having disruptive effects on our moral faculties. Rather, the ARA is best understood as an argument that targets a particular subset of horror films.

With this much decided, where is the controversy? If a sensible version of the ARA suggests that some horror films are permissible, if not praiseworthy, while others are problematic if they invite harm to our reactive attitudes, it is difficult to see what is left for debate. Yet disagreement remains because Stoner

8 Woodcock, "Horror Films," 316. Stoner acknowledges this point in a footnote ("Barbarous Spectacle," 524).

9 For example, military-themed films arguably contribute to xenophobic tendencies in human nature that blunt our sympathy for those we perceive as outsiders—through, e.g., racist characterizations of those depicted as enemies (*The Deer Hunter*), failures to depict enemies as full persons (*Black Hawk Down*), or complacency about the permissibility of torture (*Zero Dark Thirty*).

10 Noteworthy examples include Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*; Feagin, "Monsters, Disgust and Fascination"; Gaut, "The Paradox of Horror"; Morreall, "Fear without Belief"; Smuts, "The Paradox of Painful Art"; Bantinaki, "The Paradox of Horror"; and Strohl, "Art and Painful Emotion."

denies that *any* horror films are problematic when it comes to ARA-derived concerns. As he sets up his discussion of the ARA, he boldly asserts that: “Whatever gore films you take to pose the challenge most starkly . . . , those are the films whose graphic depictions of violence I will defend.”<sup>11</sup> Why does Stoner argue for such an extreme position? His view is that whatever horrific violence is depicted in a horror film, its aesthetic appeal is premised on viewers engaging with horrific material in ways that are morally appropriate—for example, ways that reflect our desires to experience fear, suspense, disgust, and sympathy. He therefore denies that viewers of horrific violence are drawn to this content to vicariously live out sadistic impulses or enjoy the suffering of victims from a detached perspective that could reinforce negative impulses in our reactive attitudes. Even in the face of extreme hypothetical cases such as Di Muzio’s *Nazi Cruelty Film*, Stoner argues that creating or viewing such films would be morally permissible if not for the fact that most of us cannot get enough emotional distance from the Holocaust to enjoy fictional depictions of those atrocities presented as entertainment.<sup>12</sup> Thus, a film presenting equivalent levels of horrific suffering devoid of any meaningful plot, character, or subtext would be acceptable for Stoner if it lacked historical associations, because the appeal for viewers could only be based on paradoxical, victim-oriented interests. In short, Stoner presumes that any realistic prospective horror film will be enjoyed by viewers for innocent reasons; therefore, he believes that “it isn’t clear that a movie that invited vicarious sadism—instead of paradoxical enjoyment of fear and disgust—could ever be a candidate for a horror film.”<sup>13</sup>

I would like to believe that Stoner is right about the appeal of any and all horror films. However, I am not nearly as optimistic about the complexity of our motivations for viewing horrific suffering, and I do not think we ought to be complacent about the various examples of films, or certain features of films,

11 Stoner, “Barbarous Spectacle,” 512. Note that Stoner stipulates that the depictions of violence must be fictional and that the objection at stake must not be extraneous to horrific violence—e.g., based on sexism or ableism.

12 Di Muzio, “The Immorality of Horror Films,” 281–84. Stoner addresses this example in “Barbarous Spectacle,” 520–22.

13 Stoner, “Barbarous Spectacle,” 519. Stoner is not alone here. In *Horror Film and Affect*, Xavier Aldana Reyes claims that horror films invite a “masochistic contract” with viewers that necessarily aligns identification with their victims (164–66). By contrast, S. Evan Kreider carefully leaves open the possibility that the ARA might gain traction for certain films, or given sufficient empirical evidence, despite the reservations he expresses about the way Di Muzio applies the ARA to slasher films (“The Virtue of Horror Films”). Similarly, Marius A. Pascale claims that our macabre fascination with horrific content can lead either to harmful or beneficial results depending on the details of individual cases (“Morality and Morbidity”).

that seem to invite sadism rather than sympathy. It is at this point that one might expect an analysis of the narrative details of some of the most conspicuous examples of shocking horror films, such as *Wolf Creek*, *The Loved Ones*, or *The Devil's Rejects*. Indeed, I think certain parts of these films invite viewers to identify with those inflicting suffering rather than their victims, so it is tempting to dive into the aesthetic details and argue case by case that they cannot plausibly be interpreted in the optimistic way Stoner requires for viewers to enjoy their content for morally innocent reasons. However, instead of working through a list of examples, I will proceed with a *reductio* strategy to highlight the extreme nature of Stoner's position when it comes to (a) the creation of horror films and (b) what makes these films appealing to their intended audiences.

