

## FUNNY GAMES AND THE AUDIENCE

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### ABSTRACT

**T**he theme of violence has been represented in different ways in cinema. While violence is represented as an exciting factor of entertainment in a lot of movies, in some others it is approached with a critical viewpoint. However, even in those movies approaching violence with a critical viewpoint, the real audience watching the movie is being put in a safe position. And this voyeuristic safe position causes the audience to develop an external and detached view against violence. Haneke, on the other hand, aims to make the audience go through an experience by removing this distance between the cinematic representation and the audience in his movie "Funny Games" (1997). Turning into a performance in this way, the movie *Funny Games*, different from the conventional-critical movies, seeks to show the audience their position in front of violence by aspiring to make them question their watching habits. It is attempted in this study to reveal what kind of an effect the director wanted to create upon the audience, by analysing the audience's position in the movie *Funny Games*. While Aristoteles' catharsis and Bertolt Brecht's defamiliarization concepts, the latter being developed as an objection to Aristoteles, provide a significant intellectual basis for the movie's analysis, the notions and analyses of Mario Pezzela, Susan Sontag, Ben McCann, David Sorfa, Brian Price, David Rhodes and Michael Haneke were benefited from.

**Keywords:** Michael Haneke, violence, audience, movie

## 1.Introduction

In this study, the representation of violence in the movie *Funny Games* (1997) by Michael Haneke will be analysed, whose movies are mostly about violence and who wishes his audience a “disturbing evening”. The reason for why violence, which is also the main theme in Haneke’s *Caché* (2005), *The Seventh Continent* (1989), *Benny’s Video* (1992), *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994), and *Code Unknown* (2000), is going to be examined via the movie *Funny Games* is that, different from the other movies, in *Funny Games* the “real” audience, watching the movie to the end, play an active role as the participators of the violence within the movie. *Funny Games*, blurring the distinctions between the ones committing violence and the ones watching, is different from the conventional critical movies, particularly in terms of style, as the movie does not put through its criticism in an exterior and dull way by keeping a secure distance. For instance, if a movie, dealing with the ‘1961 Algerian Genocide’, tries to manipulate the audience emotionally by showing the sufferings, oppressions or injustices the Algerians underwent during and after the genocide, this movie has the form of a ‘conventional critical’ and, according to Haneke, a fascist movie. Similarly, movies criticising violence, like Stanley Kubrick’s “A Clockwork Orange” (1971) or Oliver Stone’s “Natural Born Killers” (1994), realize their criticisms only with a safe distance in the diegetic space and therefore give no opportunity to the audience. In turn, this makes them one-sided with regard to their interrelation with the receiver. Coming back to the movie *Funny Games*, I believe that Haneke’s statement about it would be quite useful in terms of understanding the subject better:

*“I am still proud of that movie. In terms of provocation, it functioned precisely the way I desired by making many people fly off the handles. But the audience should have, actually, raged against themselves.”* (Cieuta, Rouyer, 2014, s. 225).

With this statement, Haneke reveals quite explicitly what he aimed to do throughout the movie. The main objective of the movie is to make the audience face themselves. So, what does Haneke want to do by ensuring this confrontation? The main point of examination for this study is constituted exactly with this problematic. According to us, with this confrontation Haneke wants to generate a sense of responsibility in the audience. Therefore, the representation of violence in *Funny Games* is intended to be comprehended by trying to expound this sense of responsibility.

## 2.The Audience’s Responsibility in *Funny Games*

The sense of responsibility, which is the ‘essential’ fact aimed to be realized in the movie *Funny Games*, is constituted by the usage of various cinematic components together and contradicting with each other. It is not possible for this study to approach all these components, yet, to provide an insight, it would be helpful to regard Haneke’s statement that sums up the contradiction between the actings in the movie:

*“I have told the actors who play the young torturers to act funny, and the ones playing the victims to act tragic. This makes the relationship between the two sides unbearable.”* (Cieuta, Rouyer, 2014, s. 229)

This contradicting structure applied on the actings is observable, for us, almost in the whole movie. Violence and parody, the virtual and the real, and, most importantly, both as methods, the Aristotelian *catharsis*<sup>13</sup> and Brechtian *defamiliarization*<sup>14</sup> notions are used all together in various scenes in the movie. As

<sup>13</sup> “The tragedy’s duty is to purify the soul from the feelings of pity and fear it arouses.” (Aristoteles 1963: 22)

