



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Haneke's 'Funny' Games with the audience (revisited)

Laine, T.

Publication date

2010

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

On Michael Haneke

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

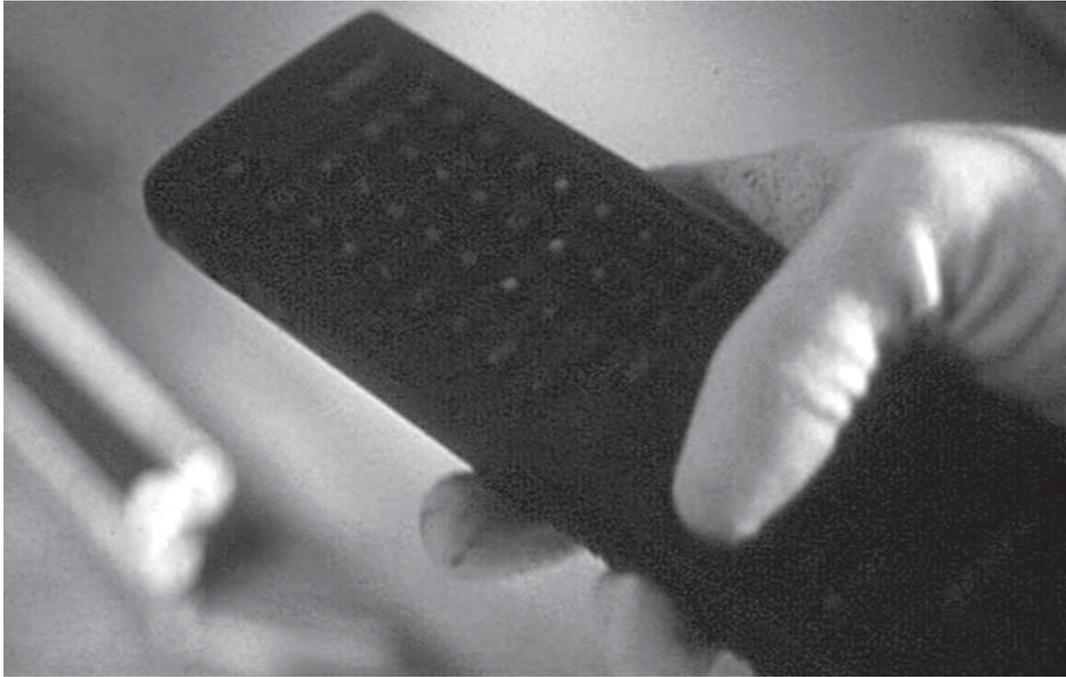
Laine, T. (2010). Haneke's 'Funny' Games with the audience (revisited). In B. Price, & J. D. Rhodes (Eds.), *On Michael Haneke* (pp. 50-60). (Contemporary approaches to film and television series). Wayne State University Press.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



Funny Games (1997): Paul prepares to save Peter.

Haneke's "Funny" Games with the Audience (Revisited)

It has often been established that, in the cinematic experience, the audience can realize certain emotions affectively without feeling them "concretely." In fact, the whole practice of cinema is built on the human capacity to be emotionally moved by what one knows does not "really" exist. Much academic discussion of the emotional response to cinema tends to capture these fictional emotions through the notion of willing suspension of disbelief, which guarantees safe involvement with the film. In the traditional feature film, emotions are placed at the service of the diegetic effect, experienced by the audience from a safe distance as privileged witnesses.¹ But in contemporary filmmaking the blurring of the boundaries between the diegesis (the film's story world) and the nondiegesis (the viewer's world) and the drawing of the audience's attention to the process of viewing itself almost seem to have become a rule rather than an exception. As a result, the traditional modes of seeing and experiencing no longer seem to be entirely appropriate for contemporary cinema. Films no longer simply "appear" before us from a safe distance; instead, they surround us, they expose us, and they confront us by any means possible. Films can look back at us, surprise us, and throw us into an objective apprehension of ourselves in the act of looking. Furthermore, we are not merely spectators in this way of experiencing: we participate, we are challenged, we are *forced* to respond, and we are often made very aware of our position of being "accomplices" (instead of witnesses) to the events depicted.

