

More Funny Games from Michael Haneke

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Austrian director Michael Haneke (*Caché*, *La Pianiste*) made the original *Funny Games* in 1997 as a response to what the director considered to be the deplorable and irresponsible treatment of violence in the American cinema and its impact on American moviegoers. But the English-speaking audience, which Haneke maintains was always the ideal audience, and perhaps target, of the work went largely unexposed to the small German-language art movie.

Given the chance to remake the work in English last year, Haneke leapt at the opportunity. He only asked that talented actress Naomi Watts be cast in a leading role. Perhaps wanting less to introduce an American audience to a new movie than to present them with an old one he wished they'd seen, Haneke chose to film the new *Funny Games* as a shot-for-shot remake of the original. Excluding a few minor details, the new work is a careful replica of the original.

The story told in each film is the same and easily summarized: Two well-dressed, polite young men enter the home of a bourgeois couple under the pretext of borrowing some eggs. Once inside, they take the family hostage and torture them. A wager is made: the young men bet the family of three will be dead within 12 hours; the family, forced to take part in the game, bet they will survive.

On this narrow scaffolding, Haneke builds his meditation on violence. But *Funny Games* is not itself violent in the sense of gore or bloody detail, though there is some. Instead, much of the violence takes place off screen. However, there are the screams of the victims that are so very blood curdling. There are the faces of those forced to witness the devastating acts of violence. There is the truly concussive sound of a shotgun blast on the soundtrack. It's a deeply disturbing display, but not, it must be said, a terribly enlightening one.

Discussing the violence in the new *Funny Games*

with *Entertainment Weekly*, Haneke said, "Usually, in an action film, violence is depicted in such a way that it doesn't hurt the audience. As an audience, you feel good about it. It's almost like you got on a rollercoaster—it's a thrill. In my films what I'm trying to do is depict violence in such a way that it becomes reality again for the audience."

Along these same lines, Haneke recently told film critic Emanuel Levy, "I'm trying to find ways to show violence as it really is: it is not something that you can swallow. I want to show the reality of violence, the pain, the wounding of another human being."

This strategy is certainly not unique to Haneke. It was a central theme in Canadian director David Cronenberg's recent *Eastern Promises*. But while there may be some merit to presenting violence in a direct light and not diminishing its horror, a *preoccupation* with such details is a very limiting approach, especially when the very subject of the work is violence itself.

To ignore, as Haneke has done in both versions of *Funny Games*, the social conditions under which devastating violent crimes such as those found in the film take place and the circumstances under which films irresponsibly exploit such violence and a taste for such entertainment develops in some sections of the public, is to ignore the most essential element of the problem.

There is even the suggestion, in a key scene in the film, that such violence simply cannot be understood or accounted for. When the young torturers (Michael Pitt and Brady Corbet) are asked why they're committing these horrible acts, one of them rattles off a number of different stories: First they're from broken homes or the product of divorce or sexual abuse. Then they're poor and "white trash." Changing their story again, they claim to be wealthy and privileged, disgusted by the emptiness of their lives. They then remind their captors that none of these stories are to be believed.

Had Haneke been suggesting that such explanations are, in themselves, inadequate, leaving a great deal unsaid, he might have been on to something. As the scene stands, one simply gets the impression that this violence is inexplicable and altogether senseless.

Rather than creating a work which delves deeply into the issue of violence in entertainment, or, for that matter, the source of anti-social acts in real life, Haneke simply throws all of the surface ugliness he has observed onto the screen as if to say to his audience, “Shame on you and your bad taste in movies.” Haneke hopes his viewers will recognize—be jolted into recognizing—themselves, their “complicity” in the prevalence of screen violence and change their ways.

To this end, a number of Godardian techniques are employed. One of the torturers speaks directly to the camera, taunting the audience. “Who are you betting on?” he asks. “It’s not enough for you, is it? You want a proper ending,” he says when Watts’s character declares she’s finally had enough. In moments like these, Haneke does not challenge his audience, but accuses them.

This kind of middle-class radicalism animates all of Haneke’s work and has led to a number of wrongheaded conclusions even in his more interesting films such as *Caché* or *Code Inconnu*, but most of all in *Funny Games*.

There is the general suggestion in a number of his films that middle class people, through their supposed complacency and acceptance of existing conditions and values, somehow “deserve” or partially deserve to be assaulted. Such a stance is stupid, with quite reactionary implications, and avoids all the complicated questions bound up with the problem of developing a higher level of political and social consciousness within such layers.

Quite concretely, it is clear in this movie that Haneke feels the bourgeois couple are more than a little responsible for their own fate. The pair, Ann (Naomi Watts) and George (Tim Roth), are either totally oblivious to the suspicious behavior of the young men who will eventually torture them, or they act too slowly in defending themselves against it once they’ve recognized something is wrong. Ann, annoyed by the rudeness of the young men early in the film, but still not having convinced herself she is in danger, won’t commit to her angry demands that the young men

leave, and so they stay. She would rather, it seems, not appear impolite than go on living.

When given a chance later in the film to save themselves, George and Ann are totally ineffectual and ill-prepared: “Call someone. Who? The police.” A plan to escape out a window soon becomes a ridiculous farce in which Ann finally ends up standing at the kitchen counter attempting to dry out her cell phone with a hair dryer.

Why are these characters, not terribly unpleasant people, shown to be so ridiculous, even stupid? If the suggestion is that the audience takes delight in their suffering or is otherwise unaffected by it, having been conditioned by countless violent films in the past, then Haneke has certainly stacked the deck in his favor in making that argument.

Funny Games is ultimately a very poor film now just as it was in 1997. More than a decade has passed since its first appearance, but the film has remained the same. Viewers looking towards either version of the work for insight into violence in entertainment will be left very much in the dark.



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