Consider first what it would mean for the writers and directors of horror films if Stoner were correct that viewers are never drawn to horrific imagery for anything but innocent reasons. It would imply that the creators of this content do not ever need to ask themselves whether their work invites identification with the agents who commit the violence depicted nor whether the narrative or aesthetic features of their work invite morally compromised responses. They may need to worry about historical associations or other factors that might decrease how favorably their work is received if viewers respond atypically, but they can rest assured that ordinary viewers will not engage with their work in morally compromised ways *no matter how they script and film horror violence*. Stoner's view would imply, therefore, that interpretive discussions of the morality of scripting and filming violence are ill-conceived and that directors such as Karyn Kusama, Jennifer Kent, and Sophia Takal are mistaken if they take the time to present horrific material in specific ways they consider to be socially responsible compared to other alternatives that would generate just as much revenue and acclaim.<sup>14</sup>

This implication strikes me as a deeply implausible view of what is at stake when artists make the effort to consider the subtleties of how they depict violence in their work. The choices they make are certainly not straightforward. As the title of this paper suggests, it can be very difficult to know which narrative choices, camera perspectives, or editing decisions will create appropriately horrific responses in viewers without inviting them to vicariously enjoy the content out of sadistic inclinations. Moreover, reasonable people can disagree about many of these choices and their implications. Yet my title is also meant as a reference to the film *This Is Spinal Tap* when David St. Hubbins acknowledges the difference between an album cover with a rock star protagonist tied down by powerful women and one that presents a naked woman on all fours held by

14 See Dobbs, "Karyn Kusama Interview"; Juzwiak, "Jennifer Kent's Brutal New Film *The Nightingale* Spits on Your Colonialism"; and Morse, "Black Christmas Remake Director Sophia Takal Talks What Sets Her Version Apart."

a leash and dog collar with a glove pushed in her face. The humor in this scene is the deadpan earnestness with which Hubbins recognizes what is obvious: details in the way art is presented can significantly affect the way audiences are invited to engage with its content, and there are at least *some* clear cases where art invites immoral responses. To presume otherwise is naïve, and the details of at least some horror films, such as *The Devil's Rejects*, would, I think, require Hubbinsesque naïvety to defend as innocuous.

To emphasize this point, it is worth returning to Di Muzio's *Nazi Cruelty Film*. Even if we grant Stoner the claim that we might not judge a depiction of Holocaust atrocities as problematic if we could get enough emotional distance from the history at stake, it is still vital to ask how the film is scripted and edited in terms of inviting viewers to identify with the victims or the perpetrators of the atrocities that it presents. It may be correct to reject Di Muzio's claim that a film is necessarily compromised if it presents horror violence for no other purpose than to provide viewers with heightened emotional intensity, yet it is critical to specify whether the hypothetical film under consideration is victim oriented. In other words, it is one thing to bite the bullet and accept that a grim depiction of atrocities could be permissible if it invites viewers to engage in the *paradoxical* pleasures that horror can provide, but it is entirely different to claim that *any* formulation of a Nazi cruelty film with sufficient distance from historical associations is innocuous. If this is not already clear, consider Di Muzio's other hypothetical example: a child torture film.<sup>15</sup> Viewers need not have historical associations with this content to judge that a film is problematic if it invites viewer identification with the torturer rather than the child. Of course, a sadistic version of the child torture film is not a fair analog for most horror films, because even those that display harm to children are normally victim oriented (*Jaws*; *Dr. Sleep*; *The Innocents*).<sup>16</sup> However, it is important to remember the burden of proof in play after Stoner denies that any horror film risks compromising our reactive attitudes by inviting sadistic pleasures. If we accept the variety of explanations of the appeal of horror violence that have been presented in the literature, why think that no horror film invites viewers to align with the perpetrators of violence toward innocent victims? For example, if Aaron Smuts is correct that a "rich experience theory" explains some of the appeal of horrific violence to viewers, is it not *possible* that some horror films provide visceral experiences that are not victim oriented?<sup>17</sup> If this is a realistic

15 Di Muzio, "The Immorality of Horror Films," 281–82.

16 Marius A. Pascale makes this point in "Art Horror, Reactive Attitudes, and Compassionate Slashers."

17 See Smuts, "Art and Negative Affect."



possibility, it places pressure on Stoner's categorical claim that no horror films inviting viewers to share in vicarious sadism exist. Thus, while the appeal of horror is still an open area of inquiry, the burden of proof remains on Stoner to guarantee that no horror films engage viewers in ways that invite sadistic responses and potentially compromise their reactive attitudes.

