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ARTICLE

Fear within the Frames: Horror Comics and Moral Danger

Scott Woodcock

Department of Philosophy, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada
Email: woodcock@uvic.ca

Abstract
Looking back, the moral panic that precipitated the decimation of horror comics in the 1950s seems quaint, yet concerns about the psychological impact of violent media on consumers have never disappeared. In this article, I outline a particular type of psychological impact we ought to take seriously when evaluating the moral status of entertainment. I then consider (a) ways in which comics seem immune from claims that they create this kind of impact for their readers, as well as (b) ways in which we might think that comics generate special instances of moral danger for readers.

Keywords: aesthetics; applied ethics; comics; horror; moral panic

Introduction

When Fredric Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), his claims of a connection between "crime comics" and juvenile delinquency seemed to confirm the suspicions of parents who feared the impact comics were having on their children. Comics had infiltrated the homes parents had sacrificed so much to establish in the shadow of World War II, and after initially presenting stories of clever animals, wholesome teenagers, and a colorful assortment of heroes dressed in leotards, things suddenly seemed to have taken a dark turn. Children were now captivated by stories of vengeful ghosts, walking corpses, and murderous sociopaths who narrated their horrific deeds.[1] Moreover, children were buying these comics from the racks of local stores and trading them with friends without oversight from adults. A pastime that parents had associated with harmless cartoons had transformed into one they no longer understood and felt powerless to control. By 1950, crime and horror comics were circulating among children at an astonishing rate, and they were obviously corrupting the minds of children whose fertile imaginations were being seeded with violent fantasies that would end up being replicated in their real lives. Or so it seemed to the parents and politicians who sought to banish this threat to moral decency.[2]

What followed were angry letters to editors, congressional inquiries, and great piles of comics set ablaze in communities rallying to purge themselves of the evil they saw as preying on their youth. Most notably for those working in the industry, the surge in concern over the impact of

[1]Horror comics existed before this post-war period, as David Annwn Jones (2017) emphasizes, but the striking rise in popularity of horror and crime comics was something of a cultural phenomenon.

[2]Precise sales and subscription numbers in Canada and the United States are not available for the period between 1940–1960, and statistics for the proportion of comics that would be considered *crime* or *horror* comics are also not easy to compile. Nevertheless, consider that by the end of World War II, sales of the famous comic *Crime Does Not Pay* were reported as nearly 800,000 per issue, and that by the 1950s it is estimated that 80 million comics were sold (let alone shared with others) every month (Snellings 2018).

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comics on children led to the establishment of the infamous Comics Code Authority (CCA) that strictly regulated the content of comics that bore its seal of approval. The CCA was designed to avoid the threat of government-imposed censorship, but the standards of the CCA ended up just as prohibitive as any rules the government might have enforced.[3] Compliance with the CCA was voluntary, but negative publicity among the public had reached such a fever pitch that it was nearly impossible to find retailers willing to sell comics that failed to earn the CCA seal on their covers. The result was one of the most dramatic examples of self-censorship in modern media, and sales of crime and horror comics all but evaporated.[4]

Looking back, the moral panic that precipitated the decimation of horror comics in the 1950s seems quaint. Modern horror films routinely present acts of gory, sadistic violence, and the availability of this material to any child with a cell phone would melt Wertham's brain. The graphic violence in anime, streaming series, and video games is no less shocking, and the once-feared CCA has been reduced to an inside joke at the beginning of Spider-Man films.[5] It might be tempting, then, to dismiss the post-war panic over horror comics as an unfortunate case of mass hysteria in human history that warrants no further analysis. The concerns of parents and politicians who were influenced by critics like Wertham can seem so deeply misguided as to be inapplicable to our current media landscape.

And yet… concerns about the impact of overtly violent or sexually explicit media on the psychology of consumers have never disappeared. It is less common for concerns about media violence or pornography to mobilize calls for censorship, but extreme cases of violent content in entertainment media still lead many of us to wring our hands. For my part, I have argued for the thesis that certain horror films carry the potential to damage the sympathetic responses we need for a healthy moral psychology (Woodcock 2013, 2023). Parallel arguments could, I think, be put forward to express concerns about other types of films, like vengeance-oriented action films or black comedies, and similar concerns have been expressed for violent video games.[6]

If concerns about the psychological implications of horror content remain plausible in a contemporary context, why does the post-war moral panic over horror comics seem so remote and antiquated? In this article, I am interested in the question of whether the *format* of comics renders psychological concerns about violent imagery more or less persuasive. A fair bit of our skepticism about the legitimacy of the post-war moral panic is, of course, due to the outlandish empirical claims made by critics like Wertham, who forecast direct causal connections between ordinary, well-adjusted children reading horror comics and instances of real violence that were alleged to mirror what children read as fiction.[7] Another factor that tends to cause the moral panic over comics to appear alarmist in retrospect is the extreme form of censorship that was recommended to address concerns that might otherwise be persuasive given the content that was

[3]The CCA code can be accessed via the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund at https://cbldf.org/the-comics-code-of-1954/. It included prohibitions like, "No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime" and "All scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism shall not be permitted". For a detailed history of the CCA, see Nyberg (1998).

