



Haneke, Moral Violence and Morbid Curiosity

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Introduction

Violence may not be omnipresent in film but, as in life, it is ubiquitous.¹ Certain genres are partly constituted by specific representations of violence. These include **(i)** action/thriller; **(ii)** horror; **(iii)** gangster; **(iv)** science-fiction; **(v)** catastrophe and disaster, including war films; and those portraying what we term **(vi)** moral violence. The nature and purpose (or functions) of the kinds of violence depicted in these genre films are not unique to their genre—after all, genres themselves overlap—but kinds of violence are broadly representative of the types of films that depict them. The kind of violence and spectator attraction in these different genres is partly constitutive of the genre.

The sixth form of depicted violence, “moral violence,” is something that Michael Haneke has recently brought into prominence. Moral violence is an assault upon moral character; it is aggression either intentionally or recklessly directed towards inflicting moral injury. For example, the family held hostage in Haneke’s *Funny Games* (1997, 2007)² is bullied, teased, played with, made fun of, verbally abused and humiliated. This is moral violence. The aim of it is to break down the moral character of the film’s protagonists; to cause them irreparable moral injury. The actual murders portrayed in the film (there are three of them) either occur off screen or without drama or display. As we set out in the discussion to follow, the one obvious example of entertainment violence in *Funny Games* is immediately (and literally) reversed, thus depriving spectators of the ordinary satisfactions of the thriller genre.

¹ See Stephen Prince, “Violence” in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga, eds. (London: Routledge, 2008), 279-288. See also Stephen Prince (ed.), *Screening Violence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

² *Funny Games*, directed by Michael Haneke (Austria: Wega Film, 1997). *Funny Games*, directed by Michael Haneke (USA: Celluloid Dreams, 2008). Haneke made two versions of *Funny Games*: one in German (1997) and another in English (2007). They are close to shot for shot remakes of each other and we will refer to both when we write about the film.

Depictions of moral violence are fairly common in films, across numerous genres. One of the most definitive depictions of moral violence occurs in *Gaslight* (1944), a psychological thriller in which the antagonist (played by Charles Boyer) tries to undermine the sanity of his wife (played by Ingrid Bergman) in order to have her institutionalised.³ The film has become a trope for a form of moral violence within relationships in which (typically) a man “gaslights” his partner. The film’s title has become a verb. *Gaslight* is typical of most filmic representations of moral violence. In such depictions, moral violence is used as a narrative device: it propels the story forward and motivates the actions of antagonists. In the 2020 release, *The Invisible Man*, for example, the protagonist is psychologically tormented by her ex-partner, who has acquired the ability to become invisible (and wreck unending havoc).⁴ It is another drama of domestic abuse and gaslighting; and the moral violence is wholly devoted to forwarding the film’s narrative and genre-satisfactions.

In Haneke’s work, by contrast, representations of moral violence can have little or no narrative function. Haneke’s use of moral violence is pre-empted by Ingmar Bergman in films such as *Persona* and, in a very different way, in *Fanny and Alexander*. In these two films moral violence is used for explicitly philosophical purposes: to explore identity and disciplinary cruelty respectively.⁵ In Haneke’s *Funny Games*, the antagonists—two murderous home-invaders—play a game with the family of the home they have invaded. They bet the family that they will survive the night. If they alive by morning, they win; if not, they lose. It is not a convincing or particularly interesting narrative gambit, but it is one that gives the film the formal structure of a thriller. The family is set a task and the audience is keyed into their survival narrative. The narrative structure of the film is thus set by the bet. But the action of the film slows the survival narrative down and substitutes the ordinary moves of such a narrative with a prolonged and brutal display of moral violence. The depiction of moral violence is the fundamental point of the film; it is not a device for narrative or argument, but an apparent *relishing* of moral violence. *Funny Games*’ depiction of moral violence produces what Catherine Wheatley calls “unpleasure”.⁶ The self-standing portrait of moral violence and the production of unpleasure which it elicits is the focus of our attention in this paper. It is the sixth genre of cinematic violence we identify and seek to understand.

It is best to begin our inquiry with a look at the contrasting case, which we label “entertainment violence.” We present a general, psychoanalytic account of film spectatorship that broadly explains the attraction of entertainment violence and the genres—action/thriller, horror, gangster, science fiction, catastrophe and disaster—which embody it.⁷ Note however, that much, though not all, of the psychoanalytic account of spectatorship and the pleasures that film allegedly brings on such accounts (psychoanalytic account are not univocal but varied), can and often are present in non-psychoanalytic accounts and even in some accounts

³ *Gaslight*, directed by George Cukor (USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1944).

⁴ *The Invisible Man*, directed by Leigh Whannell (USA/Australia: Blumhouse Productions, Goalpost Pictures, 2020)

⁵ *Persona*, directed by Ingmar Bergman (Sweden: AB Svensk Filmindustri, 1966); *Fanny and Alexander*, directed by Ingmar Bergman (Sweden/France: Gaumont, 1982).

⁶ Cinematic unpleasure is “a term which signifies not only the frustration of the pleasure drive, but also the mobilization of a range of ‘negative’ emotions on the spectator’s part, among them discomfort, embarrassment, anger and guilt.” Catherine Wheatley, *Michael Haneke’s Cinema: the ethic of the image* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 78.