In Michael Haneke's controversial film *Funny Games* (1997), the audience is held to be an accomplice to brutalities committed by two film char-

acters that are no “real” characters at all, precisely because they emerge out of that cinematic space where the diegesis and the nondiegesis cancel each other out. The film is affective in a very “primal” way; critics frequently define it as offensive, provocative, and shocking. Furthermore, the film is often seen as particularly emblematic for Haneke, a filmmaker who wishes unambiguously to confront the audience within the paradigms of affective intelligence, beyond the emotionally distanced Brechtian anti-illusionism. In the film, two decent-looking, polite, and seemingly well-educated young men who call themselves Paul (Arno Frisch) and Peter (Frank Giering)—but at times also Beavis and Butthead or Tom and Jerry—force their way into the holiday residence of Anna (Susanne Lothar) and Georg Schober (Ulrich Mühe) and their little son, Schorschi (Stefan Olapczynski), and start to torture the family systematically. First, Paul kills the family dog with a golf club. Then, Peter strikes Georg with the same club, shattering his kneecap, after which Anna is forced to undress to stop the young men from torturing her son. With a friendly smile on his face, Paul suggests a “funny” game: “I’ll wager a bet that in twelve hours you three will be kaput?” The game of physical torture and psychological humiliation now begins in earnest.

Funny Games is a shocking film experience by any measure. According to some critics, it is also a shockingly contradictory film experience. This may be the case because the film is not meant to be “merely” a thriller (even though it clearly is) but simultaneously a critique of thrillers, violent mass media, and mainstream cinema in general. *Funny Games* is purposefully shocking rather than enchanting, and it is meant to question the use of violence, rather than to actually use violence itself, as a major narrative element. Instead, we are forced to experience the effects of violence afterward, particularly as they are reflected in the close-ups of Georg’s and Anna’s faces. As a result, Georg’s and Anna’s faces become the sites of pain and shame for being tortured and humiliated up to the point where both move beyond humiliation, dwelling in a trancelike state. As Jürgen Felix and Marcus Stiglegger write: “In *Funny Games*, it is Anna’s ravaged face especially that we must stare at again and again: a face that gradually loses—torture by torture—all traces of human dignity, destroyed by escalating acts of humiliation forced upon her by her tormentors.”²

Traditionally, one of the central ways in which a film is made emotionally significant for the audience is in the use of the human face in the scene of “emotional contagion.”³ Yet, even though Haneke does indeed use the human face to promote emotional contagion between the victims and the

Haneke's "Funny" Games with the Audience

audience, even more important to the emotional effect of *Funny Games* is the fact that the terrible situation the victims are facing is simultaneously both very real and very absurd. The victims' pain refers to the reality of physical necessity that nevertheless is isolated from any psychological motivation or rational explanation, and this is established from the very beginning of the film through the use of sound. The film opens with a series of eerie aerial shots of the Schobers' car driving toward their beach house. Elevated classical music is playing on the soundtrack (Handel and Mascagni). This appears to be diegetic sound played on the car stereo as a subject for Georg and Anna's music quiz, which is revealed to us by the offscreen dialogue between them, while the camera maintains its "God's eye" perspective.

