THIS IS **NOT** FUNNY: HOW MICHAEL HANEKE'S *FUNNY GAMES* CORRECTS ITS AUDIENCE

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Breaking Eggs, Breaking Kneecaps

"Eve sent me. She's cooking and she ran out of eggs, and she asked if you could help her out." It is this seemingly innocent request for a couple of eggs that makes Ann Farber believe that she can trust Peter, a decent looking young man she has only met once before. Smartly dressed in an impeccable white outfit, and afflicted with polite manners, he appears at the doorstep of Ann's well-equipped holiday home. His shy and clumsy behaviour and soft tone of voice contribute to his reliable, gentle appearance. So Anne decides that she can invite Peter into her home. When he almost instantly drops the eggs Ann has handed over to him, she initially laughs and tells him not to worry about it. Peter politely asks her for some new eggs, after which he 'accidentally' knocks her phone into the kitchen sink, and finally drops the eggs again.

This scene from Michael Haneke's film *Funny Games* (2007) may seem funny at first. However, the slapstick humour which the rapid succession of accidents of the clumsy protagonist hints at is nipped in the bud. When Peter's companion Paul enters the Farber premises as well, the situation quickly turns grim. Ann loses her patience with the two young men. Offended by the fact that they still dare to ask for new eggs after having dropped them twice, she firmly asks Peter and Paul to leave. They don't. Paul suddenly smashes the kneecaps of Ann's husband George with a golf club. After that, the two men stay for another twelve hours in which they torture and kill Ann's entire family: her dog, her ten-year old son, her husband, and finally Ann herself.

Funny Games is not a funny movie at all. It meticulously represents the pain, distress and suffering of the Farber family for the duration of the film. Yet, the film cannot be seen apart from humour. As both the title and the above mentioned opening scene already indicate, the film constantly suggests that it *is* funny. Violence is alternated with jokes, games and funny little accidents.

Whereas such a mixture of horror and humour often succeeds in entertaining the audience of many contemporary narrative films, Haneke's film makes its viewers shiver instead of laugh. Both the German version—which first appeared in 1997—and the more recent English version of *Funny Games* have led to very emotional responses and controversies: the film has truly compelled and horrified its spectators.[1,2]

The strong feelings of disgust and discomfort which *Funny Games* gives rise to are not so much—not solely—a result of its meticulous representation of violence. Rather, the film is so highly unsettling because of its constant mismatches between violence *and* fun, horror, *and* humor, as well as suffering *and* entertainment. In this article I explain how many of the characteristics which can make representations of violence uplifting and entertaining to an audience are hinted at but then undermined in Haneke's film. As for the protagonists, every possible escape from violence in *Funny Games* turns out to be a cul-de-sac for its viewers too, who are deprived of any secure, satisfactory stance towards the violence that is depicted. I argue that the above mentioned 'çul-de-sacs' and 'mismatches' in Haneke's film function as a correction of the customary *cinematic match* between violence and fun. Before turning to this common combination of humor and suffering in film, it is first necessary to look into the more general link between entertainment and the pain of others.

Painful Pies

The relationship between violence and fun is not exclusive to cinema, nor is it a recent phenomenon. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag suggests that the 'despised impulse' to watch the violation and suffering of others might be as natural to human beings as sympathy. She traces the acknowledgment of human attraction to gruesome sights as far back as Plato, who "appears to take for granted that we also have an appetite for sights of deg-

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radation and pain and mutilation" (86). It is important that Sontag defines this attraction to atrocity as a *despised* impulse. Although religious thinking has linked pain to sacrifice and exaltation, suffering is generally regarded as "a mistake or an accident or a crime. Something to be fixed. Something to be refused" (Sontag 88).

Because of this dominant moral rejection of violence and suffering in most Western cultures, the desire to look at (pictures of) suffering tends to be suppressed, and the pleasure derived from watching pain is not a culturally accepted one. As a result, the wish to see something gruesome can be a source of inner torment and mental conflict. We want to look while we feel we shouldn't. This struggle can explain why looking at the pain of others is not only a source of (forbidden) pleasure, but also a common source of *laughter*. Over the past couple of centuries, many theorists (Spencer [1860], Gregory [1924], Freud [1928], Shurcliff [1968] and Berlyne [1972])—to name only a few), have noted the *tension-releasing* function of humor, and some have even suggested that tension relief is a defining characteristic of all humor (Martin 2007).

One of the main tenets of relief theory is that making a joke about something we find frightening or threatening can relieve us from feelings of anxiety. More importantly, according to relief theory, humor functions as a way to overcome sociocultural inhibitions and reveal suppressed desires. In jokes we express and address things we are not supposed to feel, do, or talk about according to conventions (or, as Freud would have, the superego). In other words, humor can provide us with an outlet or a feeling of relief as we briefly step out from under moral and sociocultural restraints. When jokes allow us to laugh out loud over the suffering of others, they might be said to temporarily relieve us from the repressed inclination to enjoy the pain of others.[3]

From its onset, cinema has provided its audience with comic relief from the prohibited pleasure of *schadenfreude*. One of the main attractions of this early *cinema of attractions,* as Tom Gunning defined it, the comic action. Many of the first single shots movies which were produced in the first decade of the last century showed brief gags in which characters suffered from little accidents or traps. Clumsy or unwitting figures would trip and stumble, fall into a pie, or get soaked by a watering hose.

The suffering of these comic characters is relatively harmless in comparison to the violence which is inflicted on victims in a large amount of more contemporary 'funny' fiction films. Around 1990, a 'violent turn' can be noticed in cinematic comedies. Similar to the turn from breaking eggs to breaking kneecaps in the opening scenes of Haneke's *Funny Games,* the *schadenfreude* which can be derived from contemporary comedies no longer depends on pies, but rather on brain matter flying in the face of guileless characters. The tendency to represent excessive violence in a funny way can first and foremost be traced back to so called *nouvelle violence* films, of which Quentin Tarantino's works provide the most poignant examples.