<sup>14</sup> With the defamiliarization effect it is aimed to strip off the familiarity in communally effective events and enable the society to interfere in them (Brecht 1997b: 26)

such, a funny tragedy movie is constituted, like there is a resembling form of comedy of every tragedy in the Ancient Greece. *As the two youngsters Paul and Peter, the torturers in the movie, are "not characters", but they are the symbols of the embodiment of the evil with enthusiasm, an abstraction.* (Cieuta, Rouyer , 2014, s. 235) Just as Tom and Jerry, being each an abstraction. However, the family members and their sufferings are real. Total opposite of abstraction, the members of the family go through concrete sufferings occurring in the cinematic field. In this case, it can be stated that the movie is a movie being not realistic in the diegetic space but realistic in the non-diegetic space, which is the audience's space. To explain again with a reference to Haneke, it can be remarked that, when looking closer at this structure that involves the movie's bourgeois family archetype with two purely fictive characters, it is a movie seeming realistic but being actually the total opposite of reality. (Cieuta, Rouyer , 2014, s. 235) As we have mentioned at the beginning of the article, the aim in creating this confrontation is to engender a sense of responsibility in the audience. And as cinema is the visual aid that creates the sense of responsibility, it would be useful to scrutinize the relationship between cinema and social responsibility.

As Mario Pezzella asserted in "*The Fetishism in Voyeurism and Performance Production*" cinema has, actually, a *narcissistic* form with regard to the audience. "*After all, the audience has the opportunity to get carried away without desisting from its deviant pleasure, and acts with a voyeuristic view independent from guilt feelings: watching without being seen, being superior to a wholly profitable object as the subject of the view, in the last instance, removing all kinds of narcissistic remains of otherness. In an absolute way, the audience's self pathologic voyeurism is reduced to a pure visual action which is dominated by completely impersonal and unconscious progresses: he/she is as if being without identity, overthrown and engulfed in front of the visual world passing before his/her eyes. "A story revealing itself is a dominant story" leaving no room for a critical and individual awareness.*" (Pezzella 2001: 64) This perspective describes the traditional cinema built only on the diegetic (cinematic space) effect.

When taking this description as a basis, it can be said that, the effect of 'conventional movies' proceeds from the audience's ability to keep distance from the movie being watched. However, the *diegetic* and *non-diegetic* distinctions are tried to be blurred in *Funny Games*. The movie world (*diegesis*), the world in which the audience fulfills the act of watching (*non-diegesis*), and drawing the audience's attention to the watching process are almost turned into a rule in *Funny Games*. Consequently, the conventional manners of viewing and manners of experiencing are beginning to be unsuitable for the structure of *Funny Games*. The movie does not stay at a safe distance for us anymore, instead it surrounds us and tries to face us. According to us, this objectifying contemporary movie style scrutinizes the subjects, surprises and tries to strengthen its self-reflexive approach. Thus, the subject is not only positioned as a passive audience but also forced to experience and is, hence, obliged to response the movie. The purpose of the movie's dramaturgy, being audience-centered, appears to be the try to show the audience the potential to be an accomplice to the incidents happening in the 'real' or 'virtual' world. To understand this structure better, it would be beneficial to examine a part of the movie *Funny Games* in detail.

### 3. Analysis

To sum up the movie *Funny Games*, we can tell that ‘two kind young men in golf clothes (Paul and Peter) torture the Schober family (Anna, George and Georgie/Anne, father and child) to death’. The movie is the detailed cinematic presentation of this torment. Besides, as far as we understand from the beginning and end of the movie, these two young men do these torments and commit murder again and again by going from house to house. This simple seeming summary is, according to us, sufficient for the movie *Funny Games*. Anything that can create moment in dramatic terms does not and even cannot occur in *Funny Games*. All the other semantic strata about the movie are relative to the audience’s connection with the movie, because the violence in the movie is correlated with the audience’s tolerance to violence. To strengthen this structure further, Michael Haneke establishes a direct relationship between the torturer main character Paul and the audience. And this directly established relationship is seen for the first time in the scene where Paul winks at the audience.