⁷ For a defense of psychoanalytic and hybrid accounts of film spectatorship, as opposed to cognitivist accounts like those of Noel Carroll, see Damian Cox and Michael Levine *Thinking Through Film: Doing Philosophy, Watching Movies*. (Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) and “Psychoanalysis and Film” in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, eds. M. Steenhagen, M. Lacey and R. Gipps, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

that eschew psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic account of spectatorship altogether. Thus, to describe one of the satisfactions of violent revenge films (*Death Wish*)⁸ as fulfilling certain desires and wishes need not be seen as giving a psychoanalytic account. Psychoanalytic accounts do however have a theoretical framework in which such satisfactions are accounted for rather than merely described. And it worth remarking on the extent to which many commonplace psychoanalytic terms (i.e. types of ego defence mechanisms for example such as projection; sublimation; regression; displacement) have become absorbed into everyday vocabulary. When judged against alternative explanations, psychoanalytic explanations of film spectatorship and phenomena like racism and sexism can also support fundamental psychoanalytic perspectives, even when no psychoanalytic framework or vocabulary is explicitly employed.⁹ However, a psychoanalytic account of film spectatorship (or of the various prejudices like racism and misogyny) will contend that other approaches, such as Noel Carroll's cognitivism with regard to film spectatorship, is partial and shallow even when insightful. There is a difference between on the one hand claiming that people enjoy certain films because they are intrigued or curious, and explaining the sources and nature of the intrigue, curiosity or other spectator satisfactions. Categorizing representations of violence as entertainment violence is not meant to denigrate or to undermine their significance; they are not *merely* entertaining uses of violence imagery. The label is meant to distinguish genres of entertainment violence from the genre of moral violence, which we distinguish from entertainment violence on the basis of both its focus (on moral injury) and its spectatorial effect (the typical production of what, following Catherine Wheatley, we call unpleasure). Having set out the character and psychological attraction of entertainment violence, we turn our attention to moral violence and its role in two of Haneke's films: *Funny Games* and *The White Ribbon*. We interrogate the ethical challenge of these films in terms of Haneke's obsessive and unblinking depiction of moral violence.

I. Entertainment Violence

From our perspective, entertainment violence typically functions in the service of wishful thinking and the (transient) satisfaction of revenge, narcissistic, voyeuristic, sadistic, masochistic and other phantasies.¹⁰ Entertainment violence can also play distinct genre-specific roles. Its role in disaster films and apocalyptic science fiction films involves more than the satisfaction of transient desire satisfactions. In these cases, entertainment violence often serves to assuage anxieties and worrisome existential concerns. In disaster films, it works by engendering and satisfying spectators' morbid curiosity and imagination. With exceptions like these in mind, let us dwell upon the basic character of the pleasures of entertainment violence. Perversion, voyeurism, fetishism, masochism, and sadism, as psychoanalytically understood, have been used to explain puzzling aspects of film spectatorship: why we are drawn to certain kinds of "unpleasant" films. So too has the idea of the return of repressed, the reconfirmation of previously surmounted beliefs (what we fear is real after all). The return of the repressed may be pleasurable for a variety of different reasons depending on the nature of the repressed element surfacing and on the spectator.

⁸ *Death Wish* directed by Michael Winner (USA: United Artists, 1974)

⁹ See Nancy Chodorow *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987) for a discussion of how psychoanalytic theory illuminates sexism, and why feminist thought needs psychoanalytic theory. See Elizabeth Young-Breuhl *The Anatomy of Prejudices* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) for a discussion of psychoanalytic explanations of the numerous forms of prejudice—all of which may involve and are indeed the source of such violence.

¹⁰ "Phantasy" is to be distinguished from "fantasy." It is a psychoanalytic term for states of mind, often symbolic in form, resulting from infantile wish-fulfilment, desires and instincts.

The pleasures of horror, for example, dependent as they are upon the effects of the repressed, may, much like neurotic activity, involve temporary substitutive satisfactions. Real anxieties are transiently assuaged in a hermeneutically transformed form. Unconscious and alienated desires are transformed and satisfied—again transiently—in hermeneutically altered and thus “safe” forms. This is not to suggest that spectators responding in this way are morally deficient. If repression was incompatible with decency, then we would all be indecent. Psychoanalytic theory strives to show how repression and neurotic activities, along with fetishist, sadistic and masochistic phantasies, are compatible both with “normalcy” and moral decency.

It is worth asking whether anything other than entertainment violence could function across these genres in the way it does. Can something other than violence produce similar psychological effects? It is difficult to see how. If entertainment violence in the service of phantasy is necessary in terms of psychological functioning and well-being, it tells us something significant about human nature. It also helps explain why violence in entertainment is ubiquitous. Comedy, for example, just is not going to cut it. Violence is everywhere not so much because we like it, but because it is psychologically necessary, which explains why we like it. This claim about the necessity of violent phantasy and the like, the desires and needs they satisfy, is *not* the same as claiming that people are inherently violent or aggressive in the sense that must actually act aggressively and violently—or that war, brutality and the like, are inevitable. Indeed, if psychoanalytic and related psychological theory is to be believed, then it is partly due to imagination and phantasy that such violence is inhibited—much more so than the operations of reason. Entertainment violence in film and fiction serves in general to curtail real world violence even while, at times, and for some people, it undeniably enables it. One might ask how people managed their inherently violent (ego-protective) natures before the advent of cinema, novels and the like. It is not difficult to point to an array of things that have functioned in their place: myth and stories, art, and religion, whose aspects encompass all these things.

Violence in film and television is not exclusively in the service of the transient satisfaction of repressed desire. Violence can be satisfying in a different way because of its relation to power. Consider, as an example, superhero films and television, such as those comprising the *Marvel* universe and its stories. The violence in these films serves the usual desires and phantasies of spectatorship (revenge, sadism, masochism, and voyeurism). But it also offers the spectator an opportunity to identify with the superheroes. The spectator may vicariously become a hero: sharing in their omnipotence, moral goodness, and ability to be of use, while also identifying with the superhero’s tendency to be regarded as a misunderstood outsider.

The *Marvel* cinematic universe, along with the *John Wick* films (2014, 2017, 2019), is indicative of the infantilization of a large section of film spectatorship.¹¹ The violence mostly consists of largely choreographed fight scenes and cartoonish killings and fights. (The fact that Keanu Reeves is utterly unbelievable in the role of John Wick—he appears after all to have trouble simply walking—is beside the point.) Entertainment violence dissolves into entertainment *per se*. It is like we are watching a dance performance. But what else is going on in these films?