[4]For an excellent overview of the rise and fall of horror comics in the United States after World War II, see Hajdu (2008).

[5]Comic fans old enough to recognize the CCA logo will have noticed it quietly presented in the openings of *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) and *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023).

[6]For contributions to the enduring debate over the psychological effects of violent video games, see Ferguson et al. (2020), Zhang et al. (2021), and Burkhardt and Lenhard (2022).

[7]For a detailed discussion of Wertham and his legacy, see Beaty (2005). Wertham is often singled out in modern examinations of the moral panic over horror comics, yet he was not alone in expressing feverish condemnations of the genre. Sterling North (1940), for example, was influential in his criticism of comic publishers perpetuating what he described as a "cultural slaughter of the innocents."

accessible to comic readers.[8] However, if we set aside these most conspicuous features of the criticism leveled against horror comics, do we also harbor residual skepticism that comics, compared to more immersive media like horror films or video games, could be responsible for generating moral danger for their readers?

In part one of this article, I outline a particular type of psychological impact we ought to take seriously when evaluating the moral status of entertainment media. Next, in part two, I consider the ways in which comics seem uniquely immune from claims that they create this kind of impact for their readers. In section three, however, I consider other ways in which we might think that comics generate special instances of moral danger for readers. My conclusion is, unsurprisingly, that very few horror comics create genuine risks for the moral psychology of their readers. Yet I argue that all fiction ought to be subject to moral scrutiny, and I claim that at least *some* of the concerns raised during the post-war moral panic over horror comics ought to be taken seriously. Most importantly for this volume, I hope that attending to some of the details regarding our moral evaluations of horror comics, compared to evaluations of films, can contribute something helpful to the growing literature on the philosophy of comics.

Moral danger in horror fiction

It can seem far-fetched that watching a violent horror film or reading a comic could ever create risks for those watching or reading these sources of entertainment. As noted above, one of the main reasons we look back at the post-war moral panic over comics with bemused contempt is the fact that the evidence presented against comics by Wertham (and other witnesses called to testify in the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency) was premised on the implausible empirical claim that horrific fictional content is *straightforwardly* harmful to the psychology of its readers. In Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, for example, depictions of horrific scenes in comics are cataloged for the reader before news stories of children committing violent acts are presented as the inevitable consequent of being exposed to comics' ghastly contents and incorporating these contents into aspirational fantasies:

> The atmosphere of crime comic books is unparalleled in the history of children's literature of any time or any nation. It is a distillation of viciousness. The world of the comic book is the world of the strong, the ruthless, the bluffer, the shrewd deceiver, the torturer and the thief. All the emphasis is on the exploits where somebody takes advantage of somebody else, violently, sexually or threateningly. […] In this soil children indulge in the stock fantasies supplied by the industry: murder, torture, burglary, threats, arson and rape.
>
> (1954: 94)

Very little time is spent arguing for psychological links that would establish a causal connection from reading horror fiction to delinquent moral behavior. That connection was, for Wertham, too obvious to require detailed proof. It was sufficient, he assumed, to expose the awful details of what was being consumed by children; the argument for a causal connection from viewing this material to subsequent violent behavior seemed to him all but self-evident.[9]

[8] Note that while censorship of comics is now rare by comparison, it is not without precedent, e.g., the prosecution of Mike Diana for obscenity. An engaging summary of the case is presented in the documentary, *Boiled Angels: The Trial of Mike Diana* (2018).

[9] It is important not to vilify Wertham in overall assessments of him as a person. He was genuinely concerned for the welfare of disadvantaged children, he testified in favour of desegregation in the hearings that led to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and he founded a low-cost clinic in Harlem to provide otherwise unavailable health care for persons of color.

One might attempt to advance a better-supported version of Wertham's argument for a causal link between fiction and behavior. Indeed, it is tempting to dive into the social science literature investigating whether data exists connecting violent fictional content to measurable outcomes. That, however, is not my aim. The argument I put forward in Woodcock (2013) is not meant to support restrictions on our ability to access violent horror films, and it is not predicated on a straightforward causal connection between viewing violent imagery and being disposed to emulate the actions depicted in that imagery. Instead, the *Argument from Reactive Attitudes* (ARA) that I defend claims only that it is wrong to view, or to facilitate viewing, those features of a work of art or entertainment that encourage the corruption of attitudes that are necessary to maintain a well-functioning moral psychology. The idea is that reactive attitudes like gratitude, sympathy and forgiveness are vital for us to understand ourselves as responsible agents who recognize our obligations to others. As vital as these attitudes might be, they are unfortunately vulnerable to deterioration if they are not routinely and properly exercised. It is therefore morally irresponsible to jeopardize these attitudes by engaging with fiction that risks undermining their proper application. In the case of horror films, the risk is that the enjoyment of sadistic violence in fiction can degrade our dispositions for sympathy in ordinary life. The risk need not involve a straightforward connection to violent behavior; it is sufficient for caution, I claim, that our basic capacities for responding sympathetically to suffering are jeopardized. As Wertham suggests in one of his less excessive passages:

> The more subtle this influence is, the detrimental it may be. It is an influence on character, on attitude, on the higher functions of social responsibility, on superego formation and on the intuitive feeling for right and wrong. To put it more concretely, it consists chiefly in a blunting of the finer feelings of conscience, of mercy, of sympathy for other people's suffering and of respect for women as women. (1954: 91)

It is admittedly odd, I recognize, to cite Wertham in order to introduce a point about the *subtle* influences of fictional material, but here he may be correct. If some psychological impacts are not easy to detect, they may be worrisome precisely because their moral implications tend to go unrecognized.[10]

Along with the greater plausibility of less ambitious empirical predictions, the ARA that I have defended reverses the burden of proof that is otherwise appropriate for condemnations of artistic expression. When we consider whether or not to censor or impose legal penalties on artistic works like horror films, we are asking deep questions about the kinds of political rights citizens have to engage with subversive material. In this context, it is reasonable to demand a notably high threshold for the evidence required to establish that a film causes moral harm. By contrast, when we consider whether we ought to have moral reservations about viewing some films with horrific violence as entertainment, the prospect of undermining our dispositions for sympathy shifts the burden of proof in the opposite direction: evidence should be provided to justify the risk to one's moral psychology against a default presumption that we should pursue morally innocent forms of amusement.

Consider the following example. Imagine Tom has joined a club to play an immersive, multi-player board game with role-playing elements. The game involves forming coalitions in order to defeat other players selected as enemies, but it also rewards deceit and ruthless self-interest in cases where one has the opportunity to sell out players in one's own coalition. Tom has played other board games in the past that involved selfish strategies and even deceit, yet the game in this club is

Nevertheless, the rhetorical excesses of *Seduction of the Innocent* remain problematic given the empirical evidence to which Wertham had access, as Carol L. Tilley (2012) documents.

[10]As Jon Robson (2017: 314) points out, Wertham's failure to convincingly identify a link between comics and their impact on our psychology does not imply that no such link exists.

different. It is no simple card game that prompts players to laugh about seeking to best each other within the artificial confines of the game. Instead, members of this club spend considerable time and effort developing the characters they play in the game, and the tone of the interactions between players, who have significant emotional investments at stake, is vicious. Yet the game is highly addictive, and for a time Tom find himself drawn into the drama of seeking to destroy his opponents at all costs.[11] In situations like this, we hopefully begin to realize that we are immersed in a toxic social situation and that we ought to extricate ourselves from this situation if it starts to affect other parts of our lives. Perhaps Tom notices that he is becoming more impatient with friends and coworkers, or he catches himself thinking strategically about how they can be manipulated to his advantage. If this occurs, I would argue that it is reasonable for Tom to quit playing the game based only a suspicion that it is having an adverse effect on his dispositions for sympathy and cooperation.

If this sounds at all familiar you may have experienced something similar in a sporting league, martial arts academy, or even just a group of friends who gossip with too much venom in their veins. If so, I suspect that (a) it never occurred to you that some sort of legal remedy is appropriate to prevent others from engaging in the activity, and (b) *you did not feel as though you needed strong empirical evidence* documenting the impact the activity was having on your psychology to conclude that it was not worth the risk to your sympathetic attitudes given other available opportunities for entertainment.

Returning to horror films, the burden of proof would seem to be stacked against taking pleasure in depictions of sadistic violence (given the availability of other options) if our enjoying these films threatens reactive attitudes like our dispositions for sympathy, fairness, and so forth Yet, at this point those familiar with the vast literature on the aesthetics of horror will be grinding their teeth. Even if the burden of proof is low for moral concerns that are not related to censorship, we need *some* reason to believe that viewing horror films presents risks to our moral capacities for a precautionary approach to be justified. Moreover, those familiar with the literature will point out that most explanations of why viewers find horror appealing are paradoxically *victim-oriented* and therefore do not present any risk to our reactive attitudes.[12] If anything, engaging with the narratives of horror films might strengthen our sympathetic dispositions by applying them to the extreme scenarios in horror films as we desperately hope that characters escape from the threats they encounter. For my part, I think this reply on behalf of horror film fans is persuasive for most examples of the genre. Nevertheless, I argue that outlier cases exist where horror films invite viewers to vicariously enjoy sadistic violence, and it is these cases that make it appropriate to adopt a precautionary attitude toward viewing those specific instances of fictional violence as entertainment. Critics remain unconvinced that such cases exist, but my aim is not to rehearse this debate here.[13] For now, I only want to suggest that some element of the moral panic of the 1950s might be worth considering: it may be reasonable in some special contexts to adopt a precautionary attitude toward moral dangers that exist for our engagement with horror fiction.