However, there are several, apparently deliberate, continuity mistakes in this opening sequence: "elliptical jumps" indicate that some time has gone by while the music and the dialogue continues undisturbed. The idyllic playfulness of the family heading out for the holidays is then interrupted abruptly with John Zorn's screaming and chaotic avant-garde speed metal jazz that drowns out every other sound.⁴ With its heavy font and aggressive red color, the title of the film that dashes against the medium close-up image of the unsuspecting family stands in harsh contrast with the saturated stativity of the filmic image on the background. The music continues as the opening credits roll, and it is clear that whatever is going to happen to this sympathetic family will in all likelihood not end well. Haneke's play with diegetic and nondiegetic sound involves us from early on in his game, which, however, is not "playable" at all due to its senseless set of rules. The opening sequence, therefore, establishes the correspondence between the diegesis and the nondiegesis, expanding the diegetic world to include the audience and, by so doing, to hold the audience to be an accomplice for the brutalities yet to come, since we now know that a terrible crime will soon be committed.

After the opening sequence, the film starts off in a normal and relaxed domestic atmosphere, even though the audience is made to notice how strangely Anna and Georg's neighbors behave upon their first meeting. The family settles in for the weekend. Georg unpacks their luggage while Anna fills the fridge; then Georg and Schorsch put the boat in the water, and Anna prepares for dinner. But the normalcy quickly turns into a senseless, homicidal situation brought upon by Paul and Peter. Anna's first reaction to this senselessness is irritation—in the film she grows increasingly frustrated with Peter's deliberately clumsy behavior. First, Peter

drops Anna's eggs on the ground; then he throws her cell phone in the dishwasher, a calculated sabotage given that the Schobers now can neither receive any phone calls nor call for help themselves when they are later left alone in the house. In the distance, the family dog barks ominously, like a warning sound for the sadistic invasion that will follow closely. However, Anna's annoyance is soon replaced by horror as the situation skids out of control with the first violent outburst. This moment makes our worst fears come true, but unlike in a traditional horror film, the moment is not followed by a sense of relief for the audience for no longer having to carry the awareness of the threat alone.⁵ The moment when the Schobers are finally aware of the threat is not a relief for the audience for the simple reason that the Schobers are unable to act to save themselves. Therefore, the audience cannot release their emotional stress by identifying with the action on the screen.

But even more important, the audience is not granted any relief, as neither the Schobers nor the audience have any rational access to the world of senseless violence with which they are confronted within/by the film. The audience shares Anna and Georg's helplessness caused by their inability to protect either their son or themselves from this nightmarish situation. Yet what is even more unbearable in the film is its refusal to offer its audience the means to find meaning in the escalating acts of violence and humiliation.⁶ In the beginning, Anna cannot explain her irritation toward Paul and Peter to Georg or even to herself even though she (unlike Georg) can sense that something is terribly wrong. In the next moment her frightful expectations are raised to the power of infinity when Peter shatters Georg's kneecap. The hostage situation that then follows keeps both the Schobers and the audience captive. The Schobers are on their toes because they know that any wrong move will escalate the violence, while we are on our toes because we are concerned both about the Schobers' fate *and* about our own involuntary role in assisting or encouraging the psychopaths in an unexplainable way.

Needless to say, the Schobers' situation is unlike any other hostage situation because it is utterly beyond comprehension. Throughout the film, the Schobers and the audience ask the killers the same question: "Why are you doing this?" only to receive banal "psychobabble" in response. Paul, for instance, justifies Peter's actions by citing dysfunctional family circumstances in which Peter's mother "wanted to have her little teddy all to herself and since then, he's been a queer and a crook," while Peter himself cries

Haneke's "Funny" Games with the Audience

inconsolably and begs Paul to stop his recitation. Later Paul refers to Peter as “a spoiled child tormented by ennui and world weariness—weighed down by the void of existence,” at the same time winking directly at the camera. The killing of Schorschi and the scenes that follow differ radically in style from the rest of the film. As is the case throughout almost the entire film, the audience is not shown the violent event itself. As a result, the audience is not provided with a source for catharsis, a conventional relief of suffering when the scene of the victim’s suffering comes to an end.⁷ Since the audience’s horror and agony cannot find an outlet through a moment of catharsis, they become enduring, bespeaking the traumatic reality of violence.