The entire *Marvel* Universe embodies a regressive strategy for dealing with developmental problems. Regression as a defense mechanism operates across all the genres of entertainment

¹¹ *John Wick*, directed by Chad Stahelski (USA: Thunder Road Pictures, 2014); *John Wick: Chapter 2*, directed by Chad Stahelski (USA: Summit Entertainment/Thunder Road Pictures, 2017); *John Wick: Chapter 3-Parabellum*, directed by Chad Stahelski (USA: Summit Entertainment/Thunder Road Pictures, 2019).

violence we have identified—allowing spectators their “guilty pleasures” while seeing to it that they need not seriously engage with anxieties. Charles Rycroft describes regression as a:

...reversion to an earlier state or mode of functioning...[it is a] defensive process... by which the subject avoids (or seeks to avoid) anxiety by ... return to an earlier stage of libidinal and ego development, the stage to which the regression occurs being determined by the existence of fixation points. The theory of regression presupposes that, except in ideal cases, infantile stages of development are not entirely outgrown, so that the earlier patterns of behaviour remain available as alternative modes of functioning. It is, however, not maintained that regression is often a viable or efficient defensive process; on the contrary, regression compels the individual to re-experience anxiety appropriate to the stage to which he had regressed. ... As a result, regression tends to be followed by further defensive measures designed to protect the ego from its effects.¹²

The fact that “regression compels the individual to re-experience anxiety appropriate to the stage to which he had regressed,” helps explain why the phantasies and satisfactions that violence in cinema presents us with are transient.

Why is the need for heroes, and a desire to become one, so seemingly insatiable and pervasive? (So great is the need that, ignoring reality, people are classed as heroes who obviously are not, like the victims of 9/11 from one side and the perpetrators of 9/11 from the other). Does the appeal of the hero reside with an individual’s infantile and narcissistic phantasies of omnipotence, a desire to become a God, or in a regressive defensive strategy? Is our inability to live without heroes, in seeking to be a hero, or in seeking out others who are heroes, indicative of societal and personal malaise—a need for love and power—or is it merely an expression of narcissism? Probably it is all these things.

Entertainment violence is a complex affair, involving more than the transient and vicarious satisfaction of repressed desire, no matter how central to genres of violence such satisfactions may be. There is another aspect of violence and its attraction which is central to its power to entertain: its satisfaction of morbid curiosity. This is seen most clearly in representations of disaster and catastrophe. Morbid curiosity is far more psychological than cognitive in nature. In thriller and gangster films, entertainment violence often functions in the service of wishful thinking. Its role in science fiction and disaster films is different. Here, by means of simplistic and uncritical narrative that elicits audience interest, it serves to assuage anxiety. In disaster films, it serves (defines) the genre by engendering and satisfying spectators’ morbid curiosity and imagination. There is an entire genre of film that devotes itself to catastrophe and disaster and it is thriving. What is it about visual representations of disaster that draws us to them; that aside from informing us, also attracts, satisfies and entertains us? Why we are fascinated by them and feel impelled to look? What makes us “catastrophiles?” These are questions about morbid curiosity, an aspect of Dieter Roelstraete’s concept of “catastrophilia.” Roelstraete says

With this neologism, I wish to denote the voyeuristic . . . scopophilic . . . impulse, clearly given in the human animal, to . . . aestheticise the spectacle . . . of human suffering . . . suffering [that] is now summarily referred to as “bare life”—“bare” in that it is stripped of the last vestiges of form and value, or

¹² Charles Rycroft, *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, 2nd edition (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 53-155.

“life” below the threshold of what is considered both distinguishably human and humane.¹³

Morbid curiosity is a strongly felt desire to see more of a violent or catastrophic spectacle: to experience greater detail or repetitive presentation of violence and catastrophe; to witness the undoing of people and their community. Roelstraete also refers to “catastrophiliac tourism.”¹⁴ Why are people drawn to want to see post-apocalyptic landscapes? Why do they want to wear t-shirts that say “I have been to ground-zero?” The reference to ground zero tee-shirts, like controversy over Katrina tourism, suggests there is a kind of morbid curiosity present, and relatedly, there are commercial sectors that benefits from it.

Catastrophilia is not innocuous, but the question of why we are drawn to images of disaster may have little to do with what if anything is wrong with such depictions. This is so even if what attracts us are desires and phantasies that one would prefer, on ethical or even aesthetic grounds, to distance oneself from. Consider the case of so-called “disaster-porn” for instance, and the fears generated by gratuitous video-game violence. Who wants to own up to that? Suppose we were attracted to depictions of catastrophe and violence because, for various reasons, we “get off” on the misery of others. While few viewers would admit to finding satisfaction in disaster, real or imagined (as in film) there may nonetheless be a psychological explanation for why they might. The idea that our interest in the representation (mostly visual) of catastrophe is largely a manifestation of human beings caring for one another, or that it expresses (mostly) a cognitive interest in what happened, is belied in part by the phenomena of disaster ennui. Disaster fatigue is evidenced by a general lack of concern—a waning of affect—with regard to a disaster’s aftermath and recovery. We don’t care about it in life, let alone in films. We seem to need new, bigger and “better” disasters to hold our interest. These needs are further shaped by new technologies that allow for heightened visual and other effects.

Our explanation for morbid curiosity and our attraction to the spectacle of suffering is given in terms (largely) of our orectic natures and the satisfactions experienced in viewing and imaginatively engaging with depictions of violence and disaster. Attractions to fictional disaster (like films) enables us to understand the attraction to visual and other representations of real disaster. The genre of disaster films now so prevalent helps confirm such a conception of human behaviour. Entertainment violence does not merely *not* disturb. It caters to the spectator’s desires not to be disturbed; to their voyeurism, and (though this varies from spectator to spectator) to other desires and wishes relating to our orectic nature. Entertainment violence generally—not just in disaster film— can stifle understanding by distracting the spectator from ethically engaging with human situations while satisfying certain kinds of wishes and desires.

The specific desires/wishes that a spectator has in specific circumstances are largely determined by character type, but general common features can be identified. Individual responses to entertainment violence vary, but they mostly rely on the satisfactions or pleasures that may come from experiencing the human disaster of violence from a distance. The distance here is the distance of the frame. We are attracted to disaster at a distance that has been constructed to be less than confronting, visually stimulating, “entertaining,” and that satisfies certain desires. Such wishes and desires, we have claimed, are neither accidental nor incidental, but constitutive of our orectic natures as manifested differently across the character types.