Horror comics present less risk of moral danger

Let us proceed with the provisional claim that a suitably conservative interpretation of the ARA is persuasive. In other words, let us assume for now that engaging with at least some fictional depictions of horrific violence invites the vicarious enjoyment of inflicting suffering on others and therefore risks corrupting our reactive attitudes. Will the format of comics make this risk more

[11]Consider the difference between a friendly game of poker and the answer Player X gives in *Molly's Game* (2017) when asked why he plays poker if he does not actually like the game: "I like destroying lives."

[12]To scratch the surface of victim-oriented explanations for what drives audiences to seek out horrific content (a puzzle known as the paradox of horror), see Carroll (1990), Feagin (1992), Gaut (1993), Morreall (1993), Bantinaki (2012), and Strohl (2019).

[13]For a critique of applying the Argument from Reactive Attitudes to horror films, see Stoner (2020).

or less serious compared to other media like novels, films, or video games? There are, I think, certain reasons for thinking that comics are uniquely immune to the kind of risk created by more immersive media like films and video games. If the risk at stake is that consumers of fictional horror are invited to align themselves with agents perpetuating the violence and thus vicariously take pleasure in sadistic actions, then it seems more likely that consumers will be tempted to "lose themselves" in a narrative and fall prey to these invitations when the format is an immersive experience. In the limiting case, we can imagine a worst-case scenario in which agents participate in a virtual reality simulation that encourages them to commit horrible acts of violence against so-called NPC's (non-player characters). The more realistic the simulation when it comes to immersive experience, the more we might worry about agents being subtly invited to share in the perspectives of perpetrators of violence.[14] By contrast, there are at least three structural features of comics that work against this kind of risk.

First, and most obviously, reading horror comics *requires effort* to continue participating in the narratives presented, whereas effort is required to stop a horror film from continuing as we watch it unfold. While it is certainly true that our imaginations might be actively engaged while viewing a film, the mechanics of film engagement are different from reading because the former does not require us to continuously perform any actions, except keeping our eyes open, to keep ourselves invested in the story at stake. This feature of watching films allows for an immersive experience that makes viewers more likely to take up the perspectives of characters in a story without critical distance. We are often prompted to move through the landscape of a film as if it is occurring in real time, and the ease with which we absorb the details of a visual narrative often gives viewers the feeling of being part of that narrative. This is not a necessary feature of viewing a film. It is certainly possible for, say, a documentary to present information to viewers from a detached perspective that blocks any invitation to take up the perspectives of those depicted in the story. The point is only that viewing a film generally requires less effort from viewers than actively reading a comic, and this could be one factor that makes comics less susceptible to the possibility of being invited to vicariously adopt the perspectives of characters who commits acts of sadistic violence.[15]

In fact, in some respects reading comics is even less threatening than reading ordinary text when it comes to this kind of concern. As Sam Cowling and Ley D. Cray point out in their insightful *Philosophy of Comics* (2022), the act of reading a comic involves considerable effort because one is constantly choosing the order in which to read the text (in either narration or speech balloons) or attend to the features of the images displayed. Engaging in this kind of "picture-reading" is a distinctly active, inefficient process for gathering narrative details in a certain sense. Reading a novel, by contrast, allows for a kind of autopilot for those fortunate enough to be literate and thus absorb information presented without much effort. Comics are rarely so consistent in their arrangement of pictures and text for this equivalent of autopilot to function. Even when the arrangements are uniform, we actively direct our attention back and forth between text and image in a way that requires extra effort beyond just turning pages to find more details. Indeed, for those who enjoy comics this inefficiency is a considerable part of their appeal. Yet for our purposes this active engagement tends to produce a critical vantage point for readers to address the material that is presented from a more distanced perspective than one that invites vicarious identification.

This is not to say that vicarious identification with the motives and actions of characters in comics does not occur. In the ordinary case of superhero comics, most of us delight in cases of onomatopoeia-infused action sequences in which someone like Batman delivers blows to his enemies. The argument here is only that, ceteris paribus, the structure of comics is conducive to

[14]Malicious agents will find reasons to take perverse pleasure in fictional violence no matter what the format, and saintly agents will not be corrupted by any media at all. The point here is that immersive media increases the risk for ordinary, imperfect agents to be drawn into narratives that invite them to take pleasure in sadistic violence.