Paul (Haneke, 1997, Time code: 00:29:31)

The first funny game in *Funny Games* is the ‘find the dead dog’ game. This scene, in which for the first time a direct reference is made to the audience, combines the camera’s actual movement with Paul’s wink and this combination implies, as for us, that the ones watching the movie are Paul’s collocutors or friends. The wink, being a common gesture also used in the daily life when two friends pull a third one’s leg, is being sent by Paul to the audience. “*Funny Games*”, being watched as a conventional horror movie heretofore, has a change in terms of genre at this point. Gerbaz has the following remark about this part of the movie: *Funny Games has seemed like, a mostly conventional psychological thriller or horror movie. But now, a number of question run through the viewer’s mind. Why is this character looking at us?* (McCann, Sorfa 2011: 167) For, directly looking at and speaking to the audience is an occasion generally occurring in comedies. *When Charlie Chaplin, say, or Woody Allen turns to face the audience, they are making light of their characters’ problems; somehow their pain becomes less serious, less severe. But direct adress also reminds the audience that they are spectators and perhaps we are readier to admit to watching comedies – in which pain and suffering are generally less seriously- than to enjoying genres that depict pain with more intensity.* (McCann, Sorfa 2011: 168) However, when it comes to *Funny Games*, this effect, belonging to the comedy genre, appears as a try of the director to pull us into a sadistic game. The aim is to make us regard the things we are watching differently from that moment on. Sorfa explains this structure used by Haneke as such: “*In films (Haneke films) the spectator is put in the same position of powerlessness that many of his characters experience*” (Sorfa, 2006: 94) This means that, with Paul’s wink the audience is made to take a side. Now the audience has to continue watching the movie with the knowledge that Paul can look at the audience.

It is considered that this dialogue between George, whose leg is broken, and Paul, occurring indoors shortly before Paul and Anna play outside Funny Games' first funny game, composes one of the main lines of the dramaturgy, which the movie forms with violence:

*“Georg: Why are you doing this?”*

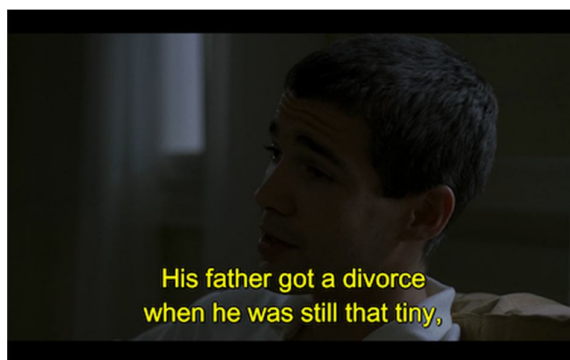
*Peter: Why not?” (Haneke, 1997, Time Code: 00:27:19)*

With this dialogue Michael Haneke wants to remind the audience of the postmodern horror movie *Scream* (1996) produced one year before *Funny Games*. The movie *Scream* received the MTV awards for the best movie in the year it was released. And MTV is a music and entertainment channel whose target group is young people and whose awarding and broadcast content is determined by the young generation while, at the same time, it gives shape to the young generation's likings. It seems to have quite worried Haneke that the young people choose a movie like *Scream* as the best movie and regard violence as an entertainment. We can infer from this interview he gave about *Funny Games* that Haneke's main motivation to make the movie was the groundless violence which became popular among the young people after 1980:

*Michael Haneke: No. This movie is about the representation of violence in the cinema, media etc. At least it is tried to be analysed within the film. An analysis of a deed within a deed. I have read especially one of the articles written after Benny's video, it was about crimes that were generally committed by young people being from good families and whose deeds were not contained by social factors. Being from bourgeois families or not, children increasingly commit crimes not for revenge or wealth, but, in a more simple way, to live the pleasure of a thrilling experience. This bothered me greatly. And this became a trigger for the story. I wanted to make a movie telling directly in a simple way how violence is portrayed in the cinema. This was what interested me.” (Minns 2007)*

As one can understand from the quoted reportage above, Michael Haneke wants to remind the audience of their desire to see fun as much as horror with facetiousness, and personal and sadistic jokes. The movie, trying to do this by focusing on the relationship between fun and violence, wants to indicate that the routine of others' sufferings is a media show.