This leads us to the viewer side of Stoner's claim that every horror film is defensible. For we can anticipate the following reply: it is admittedly *possible* for a horror film to invite sadistic responses from viewers, but in practice, no actual horror film operates this way, because viewers are just not attracted to horror films to satisfy sadistic urges. Even in cases such as *The Devil's Rejects*, this anticipated reply argues, viewers only identify with perpetrators of violence out of a meta-level interest in challenging established normative conventions. Like more overt attempts to force viewers to reflect on the limits of what they find stimulating (e.g., *A Clockwork Orange*; *Funny Games*; *A Serbian Film*), viewers are drawn to apparent endorsements of cruelty from a perspective that will not threaten their reactive attitudes in the way the ARA predicts.<sup>18</sup> Thus, one might claim that the ARA never gains traction in the real world since ordinary viewers are not motivated by sadistic impulses when they enjoy even the grisliest of horror films.

Again, I would genuinely like to believe this claim about the appeal of horrific content. It would be comforting to know that it is only unusual sociopaths who watch horror films to satisfy their sadistic impulses rather than their paradoxical interests in horror, disgust, suspense, and so on. Yet it would be foolish for those of us who enjoy horror films to believe that our interests in watching violence are always pure and noble compared to those of some separate class of sociopaths who share none of our psychological traits. It is too convenient for the complexity of human desires to play out so straightforwardly, and we cannot rely on our introspective experience to reassure us that our reasons for watching violent content are always defensible. If recent work in empirical psychology on implicit bias and cognitive dissonance has taught us anything, it is that we ought to follow Kant's warning to avoid being overconfident about

18 Jeremy Morris provides something like this type of justification for *The Devil's Rejects*. He acknowledges that the film encourages vicarious sadism by inviting viewers to identify with its killers yet claims that this is the point of its metalevel horror: "it transforms the source of fear from a distant other to something familiar in ourselves. The terror of the victim is supplanted by the delight of the torturer, which is being consciously shared by the audience: *that* is the source of horror" ("The Justification of Torture-Horror," 51). I agree with Morris that *The Devil's Rejects* uses humor, music, and narrative structure to encourage viewers to identify with its torturers; I do not agree that the film exhibits metalevel objectives to redeem the sadism it invites.



the true impulses that are responsible for our choices.<sup>19</sup> Thus, I maintain that when certain films appear to invite viewers to take pleasure in horrific violence, we ought to seriously consider the possibility that audiences of these films are at least partly taking pleasure in that violence. We should not avoid this possibility by seeking refuge in ironic distance or metalevel analysis, for there is no excluded middle here. Instead, it might be that viewers are sometimes drawn to horror because of paradoxical aesthetic tastes *and* the sadistic impulses that allow the ARA to gain traction.<sup>20</sup>

Stoner, it must be noted, attempts to accommodate this concern in his defense of horror films from the ARA. In addition to recognizing that many horror films are complicit in misogyny and ableism, he acknowledges that we ought to adopt a precautionary attitude toward films that invite sadism: “if a particular [horror film] somehow did, in contravention of genre expectations, invite vicarious sadism, I would support a precautionary attitude toward that specific film.”<sup>21</sup> This is an odd claim from someone who has promised to defend *whatever* horror films one selects to advance the ARA. How can Stoner advance his sweeping defense of every horror film with this prominent concession? The key is a rigid definition of genre conventions such that any film that invites sadism is no longer functioning *qua* horror film. Stoner defends all possible candidates for horror films from the ARA because as soon as any film exhibits traits that allow the ARA to gain traction, the film in question is no longer a genuine example of a horror film after Stoner defines the genre in strictly victim-oriented terms.

I think this way of defending horror films from the ARA is less than satisfying. First, it attempts to settle a longstanding question about the moral status of horror films by terminological stipulation, and in doing so, it commits a

19 Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 19–20. To scratch the surface of the literature on implicit bias and cognitive dissonance, see Brownstein and Saul, *Implicit Bias and Philosophy*; Levy, “Implicit Bias and Moral Responsibility”; Harmon-Jones, *Cognitive Dissonance*; and Brownstein, Madva, and Gawronski, “Understanding Implicit Bias.”

20 This point about the dual appeal of horror violence is a key part of what makes Clover’s *Men, Women and Chain Saws* so influential in the literature on horror aesthetics. Clover observes victim-oriented viewer identification in slasher films, and she challenges the presumption that these films are unambiguously grounded in misogynistic sadism. Yet she simultaneously acknowledges features of the films that invite identification with killers who prey on young women in varying states of undress. What makes her work so compelling is the way she illuminates the complexity of the shifting and sometimes contradictory perspectives that make horrific violence appealing to its viewers (see esp. *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, 182). Stoner, however, emphasizes only one side of this complexity by referring to Clover’s “final girl” thesis as if it exonerates all slasher films from vicarious sadism (“Barbarous Spectacle,” 519). I think that is a mistake. Clover’s work is fascinating because she so artfully describes how horror films invite identification with both victims and their sadistic killers.