¹³ Dieter Roelstraete, “On Catastrophilia,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 15 (2007): 5-11. Here: 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

These are the things invoked while viewing films that sustain and explain (not exclusively) the pleasures of viewing. A scene may evoke masochist pleasure for one person and sadistic, fetishist, or voyeuristic pleasure (or some combination thereof) for the person in the next seat. These concepts are similarly used to explain the (seemingly inexplicable) attractions of horror. They are used to resolve the so-called paradox of horror. The paradox can be stated as follows. **(i)** We seek pleasure in seeing films and see films in the hope of them providing such pleasures. We would not otherwise go to the cinema. **(ii)** Horror films provide no such pleasure and we know that. They frighten and disturb us—and this is not pleasurable. **(iii)** We go to see horror films (some of us avidly seek them out) despite the fact they do not provide us with the pleasure we seek when we go to the movies. The paradox dissolves when it is recognized that such films do provide certain viewers with the pleasures they actively seek. Emotions such as fear, horror, disgust, and so forth, are not intrinsically unpleasant. Disgust may at times be a source of amusement. In certain circumstances—not just when watching films but also in some media presentations of disaster, and everyday life—such emotion can be enjoyed.

Berys Gaut asks whether

the audience's enjoyment of fear and revulsion is to be explained in terms of masochism. So widespread is horror that its popularity would argue for an extraordinary prevalence of a perversion that many had thought only a marginal phenomenon. Nor should one hold that the audience is only making-believe that it is afraid: it really is scared, for one can experience fear or disgust towards situations one knows to be imaginary, as when one imagines being viciously assaulted.¹⁵

There is however, no reason to suppose that perversions such as masochism are “only a marginal phenomenon.” Masochism is a component of grief as well as of melancholy and “love-sickness.”¹⁶ Gaut seems to think that there is a more or less clear divide between the normal and neurotic, and between the perverse and non-perverse. But a cornerstone of psychoanalytic theory is a denial of these divides. Everyone is appreciably neurotic in varying degrees throughout significant parts of their lives. And the explanations for an audience's enjoyment of fear and revulsion, or for their catastrophilia, in no way depends on the supposition that the audience is only making-believe.

As we have noted, morbid curiosity is a strongly felt desire to see more of a violent or catastrophic spectacle: to experience greater detail or repetitive presentation of violence and catastrophe; to witness the undoing of people and their community. It has numerous sources based on our orectic natures. It is way of taking pleasure in spectacle that allows a transient satisfaction of desires that, were they explicitly acknowledged and integrated into our moral lives, would be unbearable to us. We form our moral character by repressing and alienating desires that nonetheless find their way to satisfaction.

Of course, one may question whether the production and consumption of entertainment violence is politically and culturally problematic. (We have argued for a mixed response to this: it is in many cases, but the occasional, transient satisfaction of repressed desire is, overall, a healthy and satisfactory thing.) The more psychologically fundamental question is about the relationship between entertainment violence and morbid curiosity. In our view, entertainment violence is a fitting object of morbid curiosity. The production and satisfaction of morbid

¹⁵ Berys Gaut, “On Cinema and Perversion,” *Philosophy and Film* 1(1994): 3-17.

¹⁶ See Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*. (1917), *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74).

curiosity—and the pleasures of transient desire satisfaction that come with it—is the point of the production of entertainment violence. A spectator does not make an error of interpretation or response by having their curiosity piqued; by wanting to see more as the spectacle unfolds. For example, at the conclusion of *Avengers: Infinity War* the audience witness the literal undoing of many of their erstwhile heroes.¹⁷ Spiderman (who is, of course, an attractively gormless youth rather than a man) is seen to dissolve elegantly into dust with a bare moment's understanding of his fate. As the film action traverses the world, we see many dissolutions—of heroes and everyday folk. This literal undoing of humanity (and superhumanity) is hard to look away from. It is a kind of pure or distilled violence: utter destruction without impact or abject display. Whether or not an audience response to it is ethically satisfactory, whether they are disturbed and saddened by the events portrayed, the spectacle is compulsively watchable; we greedily await the next revelation of destroyed life. It is a fitting object of morbid curiosity.

II. *The White Ribbon*

In order to contrast entertainment violence with moral violence, we turn now to a discussion of the cinema of Michael Haneke. Haneke's filmography is richly infused with examples of moral violence. In *Benny's Video*, an example of non-moral violence – the motiveless murder of a young friend by the protagonist, Benny – is used as a pretext for the undermining and betrayal of his parents.¹⁸ The deepest violence of the film is the moral response of the boy to his own culpability and his betrayal of his foolish and over-protective parents. In *Code Unknown*, one of the film's protagonists, Jean, thoughtlessly throws a piece of rubbish at a homeless woman, Maria, begging on the street. Jean is confronted about this by a child of Malian immigrants, Amadou.¹⁹ The confrontation is excruciating: a just, if exaggerated and relentless, attack by Amadou on Jean's moral character. The film's primary plotline unravels from this confrontation, with both boys arrested, Amadou, beaten and humiliated, his explanation and complaint ignored, and Maria deported to Romania. In films such as these, Haneke embeds moral violence within a complex narrative, but the violence is subordinate to his other filmic purposes. In yet other films, moral violence takes centre stage. These films include *The Piano Teacher*,²⁰ but the most richly detailed depictions of moral violence occur in *The White Ribbon* and *Funny Games*.²¹ We concentrate on these two films in our discussion of moral violence and the cinema of Michel Haneke.

The White Ribbon is an incomplete narrative, where the probably unreliable and inaccurate memories of a schoolteacher (played by Christian Friedel as a young man and voiced by Ernst Jacobi as an old man) jostle for sense and relevance. The schoolteacher had worked in a small German village, Eichwald, in the years before the outbreak of World War I. As an old man he recounts events in the village without ever getting to the cause of them. A doctor (Rainer Bock) is injured when his horse runs into a wire suspended across his path; the young son of the local baron is kidnapped and assaulted; as, later and more seriously, is the midwife's son. The schoolteacher becomes convinced that a group of children, led by the pastor's daughter and son, Klara and Martin, are responsible for the violence, but his efforts to find evidence are fruitless and the pastor (played by Burghart Klaußner) is contemptuous and threatening

¹⁷ *Avengers: Infinity War*, directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo (USA: Marvel Studios, 2018).