As it is, the second funny game, which Haneke makes Paul and Peter play, is about the arbitrariness of violence and targets the audience directly. In this game Paul explains to the family and the audience why they commit violence by counting various clichés, such as that



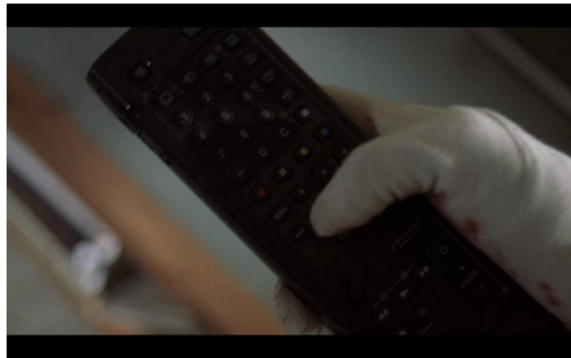
Paul (Haneke, 1997, Time code: 00:38:13)

Peter's father molested Peter, his brothers and sisters are drug addicts, and that his parents divorced when he was a child, which the main stream cinema uses to legitimate and give a reason for the violence gone through with by the audience. The psychological difficulties they went through turned them into heroin

and violence addicts. However, at the end of the scene Paul and Peter tell, by laughing raucously, that everything they told them was a lie. They played a funny joke on the Schobers and the audience, but more importantly, it was aimed to show the audience that they would make a fool of themselves in the case they watched this movie within the daily life's cause and effect relation, since one of the key features that distinguishes *Funny Games* from the other serial killer movies is that it will not relieve the audience.



Shooting (Haneke, 1997, Time code: 01:39:46)



Remote (Haneke, 1997, Time code: 01:40:04)

The shooting scene, which emphasizes that the catharsis expected by the audience cannot be experienced in this movie, is the scene when Anna grabs the gun and shoots Peter. Right after Peter is murdered by Anna, Paul goes back to the moment before Anna shoots Peter by running the movie back with the commander to rescue his friend and correct the corrupted rules of the game. After Paul rewinds the movie he takes the gun from Anna and corrects the corrupted rules of the game. By getting a torturer young man killed at the beginning of the scene, Haneke makes the audience go through a catharsis but right afterwards he lets down the catharsis. Fictionalising the Aristotelian *catharsis* and Brechtian *defamiliarizing* effect in a conflict with each other within the same scene, Haneke seeks to show the audience at which point they stay and how they are manipulated, in other words he entraps them. In a conversation about the movie Haneke explains this situation as follows:

*“Haneke: When the woman takes the gun and shoots the fat one, people applaud. Then when the scene is rewinded there is absolute silence, because they understood, they accepted that they fooled themselves totally. Because after all they applauded the murderer. I wanted to show and I did my job great. I told my producer, if the movie can be successful, and it will, this is going to be along with its misunderstanding.”* (Sharlett 2007)

The rewinding scene is at the same time the scene in which the *diegesis* (movie's space) and *non-diegesis* (audience's space) destroy each other. As to the manner of the violence's depiction, Tarja Laine remarks the following words:

*“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.”* (Price, Rhodes 2010, s.59)

What Laine says about the audience becomes quite apparent after Anna shoots Peter. Anna is unable to harm the murderers even after killing Peter, and Paul brings Peter back by using the fictional

means of cinema in a direct way. Therefore, someone being killed or suffering in the movie has no trueness about the world of the movie hereafter, on the contrary, showing that someone is murdered is an absurd attitude. Yet, the violence the audience is watching is real and that the subject continues watching the violence within this absurdity is off one's own bat. And the last reference that Paul is making to the audience is about this responsibility. The dialogues in this last reference are as follows:

*George: This is enough (implying their tortures)*

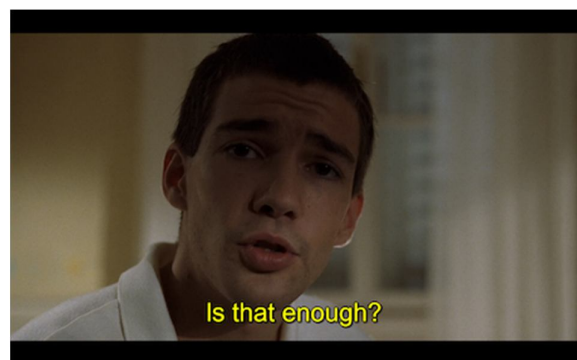
*Paul: (first to the family) 'Do you think it's enough?' (then to the audience) 'Is that enough?'*

We're not up to feature film length yet. (Haneke, 1997)

These dialogues are attacks made from the front to the habits of watching a movie. The viewers can after this moment, if they want to, close the movie and stop the cinematic torments done to the family, but mostly the viewers go forward with the cinematic torment for the sake of a satisfying ending and contribute to the reproduction of the violence in the visual field.