[15]This contrast between participatory effort in film and comics is noted by Scott McCloud (1993: 68) in his artful discussion of comics and perceptual closure.

taking up a critical perspective on the content presented compared to the more immersive nature of viewing film. Even in cases where comics attempt to present a first-person point of view for the reader, like Bob Powell's *Black Cat Mystery* story "Colorama" (1953), the work that the reader must perform to assemble the imagery from one frame to the next is sufficient to keep oneself *aware of the process of picture-reading*, even if the imagery is arranged as if one is viewing the events from within the narrative.

The second structural feature of horror comics that mitigates against the risk of being invited to vicariously identify with characters who perpetuate violence is the fact that these comics are almost exclusively collections of short stories rather than serial narratives. This feature is reflected in the titles of some of the most famous horror comics: *Weird Mysteries*, *Startling Terror Tales*, and *Tales from the Crypt.* Individual issues of these titles often include three or more short stories collected without any expectation of continuity for the characters appearing in future issues.[16] Given this format, readers are invited to drop in and observe the stories from a distanced, sociological perspective rather than setting an expectation that they will be prompted to identify with the characters presented. This is not to say that readers will not identify with characters in horror comic stories, or that there is no expectation for readers to become emotionally attached to characters in certain stories. The point is only that a short story format presents a different default expectation than serial stories or films when it comes to how we engage with the content at stake.

Consider another notorious horror comic from the post-war period that was discussed during the hearings leading up to the imposition of the CCA. In "Foul Play" from *Haunt of Fear* #19 (Feldstein 1953), the story begins during a minor league baseball playoff game. At bat is Herbie Satten, who draws a walk by leaning into an inside pitch. He then runs to steal second despite having no chance of succeeding. As he slides into second base, he maliciously clips the player from the opposing team with his spikes. The act is initially written off as strange and reckless, but the players figure out later that Satten intentionally laced his spikes with poison because that second baseman was the opposing team's star player who was poised to win the game in the ensuing inning. The second baseman collapses and dies at the plate in that last inning, sealing the victory for Satten's team. Later, after the opposing team figures out the plot and confirms their suspicions, they lure him to a midnight ceremony that results in a baseball game played with his internal organs and decapitated head.

What is noteworthy about this story, and hundreds of others like it in the horror comics genre, is the way in which it illustrates a grisly example of karmic payback inflicted on someone without any clear protagonists necessary to deliver it. The players from the opposing team are not depicted as evil, but neither are they depicted as justified when they discuss contacting the police and decide instead to deal with Satten themselves. Horror comics often avoid depicting characters as straightforward heroes or villains because this classification is not necessary when presenting a short story for the purpose of illustrating karma, irony, or some terrifying aspect of human nature. Instead, the anthology format encourages readers to approach the material at stake from a distanced, sociological perspective that does not require obvious protagonists and antagonists. This perspective is accentuated by the fact that many horror comics have a creepy host, like EC Comics' the Crypt Keeper or the Old Witch, introducing and sometimes narrating the stories like twisted sociology professors. The hosts emphasize the central elements of the stories without offering as many judgments of the characters as they offer morbid, heavy-handed puns.

This distanced perspective that is so common in horror comics is difficult to sustain in a serial comic or a film. If a serial comic is centered around a specific character, it is difficult for readers to not identify with them as a default protagonist. Even within the time one invests in a full-length film,

[16]There are certainly exceptions to be found within the genre, some of the most famous being *Dark Shadows*, *I, Vampire*, and *Swamp Thing.* I only mean to suggest that presenting individual short stories is the most common format among popular horror comic titles.

some expectation is normally generated to see the events portrayed from the perspective of certain characters. Horror comics delivered in a short story format are uniquely immune from this default expectation, and in this respect they are less susceptible to inviting their audience to vicariously enjoy the infliction of suffering from some particular character's standpoint.[17]

The third feature of horror comics that makes them importantly different from horror films is their lack of auditory accompaniment. The simple fact that comics are enjoyed without sound has an effect on how likely it is for readers to become immersed in a storyline in such a way that they vicariously identify with the actions of characters. In films, sound plays a crucial role in way viewers are prompted to feel about the events unfolding in the narrative. Ominous tones can signal to viewers that characters are malevolent or untrustworthy, suspenseful music can indicate a threat to characters with whom viewers are prompted to align themselves, and an exhilarating soundtrack can implicitly license viewers to take pleasure in the events that are displayed visually. There is obviously a substantial literature in film theory discussing the ways in which sound design influences our experiences as viewers.[18] My aim here is only to note that the richness of this literature speaks to something present in horror films that remains absent in horror comics, for the latter do not include auditory cues for those engaged with works of art to be emotionally directed toward any particular source of identification.

Consider, for example, one of the most notorious stories from horror comics in the post-war period titled, "I Killed Mary" (Morse 1954). The story involves a disaffected teenage boy named Robby who has been ignored as inconsequential since he was a child and now both hates and desires the girls in school who dismiss him as a "sissy." He lures one of these girls into a barn, and after she refuses his advances he murders her with an axe. He returns home and calmly announces to his family that he killed Mary, but he discovers that no one believes he could accomplish any feat so significant, whether good or evil. The story concludes with Robby hanging himself in the same barn that contains Mary's corpse, though final frames of the comic show the authorities finding the bodies and assuming that Mary must have been murdered by a maniac drifter before Robby found her and ended his life. Clearly, they assume, he was too frail to handle her death.