¹⁸ *Benny's Video*, directed by Michael Haneke (Austria: Wega Filmproduktionsges.m.b.H, 1992)

¹⁹ *Code Unknown*, directed by Michael Haneke (France: Mk2 Films, 2000)

²⁰ *The Piano Teacher*, directed by Michael Haneke (France: Wega Film, MK2 SA, Les Films Alain Sarde, Arte France Cinéma, 2001).

²¹ *The White Ribbon*, directed by Michael Haneke (Austria/France/Germany/Italy: Les Films du Losange/ X-Filme Creative Pool / Wega Film /Lucky Red, 2009).

when confronted with the schoolteacher's suspicions. The story deepens without resolution when the doctor and his daughter and son disappear and the midwife (played by Susanne Lother) runs off to the nearest town to inform on the culprits: her son had identified them; she doesn't reveal their identity to the school teacher; she never returns.

The film opens with the following narration from the schoolteacher as an old man:

I don't know if the story I want to tell you is entirely true. Some of it I only know by hearsay. After so many years a lot of it is still obscure, and many questions remain unanswered. But I think I must tell you of the strange events that occurred in our village. They could perhaps clarify some things that happened in this country.

Haneke thus establishes the partial and uncertain nature of the epistemological quest of *The White Ribbon* from the very start. Clearly, it is an attempt to illuminate some aspects of the origin of Nazism and locate it in repressive practices of German culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The historical specificity of this explanation is often denied. For example, A.O. Scott mused in his New York Times review of the film that it:

... [mystifies] the historical phenomenon it purports to investigate. Forget about Weimar inflation and the Treaty of Versailles and whatever else you may have learned in school: Nazism was caused by child abuse. Or maybe by the intrinsic sinfulness of human beings. "The White Ribbon" is a whodunit that offers a philosophically and aesthetically unsatisfying answer: everyone. Which is also to say: no one.²²

Scott appears to miss the care Haneke took to establish the historical specificity of his story, and the uncertainty and partialness of his inquiry, professed in unmistakable terms at the very start. The idea that evil is generated—in one form or another, to one degree or another—by harshly punitive, hypocritically self-righteous and deeply repressive treatment of children is hardly original. But the film's point is to allow an audience to dwell in a specific exemplification of this common thought. The film is an illustration of inchoate evil and its origins in hypocritical repression—and is all the more successful because of its plainly stated epistemic modesty.

Moral violence is integrated into the film's argument in a straightforward way, but there are other—fugitive—examples of it in the film which call for another sort of explanation. Let us illustrate this with three scenes from the film. In the first scene, the pastor is calling his son Martin to account for his adolescent masturbation. The scene begins with the Martin's father addressing the boy in his office. After a run of the mill inquiry about the boy's sleep and school, the interrogation begins.

Father: You don't understand why we worry. I'll explain it to you. As you know, I'm also the pastor of Birkenbrunn. One day a mother came to see me because her son, about the same age as you, had shown the same symptoms you've shown for some time. The boy suddenly seemed extremely weary. His eyes were ringed, he was depressed and joyless. He avoided looking his parents in the eye, and soon he was also caught lying. This lasted about half a year. Then everything went very fast. He lost his appetite, couldn't sleep anymore, his hands began to shake, his memory started to fail, his face became covered in pustules, then his whole body.

²² A.O. Scott, "Wholesome Hamlet's Horror Sends a Jolt to the System" *New York Times* (2009) <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/30/movies/30white.html> (accessed 24 January, 2020)

Finally, he died. The body, which I had to bless, looked like an old man's body. Do you understand now why I'm worried? What do you think caused these things that led to that boy's miserable end?

Martin: I don't know.

Father: I think you know very well. [The father moves from behind the desk to confront the boy directly.] Won't you tell me? ... No? ... Then I'll give you the answer. The boy had seen someone who was harming the finest nerves of his body in the area where God has erected sacred barriers. The boy imitated this action. He couldn't stop doing it. In the end he destroyed all his nerves and died of it. I just want to help you. I love you with all my heart. Be sincere, Martin. Why did you blush listening to the story of the poor boy?

Martin: Blush? I don't know. I felt sorry for him.

Father: Is that all? I think there is another reason. It's written on your face. Be sincere Martin! Why are you crying? Shall I spare you that confession? Have you been doing what that wretched boy did?

Martin: Yes.²³

Haneke immediately cuts from this scene to an ugly depiction of the doctor having grunting sex with his neighbour, the midwife. The concatenation retrospectively increases the tone of menace in the fatherly interrogation, as does the established pattern of the father's sadistic behaviour to his children (e.g. canning his two eldest children in front of their siblings following a minor infraction of the house rules). It is possible, of course, that Martin's father was uncloudedly sincere in his attempt to stop the boy from masturbating, believing it to be as deadly a habit as he describes. There were, after all, no shortage of crackpot theories about the relation between illness and masturbation advanced in the nineteen and early twentieth centuries. And the story of the boy from Birkenbrunn might be based on an actual case of a degenerative illness that the pastor mistook, in his ignorance, for the effects of masturbation. Nonetheless, the conduct of the interview in Haneke's directorial hands is a sharply detailed and convincing exposition of parental sadism. The father is seeking the boy's undoing, it appears, in response to his intense disgust and dislike of him and his surly adolescent autonomy. The aim of breaking him down and remaking him in compliance and purity—with a white ribbon tied to his sleeve—is serving another, plainly sadistic, purpose. It aims at the boy's health at one level, but it is also aiming at his moral injury. Professions of paternal love after the sadistic display at hand have an undermining force. How is Martin ever to believe in the sincerity of his father's love when his sadistic bullying of him is everywhere in view? Martin's interrogation neatly integrates into the argument of the film—that evil can be (the *can* is important) born of harsh and hypocritical repression in childhood.

Martin's humiliation was kept within the family; the result of his interrogation with his father was his restraint each night. Martin has his hands tied to the bed each night to prevent self-touching. By contrast, the humiliation of the pastor's daughter, Klara, is performed in the classroom, in full view of her peers. It is yet another scene of parental sadism and establishes the pattern of Haneke's argument. Klara appears to act as a kind of class monitor at the village school, and when her father suddenly appears for divinity class, the children are in some disarray. He responds by taking Klara (a child in her mid-teens) by the ear, marching her to the back of the classroom and standing her facing the back wall. After a prayer, he delivers the following speech.

