

Arts & Faith on horror

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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In a [post](#) introducing Arts & Faith's list of the [top 25 horror films of all time](#), Jeffrey Overstreet rightly observes that not all horror is created equal:

Many horror movies are lurid and gratuitous--even pornographic. They appeal to our baser appetites.... But horror movies can do more than just frighten us. They can ask us to move beyond terror into contemplation, where fear of separation from God becomes the beginning of wisdom.

I'm not a fan of horror films of any kind, but Overstreet's reluctance to condemn a whole genre is right on. Horror aside, I try to avoid violent movies--but I weigh this concern against how *good* I expect a film to be. As Martin Sheen (an outspoken pacifist who's starred in some very good [violent movies](#)) puts it in *The West Wing*, the problem isn't that some movies are too violent, "it's that they suck. They're terrible." I think a lot of better, more challenging films could be just as effective with a bit less explicit violence, but I take Overstreet's point: "explicit" and "gratuitous" aren't synonyms.

This argument of Overstreet's, however, is troubling. In response to the question "shouldn't good Christians avoid depictions of such violence and depravity?" he offers this:

Think about it. What is the central image of Christian faith?

The cross. The blameless Son of God--a truly perfect organism--was nailed to that wooden plank and raised up, naked and bleeding, for the amusement of his scornful community.

What could be more horrific?

We cringe at the thought of our capacity for evil. And that discomfort is useful. It's a distress call. We're compelled to seek a cure for our disease, to seek the

reconciliation of a dismembered world.

Hmm. The idea that Christianity's central image is a gruesome crucifixion scene--and that this has positive effects--isn't exactly a consensus position. Margaret Miles argues in the *Century* that the faith's original symbol [wasn't a cross at all](#). Sarah Sentilles [connects](#) the common emphasis on the crucifixion's bloody details with support for torture (though [I don't buy](#) how she applies this to poll data). And that's just recently: tension between gory crucifixes and more cerebral depictions--to say nothing of different atonement theologies--has of course existed for centuries.

In any case, if you enjoy a good horror film, this list may be useful. As for me, I'm looking forward to future such lists from Arts & Faith--their [top 100 films list](#) is fantastic, and now they're planning a whole series of genre-specific lists.