The story is notorious for a reason. In only a few pages it delivers a seriously disturbing commentary on what we would now describe as "incel" pathology. My point in raising it here, however, is to note how different the story might be with accompanying music. As it is, a large part of what is so unsettling about the story is the bleak, detached way in which the details are delivered to the reader. The story recounts the tragic tale of someone bullied by his peers who responds to this treatment without any moral conscience, and its even tone gives the reader an unsettling sense of true-crime documentation. If music were added to a version of the story in film, viewers would be prompted to experience feelings of compassion, fear and disgust during the different parts of the story, and the choices to use certain kinds of music at particular times could have a powerfully regulative effect on the emotional impact of the film. It is possible for a film version to use sufficiently balanced music to replicate the detachment of the comic, but it would be a conspicuous choice for a filmmaker to make. In general, the lack of accompanying soundtrack contributes to the

[17]In fact, I think the short story format is so conducive to a distanced, sociological perspective that it makes horror comics less susceptible to strong investments of sympathy for victims of violence as well. Consider the brutal story "Shoe-Button Eyes" (Craig 1954). It features a blind boy growing up in poverty with a single mother after his father dies. The mother is forced to live with a man who abuses her and the boy, including tormenting the boy by ripping out the eyes of his favourite teddy bear. Eventually, the mother dies and the step-father kills the boy. The karmic payoff is that the step-father is found dead with his eyes ripped out and the teddy bear oddly smiling. This story is so wrenching that I think it could only be delivered in a context where readers operate on the understanding that they are distanced observers to the details presented – that they are studying the sordid details of human nature under the presumption that some karmic payback will ensue. The narrative of this story would be too awful, in my opinion, to be appealing for readers if the sociological conventions associated with short stories were not present to blunt our otherwise overwhelming sympathy for a child being maliciously beaten and killed.

[18]For a helpful introduction to this literature, see Murray (2019).

way in which picture-reading tends to create a rather distanced, sociological perspective in comics presenting horrific material. The creators of comics can elicit amazing emotional responses in their work, but without audio accompaniment the mechanics of comics tend to give readers a sense of looking in on a disturbing scene rather than being an active participant.

Thus, with regard to concerns grounded in a precautionary version of the ARA, we find that the effort of picture-reading, the lack of auditory accompaniment, and the convention of a short story format give us *ceteris paribus* reasons for thinking that horror comics generate less risk of moral danger for their readers than the risk for viewers of horror films. And that might be the last word on the subject, if there were not countervailing factors to consider.

Horror comics present increased risks of moral danger

So far we have seen that the misguided nature of the post-war moral panic over horror comics was not solely due to implausible psychological hypotheses and a draconian willingness to use censorship to achieve social aims. The post-war moral panic also seems exaggerated given the way readers interact with the format of short horror stories that require silent picture-reading compared to immersive media like films or video games. Nevertheless, for the curious enough to read Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, it is hard to avoid noting that he was not wrong about everything. Take, for instance, his observations about the ways in which persons from racialized groups are portrayed in comics:

> While the white people in jungle books are blonde and athletic and shapely, the idea conveyed about the natives is that there are fleeting transitions between apes and humans. I have repeatedly found in my studies that this characterization of colored peoples as subhuman, in conjunction with depiction of forceful heroes as blond Nordic supermen, has made a deep—and I believe lasting—impression on young children. (1954: 32)

On this point about racist depictions of non-white characters in comics, Wertham seems to be impressively ahead of his time.[19] As a parent, I am certainly concerned about how my daughter might internalize stereotypical representations of racialized groups, and I doubt I am alone in having this concern. Moreover, it does not seem unreasonable to think that racist depictions of non-white characters in comics can have troubling effects on adult readers as well. I trust that this point is not especially contentious, but it is interesting to notice how recognizing this point cuts through the skepticism we might otherwise have when we consider how horror comics can have a negative impact on the moral psychology of their readers.

Another way in which Wertham was ahead of his time was identifying the problematic social implications of stories proposing that we ought to place our faith in powerful heroes who operate outside the constraints of democratic institutions. By now there is an entire genre of comics, television, and film devoted to exploring themes of mistrust in heroes who are viewed as super-powered vigilantes operating without public oversight. Most of us classify this genre in terms of variations on Alan Moore's influential *Watchmen*, but Wertham noted this trend in comics decades earlier:

> Actually, Superman (with the big S on his uniform—we should, I suppose, be thankful that it is not an S.S.) needs an endless stream of ever new submen, criminals and "foreign looking" people not only to justify his existence but even to make it possible. It is this feature that engenders in children either one or the other of two attitudes: either they fantasy themselves as supermen, with the attendant prejudices against the submen, or it makes them submissive

[19]This is not to say that crime and horror comics were uniformly guilty of racist characterizations. See Whitted (2019) for a discussion of how EC Comics contributed to progressive aims with respect to race and social justice.