Paul (Haneke, 1997, Time code: 01:35:07)



Paul (Haneke, 1997, Time code: 01:35:05)

As for the fact that *Funny Games* does not aestheticise the violence, is another element that increases the sense of responsibility in the audience. Presenting the violence 'out of the frame' causes the audience to imagine the violence occurring in the movie and, therefore, the audience create the violence themselves. *Elaine Scarry has shown, physical pain is unrepresentable; thus we do not have the means necessary for genuine sympathy. In Body in the Pain, she writes: Unlike any other state of consciousness pain has no referential content. Because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resist objection in language.* (Price, Rhodes 2010, s. 37) To turn to Haneke again at this point, what he says about the representation of violence is as follows:

*"Whenever I have to show something terrifying, I shoot from a distance. I think that showing pain closely is obscene. What a mother and father feels while being tortured in front of their children cannot be acted. Thus, the only method is to remove the camera until the faces cannot be seen. If you pay attention to the about ten minutes long shot sequence in which is much talk, this scene consist of what we hear rather than what we see."* (Cieuta, Rouyer, 2014, s. 237-238)



Anna (Haneke, 1997, Time code: 01:06:10)

We can also see this type of use of sound in Haneke's movie "The White Ribbon" (2009), produced in 2009, in the scene in which the children receive a bastinado by the father. By this means the audience is forced to produce violence. As it is seen, in both of the movies mentioned, the audience is put in the position of the one producing as well as receiving violence. It seems as though the main motivation of Haneke to make movies generally consist of this principle. He wants to create a ground for confrontation with the responsibility of the deeds they participate in unwittingly, by reminding the audience of their position.

#### 4. Conclusion

Funny Games seeks to show what the seemingly harmless habits, which the subject obtains from the daily life and the cinema, result in. It tries to show that even the motivation for watching the daily news, which mostly seems ordinary for the subjects, is closely related to being participants in violence and crime. The swinging between *diegesis* and *non-diegesis* creates an ethical space. While the subjects as the viewers and Paul can go between *diegesis* and *non-diegesis*, the family undergoing the torment cannot go beyond the *diegetic* space. As it is, the audience is made a participant of the ones torturing the Schober family. In other words, while the audience were together with the Schobers in terms of mercy and concern, they unavoidably take sides with the murderers.

It is a necessity to evaluate the audience's position in Funny Games in ethical terms, as the consciousness cannot be raised without revealing the ethical values and the violence in media synchronously. And the main motivation for Haneke to want to make this movie is to ensure the audience's realisation of the ethical space to which they have become estranged. Haneke speaks this out in a reportage about Funny Games:

*"Haneke: The murderers get in contact with the audience. Make the audience an accomplice to themselves. I make the audience an accomplice to the killers and punish the audience at the end because they played that role. This is quite sarcastical and cynic but I made Funny Games to demonstrate how we turn into being the accomplices of the killers when we are watching such kinds of movies. Such kinds of movies do not represent this by themselves, but depict violence in a reasonable way only. People always accept the occurring violence; this can be confuted, but we are unwittingly becoming accomplices. This is what I want to show."* (Minns 2007)

The presentation of this accompliceship is not made by Haneke with postmodern motivations such as "not giving a message, that the human essence is evil, and ambiguity", but to emphasize that we should not lose a consensus which he thinks is necessary for communal living. By showing the audience their own position, Haneke wants them to develop a critical point of view towards the violence they normalize and are unwittingly part of. The director's views about the social consensus are as such:



*“All the rules maintaining the social functions in Funny Games, have turned into nothingness for Paul and Peter. And you do not have the chance to confront such characters. I think that this became shocking in the movie. This concern, which we confront because of some people to whom one can react in no way, shows what can happen when the social cause and effect relation is lost, even if kindness and culture is preserved. Because this is a key consensus that we have to possess. If we lose it, we really will lose.” (Minns 2007)*

By looking at all we have mentioned, it is safe to say that, the thing wanted to be shown, in Funny Games specifically and in Michael Haneke’s movies in general, is not to show violence as a media in cinema. On the contrary, while it is emphasized in Haneke’s movies that violence cannot be represented, it is questioned what the audience’s attitude is in front of the representation of violence. As it is mentioned especially in various writings about Funny Games, ‘the petit bourgeois family’ or ‘the upper-middle class conformism’ cannot compose one of the movie’s critical motivations.

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