21 Stoner, “Barbarous Spectacle,” 520.

no-true-Scotsman fallacy. Any potential counterexample put forward as morally problematic can be dismissed according to this strategy, because as soon as it seems persuasive that a film invites harms to our reactive attitudes, Stoner can claim that the film is not properly defined as a horror film. It is a foolproof strategy, to be sure, but it does not meaningfully advance discussion of the ARA for those interested in the darker elements of what are normally considered horror films.

Moreover, as a matter of classification, it is not persuasive to draw the boundaries of the horror genre so narrowly that its films cannot possibly include elements that invite vicarious sadism. Returning to *The Devil's Rejects*, it is implausible to think that the film loses its status as a horror film because its main characters (who commit murder, torture, and sexual assault) are presented as protagonists. Similarly, if one asks whether films in the *Saw* franchise present feeble pretexts for the characters to be punished in sadistic ways that viewers can vicariously enjoy, it is not as if one is asking *whether the films are horror films*, no matter how one answers the question. We also want the flexibility to apply the ARA to specific features of films that might otherwise be morally defensible. The original *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, for example, is a mix of grisly victim-oriented scenes followed by a final dinner scene that surely veers into vicarious sadism. Di Muzio unfairly condemns the film as uniformly immoral, but he is not wrong about the dinner scene when he observes that

although the audience began watching the scene from Sally's point of view, it is now drawn irresistibly to the side of the table where Leatherface and the hitchhiker are sitting. The accumulation of disturbingly entertaining sights and the high level of stress induced by Sally's piercing screams have won the spectator over to the killers' side.<sup>22</sup>

If this evaluation is correct, is this final part of the film suddenly no longer properly described as part of the horror genre? It would seem odd for a specific scene from a classic horror film to be exempt from the genre to which the film as a whole is clearly a member. This classification system is not incoherent, but it is misleading to rely on it to defend the otherwise bold thesis that all horror films are immune to ARA-derived concerns.

Finally, the classification system Stoner's argument relies on can only set up a contrast with advocates of the ARA if the argument is interpreted such that victim-oriented genre conventions in horror films are alleged to be morally hazardous. Yet my presentation of the ARA (which Stoner primarily draws on in his summary of the argument) explicitly denies this claim and makes

22 Di Muzio, "The Immorality of Horror Films," 287.

considerable efforts to discuss the complexity of what might trigger the ARA when it comes to the controversial appeal of horrific content for viewers.<sup>23</sup> This makes it odd for Stoner to try to ensure that discussion of the ARA occurs within the confines of a presumption that true horror films invite nothing but paradoxical, victim-oriented responses. Stoner can legitimately set up a contrast with Di Muzio's position that all slasher films are problematic, but if an advocate of the ARA allows, as I do, for an open-ended framework to consider whether films invite sadistic responses, then it is not helpful to stipulate that any case where reactive attitudes are at risk is no longer a genuine horror film.

In the end, what we find is that neither side of the ARA debate is truly seeking to defend a cut-and-dried thesis about the moral status of every film or part of a film that would commonly be classified as belonging to the horror genre. My defense of the ARA does not argue for a precautionary claim that all horror films are morally problematic, and Stoner ultimately allows for concerns about our moral capacities by excluding invitations to vicarious sadism from his definition of what counts as a horror film. I hope it is clear, however, that Stoner's artful classification strategy does not help advance a sensible, case-by-case approach to horror violence. Some films are problematic for reasons described by the ARA; others are not. This middle ground is not usefully captured by a thesis that any horror film is morally defensible ... unless it is not defensible, in which case it is no longer a horror film. Instead, we should apply the ARA to whatever films invite sadistic responses, and some of these films will be horror films. The difference is important, because we ought to remain open to the possibility that horror films draw some of their appeal from the darker aspects of human nature—for example, a sadistic fascination with suffering that potentially disrupts our reactive attitudes if it is promoted as a source of enjoyment. That may not be our predominant interest in horrific content, but neither is it a possibility that can be dismissed via genre definitions. In conclusion, then, I hope that consideration of the ARA should encourage us to balance the paradoxical pleasures of horror films with a willingness to confront the possibility that some of the films are morally problematic if they invite us to compromise our moral psychology. This may be a frightening possibility for us to contemplate, but fans of horror films are presumably up to the task.<sup>24</sup>

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23 Woodcock, "Horror Films," 316–20.

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