> and receptive to the blandishments of strong men who will solve all their social problems for them—by force. (1954: 34)

We may not be as accustomed to this criticism focused on Superman compared to other anti-heroes, like Batman or The Punisher, yet the point at stake could reasonably be mistaken for having come from a contemporary interview with Moore, who remains bitter that *Watchmen* gained widespread popularity without leaving a lasting legacy of immunizing readers from the authoritarian influences that he perceives in superhero comics.[20]

It seems, then, that there are at least some considerations raised during the post-war panic over comics that are worth taking seriously (even if Wertham tends to follow them up with misogynistic rants about Wonder Woman). Returning to horror comics, it is not so absurd to speculate that moral danger may be generated by comics if they invite readers to vicariously enjoy depictions of suffering. For our interests in this chapter, is it ever true that *the format* of comics increases this risk compared to film? I have just presented reasons for thinking that the opposite is true in some respects, but it might nevertheless be true that there are format-based features of comics that push in both directions. Indeed, I think there are at least three features of comics that make them especially susceptible to the concerns regarding reactive attitudes presented above.

First, the imaginative space of comics is wider than what can be presented in film, and this creates opportunities for comics to depict more deeply disturbing content. A vast scope of body horror and existential threat can be drawn or implied in comics without the presumption that they must be realistically depicted in visual terms as if they were actually occurring. Film, by contrast, carries an expectation that its themes be visually depicted as if they are happening in the relevant fictional context; hence, film faces corresponding limitations when the themes at stake are too bizarre or otherworldly to capture in ways that viewers find compelling. There are exceptions, of course, because film can also leave some of what it presents as horrifying merely implied for viewers, and it can deviate from the ordinary expectation of plausible visual representations by delving into experimental sequences of images.[21] Yet film often relents to viewers' expectations to see coherent visuals, and this notoriously generates mixed results for films that attempt to create special effects that are realistically horrifying. If these effects end up visually doubtful, they can undermine viewers' emotional investment in the narrative. The format of comics, on the other hand, allows for much greater leeway in what readers expect to be rendered accurately in artwork.

Take, for example, the work of Mike Mignola in *Hellboy* or other *B.P.R.D.* comics. There are instances of horrifying imagery in these comics that would be nearly impossible to present in any plausible way on film. (Indeed, efforts so far have not met with success.) Representing Lovecraftian ideas like the monstrous Ogdru Jahad can proceed in comics like Hellboy with the reader being willing to grant much more artistic license to visual representations. Similarly, one finds surreal representations of horror themes in iconic work like the hallucinogenic stories of Junji Ito and the existential meditations in Alan Moore's *Saga of the Swamp Thing*. It is difficult to imagine any of these works being as successful as they have been at tapping into our psyches if they had not benefited from the imaginative space that the format of comics provides.

What is curious, in fact, is that titles during the heyday of horror comics in the post-war period did not push moral boundaries as far as they might have given the nearly limitless scope of what can be drawn within the frames of comics. For their time, horror comics did present a series of images that pushed boundaries of what was considered morbid and grotesque, but it was still largely the case, as noted above, that horror comics presented violence and gore from a detached, sociological perspective that almost always served to reinforce ideas that persons who acted viciously would eventually meet some terrifying fate.[22] Given the lack of boundaries of what could be drawn,

[20]See, for example, Moore (2022).

[21]See, for example, Altered States (1980), Beyond the Black Rainbow (2010), and Possessor (2020).

[22]A noteworthy exception: the disturbing "A Kind of Justice" (Wessler 1952).

compared to what could be plausibly filmed with the special effects of the time, it is conspicuous that horror comics in the 1950s were not even more brutal in terms of inviting readers to take pleasure in extreme possibilities that could have been presented.

A second feature of comics compared to film that might lead us to think that the format of comics increases moral risk is the way in which the process of picture-reading allows readers to linger on horrific images in a way that film normally does not. Contrasted against pure text, both comics and film allow agents to satisfy their morbid curiosity for horrifying visual imagery, yet in the case of comics readers have the luxury of moving at their own chosen pace. They can potentially linger on and obsess over the violent imagery presented. Of course, modern media allow users to do this with film as well now that we can scroll and pause film whenever we like, but film is not normally created with this in mind. Instead, film editors agonize over how long to hold on disturbing imagery to produce the appropriate balance of horror and satisfaction of morbid curiosity. Very often this balance errs toward only very brief moments of truly graphic representations of violence, whereas comic readers can linger as long as they wish on imagery like the notorious cover of Black Cat #50 for Lee Elias' story *White Heat* (1954).