²³ *The White Ribbon*, 58:40 - 1.02:40.

This is a very sad day for me. In a few weeks, we all want to celebrate your confirmation. For months I've tried to bring God's word closer to you and make responsible human beings out of you. Who do I face today? Yelling monkeys, undisciplined, as childish as your seven-year-old classmates! But to me, what is even sadder is that my own daughter plays the leading role in this pitiful display. Last year I tied a white ribbon in her hair. White, as you all know, is the colour of innocence. The ribbon was meant to help Klara to avoid sin, selfishness, envy, indecency, lies and sloth. At the start of the year, I naively believed that she was now mature enough not to need that ribbon anymore. That she'd become responsible enough, as the daughter of the spiritual leader of ... [Off-screen, Klara collapses and the scene abruptly ends.]²⁴

The pastor has a penchant for humiliating his children. The speech starts out as a familiar imprecation aimed children by figures in authority, but soon transforms into a sadistic display of the pastor's disgust of his daughter and her apparent moral failure. (In fact, she merely had difficulty getting the class to heed her request for order.) The gross injustice of this is one thing; the sadistic display is another. Burghart Klaußner plays the pastor with a steely air of barely disguised sadism. It is a remarkable performance because Klaußner is able to convey the depths of his sadism without ever coming close to acknowledging it. He disguises his sadism with sadness, both to his children and himself. The disguise gives him little more than plausible deniability; and is quite transparent to an audience whose milieu has fully prepared them to see through a pretence like this.

These two scenes are integral to the film's argument, but there are other scenes of moral violence which elude such a straightforward argumentative function. One particularly vivid and disturbing instance is the violence perpetrated by the doctor on his neighbour, the midwife. The doctor had been using the midwife for sex. At one hour and twenty-two minutes, the film abruptly cuts to a scene in which the midwife is performing fellatio upon the doctor. The following conversation ensues.

Doctor: Why don't you stop doing that? Why all the effort? Don't look so dumbfounded. You don't lack talent. I just can't do it with you anymore. [The audience knows why: he has resumed sexually abusing his teenage daughter.] To be truthful, you disgust me. Can't you finish your work? I don't want to spend the night here.

Midwife: What did I do to you?

Doctor: My God, you've done nothing to me! You're ugly, messy, flabby and have bad breath. Will that do? [Gesturing across the room] The cover has to be sterilized. Don't sit there like death warmed over. The world won't collapse. Not on you, or on me. I can't go on with this, that's all. I've really tried to think of another woman while making love to you. One who smells good, who's young, less decrepit than you, but my imagination can't manage it. In the end, it's you again, and then I feel like puking and am embarrassed at myself. So, what's the point?

Midwife: Are you through?

Doctor: I have been for ages.

Midwife: You must be very unhappy to be so mean.

Doctor: Please, not that routine!

²⁴ *The White Ribbon*, 1.30:00 - 1.33:10.

- Midwife:** I know I'm not much to look at. My bad breath comes from my ulcer, you know that. It didn't bother you in the past. I had it when you wife was alive.
- Doctor:** Spare me these sordid details. Let me reassure you, it always disgusted me. After Julie's death, I wanted to ease my pain with anyone. I could have screwed a cow! Whores are too far from here, and once every two months isn't enough for me, even though I'm getting on. So, skip acting like a martyr, and scram.
- Midwife:** Why are you only noticing this now?
- Doctor:** When should I have noticed it? At the hospital, I forgot how tiresome you are. One grows sentimental when in pain. Get out! Don't you have any pride?
- Midwife:** There is no room for any with you.
- Doctor:** That's true.
- Midwife:** What if I do something silly?
- Doctor:** Go ahead. It'd surprise me. But be careful, it may be painful.
- Midwife:** I know I am ridiculous. You wouldn't care anyway. Why do you despise me? For helping to raise the boy? For watching you finger your daughter and saying nothing? [The doctor slaps her sharply across the face.] For helping you to deceive yourself? For listening to you claim how you loved Julie, when everyone knew you treated her as badly as me? For loving you, when I know you can't stand being loved?
- Doctor:** That's it. Now get up. I have work to do.
- Midwife:** You can't afford to get rid of me. Who'll do the dirty work for you, who'll help you with the kids and your practice? You don't mean what you say. You want to see how far you can go. Will she take it? Can I drag her even lower? I'm tired too. I've got two retarded kids: Karli and you. You're the most troublesome one.
- Doctor:** [Wearily] My God, why don't you just die?²⁵

This scene illustrates a gratingly convincing form of moral violence: the attempt by a man to destroy the self-respect and self-content of a woman by abusing her physical characteristics and expressing contempt for her as a person. The midwife eventually responds with some robust truth-telling, which elicits a physical assault and an undiluted denial of moral worth: "My God, why don't you just die?" The depiction of moral violence in this scene is unmatched in the rest of the film, but it is supplementary to the basic argument of the film, focused as it is on the abuse of children. It is the kind of scene which led A. O. Scott to mistakenly conclude that the film locates the origins of evil in everywhere and in everyone. That an environment is suffused with sadism (we see it in many places in the film, though we also see gentleness and generosity) does not, however, undermine the fundamental historical assertion: that the rise of Nazism was facilitated by a culture of repressive, punitive hypocrisy experienced by the Nazi generation in their childhood. Whatever the merits of this argument, the film depicts moral violence well in excess of the argument. There are various self-standing displays of moral violence interpolating the film's historical argument and creating a resounding atmosphere of moral dread. The narrative consequences of the moral assault upon the midwife are hard to determine; the film's narrative becomes wilfully obscure on this point. The doctor and his family disappear; the midwife makes a hasty escape to town and does not return. Thus, the narrative significance of the scene is obscure. It does reveal a great deal

²⁵ *The White Ribbon*, 1.22:35 – 1.26:53.

about his character so it is not a gratuitous element of the film, but the scene is profoundly unpleasurable for audiences. There are very few people—only the severely pathologically misogynist—who could experience it as a vehicle for the transient satisfaction of vicarious desire. It does, however, make the doctor a rich source of antagonism for the audience and this is exploited in a more conventional scene later in the film.