In the scene discussed earlier, the camera stays with Paul, who is nonchalantly making sandwiches in the kitchen while the fatal shooting takes place in the living room. This is a scene intended to shift the responsibility of the events in the film to the audience, for even though the audience are “spared” an otherwise ruinous emotional investment in the sadistic events observed, they are nevertheless forced to listen to and imagine the violence, the blast of the shotgun, the engine sounds of the race cars on television, and the terrified, desperate cries of Anna and Georg screaming in unison in the background. On the visual level, then, the film refuses to aestheticize the violence, but its soundtrack expands the diegesis to involve the audience in a way that literally hurts in order to reassign the accountability of the violence to them. The next shot shows a close-up of a television screen with the car race still on, streaks of blood all over the monitor, while Paul and Peter argue offscreen about which family member should have been shot first instead of Schorschi. This is followed by a static long shot of the Schobers’ living room where the killing took place, with no movement whatsoever within the frame for more than a minute, again allowing the diegesis to expand and to swallow the nondiegesis with its devastating stillness. Anna’s paralysis finally ends, and she frees herself from the binds and attempts to escape together with Georg. All this time, the camera hardly moves, and the next change of camera angle does not take place for another thirteen minutes. Instead of having to watch the pain reflected on Anna’s and Georg’s faces, we now have to listen to it in Georg’s desperate and heart-wrenching wounded animal cries that enter into us without distance, and it is with the most inward part of ourselves that we establish their affective meaning.

Audience Responsibility

By expanding the diegesis to involve the audience in a most immersive way, *Funny Games* unsettles and dislocates the audience to the point of devastation. Haneke's game with the audience is to invite us to share Anna and Georg's helplessness, while compelling us to be accomplices in the violent actions that determine the Schobers' fate. With regard to *Funny Games*, Haneke himself states, "Anyone who leaves the cinema doesn't need the film, and anybody who stays does."⁸ I am inclined to disagree with this statement, since it seems to me that we stay in the cinema because we hope (against hope) that things would eventually go well for the Schobers. Haneke, in fact, does give us (torments us with?) crumbs of hope: when first Schorschi and then Anna manage to escape, only to be caught again quickly afterward; when the damaged cell phone suddenly gets a signal; or when, toward the end of the film, Anna manages to snatch the shotgun from Peter and shoot him at close range.

Elsewhere I have argued that it is precisely the empathic sharing of fear and helplessness that is the key to understanding the violence depicted in *Funny Games* not as an innate part of life but as inconsolable. It might even be said that we have no choice but to stay with the Schobers and the killers without the "luxury" of occupying a position of safe distance, and being very aware of this entrapment all the time. David Sorfa calls this entrapment "the double bind of the engaged" that in Haneke's films characteristically becomes a matter of being a partner in crime without the means to resist: "In [Haneke's] films the spectator is put in the same position of powerlessness that many of his characters experience. Just as they cannot alter the course of their lives or their predicaments, so we cannot alter the concrete and pre-recorded inevitability of the films (however much we may wish to do so)."⁹ This means that the Schobers cannot escape because their fate is overdetermined, always already happened. Their fate is overdetermined due to the way in which they have attempted to maintain their domestic boundaries and to insulate themselves from the world with their wealth, dumping the unfamiliar on the other side of the fence. What is more, the Schobers' fate is overdetermined because the film collaborates with the killers, who already know the outcome of the sadistic film-game. Therefore, even when things in the film take an unfavorable turn for the two killers, Paul can simply grab the remote control, "rewind" the scene in question, and reverse the episode to maintain the predestined course of events. But our fate in the audience is also overdetermined because of the

Haneke's "Funny" Games with the Audience

way we have anaesthetized ourselves to emotions in everyday life (Haneke would say that we have sunk into emotional "glaciation") and sought our affective thrills in the cinema instead.

