



Poor Things: MICHAEL HANEKE'S FUNNY GAMES



Michael Haneke plays sadistic voyeuristic games, not only with his characters, but with his audience too – twice. BY BRAD PRAGER

Still from: *Funny Games* (Halcyon Pictures)

IN MICHAEL HANEKE'S *FUNNY GAMES*, two young men intrude into a comfortable bourgeois home intent on violence and murder. They have devised a sadistic sport and they play it like pros. It seems that they have done this before. The duo might remind us of the murderers in Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948). Paul is a tough guy and Peter seems to be a pushover, but neither one of them has Farley Granger's guilty conscience. It's all academic for them. Invoking his acquaintance with the neighbours, Peter drops by to borrow some eggs. This is already a transgression – what if the film's homemaker had planned on serving eggs for breakfast? Politeness, however, makes it hard to say 'no'. Next, Peter really crosses the line when he gamely drops them on the floor in the hall and expects to borrow four more. This initial game, which trades on good manners, leads to rougher ones, and eventually into some pretty heavy violence. And we're put through each stage of a very long night in what feels as though it were foot-dragging real time.

Many found Haneke's film – which was first released as an Austrian production in 1997, and then again in 2007 as a nearly shot-for-shot US remake – too trivial, even too exploitative, to bother about. The film acts, of course, as a critique of bourgeois domesticity. Ann and George (Anna and Georg in the 1997 original), the couple in question, are so isolated on the grounds of their lakefront property that they can't even escape when they need to: the poor things have been hoisted by their own private petard. It is an Oedipal story as well – a cinematic turning of tables on the *pater familias*. Early on George tries to assert himself as the master of the house, but one of the young intruders quickly puts him in his place with the help of an expensive golf club. But social



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comments of this kind are hardly foremost on Haneke's mind. He'd prefer to say he is deploying violence to subvert violence. Thanks to *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and other films like it, however, we recognise this for the dead end that it is. Most of us know there is plenty of voyeuristic pleasure in watching these games from the sidelines. As uncomfortable as we feel, we don't look away. Pleasures of that sort were intensified in the remake. Though the film was no blockbuster, depicting Naomi Watts all trussed up was surely seen as a selling point.

The stakes, it seems, lie elsewhere – or we must look for them elsewhere. The director repeatedly breaks the fourth wall as the cold-blooded Paul addresses the camera. In one of the film's many games, in which Ann is forced to hunt for the corpse of her dog, Paul calls out 'colder' and 'warmer', sending her roaming around the driveway like a pinball. Here, he ostentatiously looks right at the viewer. Similarly, after Paul explains to Ann and George that he'd like to make a bet – that in 12 hours the whole family will be 'kaput' – he asks us who we think will win. This 'Brechtian' game is not so interesting (there's not much that's new there), but the choice of teams is the film's main innovation. The perpetrators signal to us that they are playing a theatrical game, while Ann, George and their little boy Georgie (Schorschii in the Austrian version), do not. These folks are trapped inside this world, as though they were caught on the wrong side of the television screen. A better title might perhaps have been *Unpleasantville*. Not only are they forbidden from making any rules, but these three haven't even been told that there's another side to



all this. If someone would just let them know it was only a movie, they wouldn't have to be afraid. But to borrow a line from the murderers' discussion of *Solaris* at the film's end, it appears that 'one universe is real and the other one is in fiction'. Peter and Paul know they are playing a role, but Ann and George never have a chance; there's no performative part to their pain. Even when Ann achieves a small victory – when it looks as though she's finally got hold of a gun – the reversal is fleeting. The film literally rewinds itself and she is stripped of her victory. The director, it turns out, is in cahoots with the perpetrators.

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In the film's opening scene, Ann and George play a classical music version of *Name That Tune*. The diegetic score is tonal and comforting, but everything is suddenly interrupted by some thrashing acid rock (courtesy of *Naked City*). It is Haneke who is the DJ. He sets the tone, not Ann and George. The couple's victimisation is thereby redoubled: Not only are they abused by Peter and Paul, but by Haneke as well. For this reason, we feel all the more hopeless when Ann runs to the road for help. We're on the side of the family, but the deck is stacked and indeed we're forced to bet against them. Consider the horrifically long take after the couple's young son has been shot. The uninterrupted sequence lasts about 10 minutes in either version. Haneke is giving us a private moment during which to spy on their agony, and that's his funny game. But what if he'd played fair? What if Ann had winked at us before she'd met her end? Or what if young Georgie had, with the help of a rewind button, come back to life? Reassuring twists along these lines would have ruined the director's game. He's the killers' accomplice, and it's his game to play.

But why go through this, and why again after 10 years? Hadn't Haneke said his piece? The two versions of this film are uncannily similar, but of course every frame of them is different. (One could spend hours scrutinising the major and minor distinctions, from the window dressing to the underclothing). It's also somewhat similar to Bryan Bertino's *The Strangers* (2008), though perhaps the Hollywood comparison sells Haneke short. The director has said that he always thought *Funny Games* was an American story meant for an American audience, but let's not cheat: the US doesn't corner the market on violent crime. Everyone, even the Austrians, seem capable of playing such games. ■

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Funny Games is available on DVD in the UK from Halcyon Pictures.