In this later scene, the doctor is discovered by his young son sexually assaulting his teenage daughter, Anna.²⁶ The scene is constructed around a conventional thriller technique. The camera follows the young boy, Rudolf, through a dark house late at night as he whimpers for his older sister, Anna. The boy climbs down the stairs, explores the ground level of the house, finding no sign of his sister. He returns to the stairs and commences to climb, apparently giving up the search, when he hears his sister's cries. The boy follows the sound, opens the door to the doctor's surgery and discovers his father in front of the softly crying girl with his back to the door. What follows is a charade in which both father and daughter attempt to convince the boy that nothing is amiss and that the father was merely piercing Anna's ears so she can wear her dead mother's earrings. The man shuffles from his daughter to the nearby instrument table, all the while keeping his back to the door, apparently tucking his penis back into his trousers. Anna pulls down her nightdress. She explains her tears away as a response to the pain of the ear-piercing. The scene immediately follows the humiliation and collapse of Klara. And immediately precedes a scene in which Klara, at home recovering after her collapse, kills her father's cage bird with a pair of scissors.²⁷ The sequence of these three scenes deepens the film's argument by showing how moral and physical violence perpetrated upon children can lead to either revenge (Klara) or complicity (Anna). The first two scenes of this sequence—Klara's humiliation and the sexual assault of Anna—are a contrasting pair. Klara's humiliation is a scene of explicit moral violence. The sexual violence perpetrated upon Anna by her father is also a form of moral violence—in this case, the selfish negligence of a sexual predator, someone using his daughter to satisfy his desire and wilfully exposing her to acute risk of moral injury. It is also a profound betrayal. The two episodes are starkly contrasted, nonetheless. The doctor is selfish, negligent and predatory. He is not explicitly attempting to humiliate and morally undermine his daughter, as he is of the midwife. In contrast to the doctor, the pastor's violence towards his children is aimed directly and intentionally at their souls, not their bodies. Haneke treats the two episodes very differently. In the case of Klara's humiliation, Haneke emphasises the moral violence of the verbal assault upon her. In the case of Anna, he emphasises the doctor's hypocrisy and sexual predation. (We learn why he has lost interest in having sex with his neighbour.)

Haneke's directorial handling of the two scenes is instructive. The humiliation of Klara—and earlier scenes of Martin's humiliation and the midwife's—are filmed as dialogue scenes: shot and reverse shot. The assault of Anna is filmed as a thriller sequence. It is structured around young Rudolf's quest to find his sister. He has awakened at night to find her gone. He is frightened. He wonders around a dark and forbidding house, with its oppressive central staircase and narrow corridors. The quest almost fails, but then he hears his sister crying. He returns to investigate. The audience witnesses the sexual assault through the boy's eyes, though of course we understand a great deal more than he does. It is a scene that, until its denouement, could have appeared in any of a hundred Hollywood films. Haneke is here exploiting our propensity to respond to violence with morbid curiosity, and he does this by employing familiar directorial techniques of entertainment violence. As spectators, we are not transiently or vicariously satisfied by the narrative fact of Anna's assault, but we are in scopophilic discovery mode. Our morbid curiosity is piqued and then satisfied. The scene

²⁶ *The White Ribbon*, 1.35:00 – 1.37:25.

²⁷ *The White Ribbon*, 1.37:26 – 1.38:21.

establishes a temporary affiliation with Rudolf, not Anna. Haneke thus treats the assault upon Anna as a fitting object of morbid curiosity.

By contrast, when Haneke focuses on the perpetration of moral violence, he eschews all directorial techniques of expectation manipulation and presents the violence in a very unadorned style: shot, reverse shot; close or medium focus; emphasis on faces; minimal camera movement. The result is an unsparing, unflinching portrait of moral violence and one that acknowledges its unfitness for the production and satisfaction of morbid curiosity. The explicit and unflinching portrayal of moral violence is a source of unpleasure. It can play important narrative roles (as in *Gaslight*) and it can play argumentative roles (as in *The White Ribbon*, and other films such as *Full Metal Jacket*²⁸) but, as a filmic phenomenon, on its own account, it is not something capable of entertaining an audience.

III. *Funny Games*

Haneke's *Funny Games* is dedicated to the production of unpleasure with the explicit aim of generating enhanced ethical reflectiveness in audiences. Haneke aims to produce a state of reflexive awareness in spectators. Perhaps the most striking way in which Haneke does this in *Funny Games* is to break the fourth wall and have a principal antagonist, Paul, directly address the viewer. Wheatley analyses the process in the following terms.

...the 'aggressive' reflexivity which Haneke employs calls the spectator's rational attention to themselves both as a spectator, that is, as someone who is watching events; and as a voyeur, that is, someone who takes pleasure from watching. In doing so, it effectively short-circuits any voyeuristic pleasure that comes from the spectator's belief that they are 'unseen' by the diegetic characters. ... Haneke reveals the spectator's appetite for on-screen violence to them, intensifying their unpleasurable emotional response to being 'caught out.'²⁹

Wheatley's analysis is very plausible. However, a direct address to the viewer is not enough by itself to generate reflexive awareness in spectators. Such an address is a commonplace in recent films dedicated to entertainment violence. *Deadpool* and *Deadpool 2* relish direct address to the viewer, bringing them in on the joke.³⁰ Haneke employs four devices in his attempt to induce spectatorial reflexivity in *Funny Games*. Three of them are insightfully analysed by Wheatley, but the fourth is the most fundamental to Haneke's project and pervasive in his film aesthetics. It is the depiction of moral violence.