By expanding the diegesis to include the audience, *Funny Games* holds the audience accountable for their "perverse" desire to seek pleasure in violent cinema. In this connection, many critics have argued (regardless of Haneke's conscious intentions to demand responsibility and active participation from his audience) that Haneke in fact manipulates and subjugates the audiences into emotional states and intellectual conclusions that are not of their own choosing, unless it is the choice of leaving the cinema altogether or the "masochist thrill" of being made aware of the shallowness of one's spectatorial desires.¹⁰ Haneke can also be criticized for shifting all the responsibility back to the audience without taking his own role as a filmmaker into consideration in the cruelties that the Schobers have to face. Yet the way in which Haneke muddles the distinction between the diegesis and the nondiegesis holds the audience responsible for what the Schobers experience and, in doing so, confronts the audience with their own attitudes and challenges them to either accept or change those attitudes.

It is popularly believed that, faced with the horrific scenes like those depicted in *Funny Games*, the audience tends to identify with the victims automatically. Yet by having the killers constantly looking into the camera, winking, and addressing the audience directly (with sentences like "Do you think they will have a chance? You're on their side, so who will you bet with?") Haneke denies the audience this kind of easy solution. As a result, the audience realizes that they are the observers, not the victims. Haneke's game with the audience is to make them share the Schobers' agony, while permitting them to move between the diegesis and the nondiegesis together with the psychopathic killers. This suggests that the audience functions as an accomplice to the torture of the Schobers, who cannot move between the diegesis and the nondiegesis in the ways the torturers can.¹¹ So even though our compassion and concern is clearly with the Schobers, we are "playing the game" on the wrong side, together with the killers, whether we like it or not. This is why the first time Paul directs his gaze to the camera and winks at us comes at the point when he makes Anna play hot and cold to find the body of the Schobers' German shepherd, as if we were part of his sadistic intrigue.

Paul's continuous acknowledgment and addressing of us in the audience is unsettling because it extends the accountability of his violent game

to us. Needless to say, we do not want to have any part of what happens to the Schobers, but we are forced to, against our will. In this way, Haneke confronts the audience with their own attitudes toward violence in the media, which then becomes a question of negative emotions, such as the spectator's repulsion, shame, and guilt for being unable to stop watching what he or she no longer wants to see. Rather than the tactics of detachment or irony that made films like *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) or *Natural Born Killers* (1994) too clever for their own good, too self-reflective to be truly critical, it is precisely the "thinking through affect" that lies at the core of the ethical pursuit in Haneke's film.¹² The negative emotions that *Funny Games* evokes remind the audience of their own possibilities for suffering and pain, as well as their capacity to cause suffering and pain for others, including the act of looking at (media) violence for one's own pleasure. In Haneke's own words, "I give back to violence that which it is: pain, a violation of others."¹³

Susan Sontag wrote in *Regarding the Pain of Others* that "our failure is one of imagination, of empathy"; we have failed to hold the reality of violence in mind because of the steady flow of acceptable ("entertaining") violence in films and mass media in general.¹⁴ However, it is not the quantity of violence that anaesthetizes us to it but the passivity with which violence is consumed. Haneke himself sees his film as a polemical statement against the "taking-by-surprise-before-one-can-think" cinema and the way in which it renders the audience passive.¹⁵ But if one asks which audience reaction would then be desirable, it would seem too easy a solution to answer with empathy after all, since "so far as we feel [empathy], we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the pain."¹⁶ As has been stated throughout this essay, in *Funny Games* we are held to be accomplices to what causes the Schobers' suffering: in response to Anna and Georg's pleading with Peter and Paul to put an end to the torture of the whole family by killing them, Paul states that losing control over the game would spoil the pleasure for everyone, since "we are still under feature length." Addressing the audience directly, he continues: "Is it enough already? You want a proper ending with plausible development, don't you?" The Schobers' suffering does not stop as long as there is an audience willing to keep watching. This is why there are negative emotions involved in watching *Funny Games*: we really are responsible for the Schobers' torment whether or not we intend to be. Or better, the Schobers' torment is a game that is played out for our "entertainment" only, a statement that is made even more explicit in Haneke's own 2007 U.S. remake of the film.