Comics have their own version of these kinds of editing decisions, since their creators can choose how much to visually present in the frames devoted to a violent event in a comic's narrative. Sometimes, for example, comics can block visual access to graphic details by drawing them occurring behind foreground objects, or they can have these details occur out of frame in an unfolding sequence. They can devote entire frames to onomatopeas with no accompanying visuals in order to withhold visual access to particularly violent acts. Nevertheless, all of these choices occur within the background constraint of a picture-reading format, and that format is one in which comic creators cannot control how long their readers decide to focus on what gets drawn in a given frame. When a disturbing image is presented, there is something especially unsettling about the permanence of the image that sits waiting for you on the page to confront whenever you allow yourself to give it life.

The third feature of the comic format that can increase the risk of readers being invited to take vicarious pleasure in suffering is the way picture-reading is an active process that, in a certain respect, implicates readers and their morbid fascination with violent material. When it comes to viewing a film, viewers can allow disturbing images to pass over them and therefore resist the feeling that they are complicit in what they are viewing. They can grind their teeth and regret the decision to have purchased a ticket or selected that film to stream. They might think about their next visit to the grocery store in silent rebellion. They can also stop watching and walk out, but the option to cease and desist is available for comics as well. The difference is that if one does continue to engage the media, it is easier to continue passively experiencing a film without implicating oneself in the violence it presents than to engage in picture-reading when experiencing a comic.

Referring to a passage from Scott McCloud (1993: 68) on the act of imaginative closure between panels in a comic, Cowling and Cray put the point as follows:

> … the suggestion here is that the imaginative act of closure—essential to the characteristic activity we've called picture-reading—is, in an important sense, participatory. By picture-reading McCloud's axe-murder panels, you are not merely an observer but are complicit in the gruesome imaginary homicide. (2022: 272)

Note that the point here is not that it is impossible to read a comic with some critical distance and thereby avoid the complicity at stake. The point is that the format of comics involves sets up a default level of engagement that is more participatory than being passively fed images via film. Thus, when it comes to concerns related to our reactive attitudes and the threat of media inviting us to vicariously take pleasure in sadistic imagery, we see an interesting way in which concerns about being immersed in comics versus film run in both directions. As was discussed above, film can produce a more immersive experience that invites complicity through viewers feeling like they are

placed within the fictional setting of the violence depicted. Yet comics can produce their own immersive experience through the participatory elements of picture-reading and our own complicit imaginative capacities. Both media, then, exhibit unique types of moral risk for their enthusiasts.

Conclusion

Given that the moral risks associated with horror comics are in some respects greater than, yet in other respects less than, those associated with horror films, should we be concerned about the possibility that modern horror comics can undermine our sympathetic responses? Is there some element of the post-war moral panic over horror comics that is worth taking seriously in order to extract important lessons from the past? Truth be told, I believe the risk of damage to the reactive attitudes of both comic readers and filmgoers is generally very low. Fans of horror fiction are normally correct that this kind of material is victim-oriented and therefore poses no risk of inviting fans to vicariously take pleasure in sadistic violence. As strange as it is to explain in terms of our aesthetic preferences, we apparently seek out fictional means of experiencing otherwise negative emotions like fear, disgust, and moral outrage rather than opportunities to simulate inflicting horrific violence on innocent victims.

Nevertheless, I think we have reason to remain vigilant about atypical cases of horror fiction that prompt their audience to indulge their sadistic impulses. This can take the form of intentional provocations like *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), which revels in sadistic perspectives while offering little, if anything, in the way of any countervailing aesthetic benefits or insightful social commentary. Yet such films are easy to identify and dismiss. More interesting questions are raised by cases of horror fiction with narratives that are for the most part victim-oriented but nonetheless contain elements of such overt sadism that it is hard not to consider whether the audience is *at least partly* being encouraged to indulge in sadistic fantasies under the guise of plausible deniability. Recent comics like *Blackgas* (Ellis 2007) and *Crossed* (Ennis 2010) are almost impossible for well-adjusted persons to read without confronting these kinds of difficult questions.

Thankfully for me, my aim here is not to answer these difficult questions. Instead, my aim has been to (a) note that these questions are significant enough to take seriously and then (b) consider whether comics are uniquely *immune or susceptible* to the kinds of moral risk that are at stake when we consider the impact of horror fiction on our reactive attitudes. My thesis, somewhat surprisingly, is: both. There are noteworthy ways in which comics are not nearly as likely to invite sadistic responses from their readers as films are likely to invite these responses from viewers. Yet there are also important respects in which the participatory means by which we engage with comics creates added risks for complicity in the violence they present. What is clear from this discussion, I hope, is that questions of complicity with horror violence are highly context-sensitive, and that the uniqueness of comics as a source of entertainment and artistic expression makes these questions all the more complex.

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