Wheatley points to the production of unpleasure in Haneke's violation of the genre norms of the psychological thriller. The film tells the story of the home invasion and murder of a family of three, a mother, father and son. The boy is murdered first, off-screen. Where an entertainment film would swiftly move to another plot point, Haneke's films focus on the consequent trauma of the parents. It does so at painful length—depicted with almost unbearable intensity—with a blaring television in the background. The entire scene depicts the boy's mother as she sits, bound hand and feet, in shock. The invaders have left (for now). She sits utterly still; then she manages to rise and stumble over to the television to turn it off; she struggles out of the room, returns unbound, and helps the father to his feet and out of the room. The scene lasts over nine minutes, an extraordinary length of time for the action it

²⁸ *Full Metal Jacket*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (U.K & USA: Natant / Harrier Films, 1987).

²⁹ Catherine Wheatley, *Michael Haneke's Cinema*, 107

³⁰ *Deadpool*, directed by Tim Miller (USA: 20th Century Fox/Marvel Entertainment, 2016); *Deadpool 2*, directed by David Leitch (USA: 20th Century Fox/Marvel Entertainment, 2018).

depicts.³¹ It is filmed with a stationary camera: the room is in medium shot; there is no edit; the camera pans slightly once but is otherwise deathly still. This unsparing depiction of the consequences of physical violence, cast amid a film in a genre (a realist horror/thriller) dedicated to the pleasurable exploitation of depictions of such violence, generates unpleasure in spectators. It robs them of the chance to develop and satisfy their morbid curiosity in the prospect of a horrific murder, its revelation and its promise of revenge.

In another vivid departure from genre norms, Haneke undoes the one unambiguous evocation of entertainment violence in the film. Near the end of the film, the mother manages to grab hold of a shotgun and shoot one of her tormentors. We see his body fly backwards and land, blood-soaked, against a wall. His companion rushes around in a panic, finds a television remote control and hits rewind. The film itself rewinds before the audiences' eyes and settles on a scene immediately prior to the shooting, at which point the antagonist hits play and the action resumes. The mother's attempt to grab the gun is now easily defused.³² In this scene, Haneke attempts to induce a vertiginous reversal in the spectator's emotional responses: from joyous relief, to disappointment and self-conscious shame. (This is Haneke's aim; in our experience audiences are as apt to turn on the film at this point as they are to turn on themselves.)

These three features of *Funny Games*—accusatory address to an audience; non-genre attention to the consequences of violence; the immediate reversal of a cathartic climax—are important elements of Haneke's attempt to generate ethical reflexivity in the audience. By themselves, however, they are very unlikely to succeed. They punctuate the film at only a few points (Haneke uses the antagonist's address to camera sparingly). In an otherwise well-crafted, conventional thriller, they would appear as mere gimmicks, easily dismissed as directorial self-indulgences. We think that they would be likely to generate little more than imaginative resistance in an audience. But Haneke's film is not, otherwise, a well-crafted conventional thriller. It is a bleak exercise in the depiction of moral violence. The real work of generating unpleasure is done by this feature of the film.

The "funny games" that the antagonists play with the family are, in fact, extended exercises of moral violence. The most pervasive feature on the film is the mocking humiliation visited upon each member of the family. A game of 'kitten in the bag' is played out early in the family's torment.³³ It involves covering the boy's head with a cushion slip. To prevent harm coming to the boy, the father must tell the mother to strip naked. He eventually complies. He is forced to say, "Get undressed, my love." The mother strips. Haneke's camera focuses tightly on her face; the audience is directed to the expression of her humiliation, not the spectacle of it. Once naked she is told immediately to dress again. The bag is pulled from the boy's head. The aim of the exercise, from the antagonists' point of view, is not to gain sexual pleasure, but to humiliate the family. Their's is a spree of moral violence, occasionally interrupted by slaughter.

Haneke's attempt to awaken audiences to what he regards as their ethically problematic consumption of entertainment violence relies on the intermixing of two kinds of violence: entertainment violence (the thrill of the chase, the survival narrative and the threat of murder, eventually realised) and moral violence (the relentless mocking and humiliation of the family). Moral violence is necessary to produce the unpleasure of *Funny Games*: the sickening and repulsive feeling one gets from witnessing the bullying and humiliation of others and devastation of their moral personality. Without its depictions of moral violence, *Funny Games*, would be a mannered misfire.

³¹ *Funny Games*, 1.03:00 – 1.12:00.

³² *Funny Games*, 1.35:10 – 1.36:10.

³³ *Funny Games* (1997) 0.50:20 – 0.55:10

Haneke is attempting to force an audience, if they stay for the length of the film, to confront the shameful fact of their consumption of violence as entertainment. The trouble with the strategy is that the violence that repels us in *Funny Games*, and which is apt to generate spectatorial shame (What am I doing watching this kind of thing? What does it say about me?) is not the violence he seeks to critique. It is a mistake to criticise the consumption of entertainment violence by mixing it with moral violence and compelling an audience to react with alarm and shame at their spectatorship of moral violence. Haneke makes us ashamed of watching moral violence, but audiences do not, characteristically, gain pleasure from such a thing in any form of entertainment. And nor do they seek it out. It is not a fitting object of morbid curiosity and dwelling on it does not match our orectic natures.

Conclusion

Moral violence is not a fitting object of morbid curiosity while entertainment violence in films and, all too often, real-life catastrophes are. The explanation resides, of course, in the differences between entertainment violence and moral violence. The former draws us in with the promise of certain satisfactions or pleasures; the latter repels us and produces “unpleasure.” Moral violence, as depicted by Haneke, viscerally disturbs rather than satisfies the spectator. It is neither pleasurable nor satisfying. Reflection on the experience may well be instructive, and watching what unfolds may, even while repelling, also draw us in. However, spectators often watch entertainingly violent films time and again. Even the film buff will have difficulty sitting down to watch *Funny Games* again and again. It is too disturbing. There is more work to be done to fully explain why entertainment violence, but not moral violence, is a fitting object of morbid curiosity, to set out the precise psychological mechanisms at work in one but not the other. Our aim in this paper, however, is necessarily more modest. We have set out to describe the difference between the two kinds of violence and explore the way moral violence operates in two films of Michael Haneke. Haneke’s cinema is powerful precisely because it confronts us with the reality and destructive force of moral violence. Its pleasures are philosophical, and they rely primarily on the illustrative depth of Haneke’s work—his revelation of the painful truth of human fragility and the nature and origins of evil—not on their power to force audiences to a reflexive ethical consciousness.

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