Haneke's "Funny" Games with the Audience

In this sense, Haneke's film is a cinematic version of the philosophical riddle of a tree falling in a forest, leading not only to a heightened sense of being an accomplice on the part of the audience but also to asking questions regarding the audience's responsibility, the obligation to think about what it means to look at violent imagery and the pain of others and the capacity to understand the absurdity, randomness, and brutality that the violent images actually show. *Funny Games* is meant to lead to reflection, to catch the audience looking in order to make them conscious of their own look. By establishing an interconnection between the diegesis and the non-diegesis, the film creates an "ethical space" (a term coined by Roger Poole in *Towards Deep Subjectivity*) where the audience is held as an accomplice to a representation of violence that they do not even want to see. This includes a consciousness of the (unseen) conditions of apprehending the film in general and of the (problematic) pleasure involved in the process of looking at violent images. The audience position in *Funny Games*, then, is of necessity ethically charged, since this consciousness cannot arise without simultaneously revealing moral values with regard to (media) violence.¹⁷

Notes

1. Ed S. Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 55.

2. Jürgen Felix and Marcus Stiglegger, "Austrian Psycho Killers and Home Invaders: The Horror-Thrillers *Angst* and *Funny Games*," in *Fear without Frontiers: Horror Cinema across the Globe*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider (Surrey: FAB Press, 2003), 175.

3. Carl Plantinga, "The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face on Film," in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 239.

4. The tracks are titled "Bonehead" and "Hellraiser" from the album *Torture Garden*, released by Zorn's band Naked City in 1989.

5. Tarja Laine, "Empathy, Sympathy, and the Philosophy of Horror in Kubrick's *The Shining*," *Film and Philosophy*, special edition on Horror (2001): 84.

6. Brian Price, "Pain and the Limits of Representation," *Framework* 47, no. 2 (2006): 25.

7. Yet, as Brian Price points out, this kind of catharsis "ultimately works in the service of order; one that configures violence and someone else's pain in the service of . . . entertainment." *Ibid.*, 28.

8. Quoted in Richard Falcon, "The Discreet Harm of the Bourgeoisie," *Sight and Sound* 8, no. 5 (1998): 10–12.

9. David Sorfa, "Uneasy Domesticity in the Films of Michael Haneke," *Studies in European Cinema* 3, no. 2 (2006): 94.

10. Amos Vogel, "Of Nonexisting Continents: The Cinema of Michael Haneke," *Film Comment* 32, no. 4 (1996): 75; Sorfa, "Uneasy Domesticity," 96.

11. *Ibid.*, 98.

12. For Haneke, the goal in *Funny Games* was indeed a kind of "counter-program" to *Natural Born Killers*:

In my view, Oliver Stone's film, and I use it only as example, is the attempt to use a fascist aesthetic to achieve an anti-fascist goal, and this doesn't work. What is accomplished is something the opposite, since what is produced is something like a cult film where the montage style complements the violence represented and presents it largely in a positive light. It might be argued that *Natural Born Killers* makes the violent image alluring while allowing no space for the viewer. I feel this would be very difficult to argue about *Funny Games*. *Benny's Video* and *Funny Games* are different kinds of obscenity, in the sense that I intended a slap in the face and a provocation.

Haneke quoted in Christopher Sharrett, "The World That Is Known: An Interview with Michael Haneke," *Kinoeye* 4, no. 1 (2004), www.kinoeye.org/04/01/interview01.php (accessed August 21, 2007).

13. Haneke quoted in Adam Minns, "*Funny Games*," www.filmfestivals.com/cannes97/cfilmd17.htm (accessed August 18, 2007).

14. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 8.

15. Haneke quoted in Vogel, "Of Nonexisting Continents," 73.

16. Sontag, "Pain of Others," 102.

17. Many thanks to Wim Staat and Dan Hassler-Forest.