Caught Laughing

In Tarantino's films, horribly violent acts or abject situations are often combined with comic aspects. In *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), for instance, a tied up policeman is approached by his guard, gangster Mr. Blonde, in a threatening, yet amusing way. While swinging a knife in his hand, Mr. Blonde is doing a cheerful little dance to "Stuck in the Middle with You" by Stealers Wheel. He then cuts off the policeman's right ear. The laconic style in which the scene is presented suddenly contrasts with the policeman's pain and suffering. The same intertwining of fun and horror can be found in *Pulp Fiction's* "the Bonnie situation" (1992). In this scene, two gangsters have to clean up a car because one of them has accidentally shot a man in the face, leaving skull, brain matter, and blood all over the backseat. This abject situation becomes ludicrous when the cool and cold-blooded gangsters panic for a rather ridiculous reason: they are afraid to get caught red-handed by an innocent nurse, Bonnie.

It can be argued that the comic aspects in Tarantino's films present the violence in his films as entirely 'over the top', and thereby ironize much of the brutal acts that come by.[4] The 'said' in Tarantino's films can be described as: violence is cruel and grave. For this is how the violence is represented for most of the time: painful, abject and horrific. The funny and exaggerated parts, however, point at the 'unsaid': that the represented violence shouldn't be taken very seriously. Hereby, the film seems to give its spectators permission to laugh over horrible acts.

However, as Sharon Willis argues, it isn't that uncomplicated for the films' viewers to consider the violence as merely funny. As I've already noted, enjoying the suffering of others is something we tend to suppress unless humor makes it 'appropriate' to laugh over.. This appropriateness, however, does not only depend on the joke(s), but also on the gravity of the suffering. It is more appropriate to laugh over someone who trips over a dog than over someone who has his ear cut off. In Tarantino's films, the violence is extreme. It is, moreover, merely funny *because* it is extreme. Paradoxically, however, this intense and serious character also prohibits us from laughing out loud. The 'comic relief' is therefore not complete.

In the same vein, Willis defines the combinations of fun with horror in Tarantino's films as 'mismatches' that produce an affective excess in the films' viewers:

> To be caught laughing when something horrific happens, to gasp at the mismatch between our affective state and the next image, may be said to reproduce, or at least to recall the embarrassment, or even shame, to be caught with our pants down in the breach of social discipline. Tweaking our internal social censorship mechanisms as they do by the mismatches between the funny and the horrifying, the abject, or the frightening, [Tarantino's] films leave us to manage that affective excess. (190)

According to Willis, this affective excess—which she describes as 'being caught with ones pants down'—can be managed in two ways by the films' spectators. On the one hand, viewers can take satisfaction in the alibi Tarantino's films provide. As Willis notes, "we can feel we are getting away with laughing when we should not" (190). On the other hand, the spectators' shock of being caught laughing when something horrific happens can be merely a source of embarrassment. These two possible reactions to laughing over the violence in Tarantino's films—satisfaction and embarrassment—can never completely be resolved.

Moreover, Tarantino's films cause doubt about the meaning or intended effect of the ironic stance towards violence that can be attributed to them. As Linda Hutcheon points out, irony doesn't necessarily have a critical edge; it can just as well be "morally irresponsible, empty, even silly" (49). According to Hutcheon, irony can become "a tone of urbane amusement, assuming the right to be amused, but offering no precise positives behind the right" (49). Furthermore, Hutcheon notes how in addition to being an empty decoration, irony can even function as an affirmation—rather than destruction—of its target.

The critical intention of the irony in Tarantino's films is hard to decipher. Are viewers allowed to laugh over the depicted violence or are they supposed to feel ashamed for doing so? Is violence ironized by the films in order show to how ridiculous and stupid violence really is? In other words, is the ironizing of violence meant to criticize violence itself? Or is the ironic stance towards violence rather celebratory? Is it meant to show us how cool and funny a nonchalant and indifferent attitude towards violence really is?

I would opt for the last option when it comes to Tarantino's films. The ironic stance towards violence in his films doesn't criticize its target; rather, violence is celebrated.[5] Although the ironizing of violence can produce unease in the films' viewers, the films nevertheless *allow* them to be amused by violence. In an interview with Lisa Kennedy, Tarantino recounts how the motto of his films was once appreciatively described to him as: "Looking cool being bad, with a fuck-you attitude" (qtd. in Kennedy 1994, 31). This doesn't just apply to the bad guys in his films though. It is also the attitude the spectator is encouraged to take up. Looking at violence ironically may be slightly bad, but is cool precisely because of that. In the end, the irony in Tarantino's films functions therefore more as an affirmation of violent behaviour than an objection to it.

Tarantino's films can be said to have paved the way for extremely violent films in which the possibly discomforting oscillation between fun and seriousness has vanished altogether. Horror parodies such as *Scary Movie* (2000) or so-called 'splatsticks' (splattery slapsticks) such as *Club Dread* (2004) hardly leave any room for the seriousness of pain, for they are riddled with slapstick-like jokes. Stabbings and murders are alternated with 'funny' little accidents, such as the loss of a breast-implant or a character slipping over a pool of blood. As opposed to Tarantino's films, these movies leave no doubt as to the intended effect of flying brain matter and the like; these 'splatsticks' are meant to entertain, not to critique. In these films, splashing blood has indeed fully replaced the splashing gardening hose. For the slapstick humor in these overtly comic yet excessively violent films grants its audience unequivocal permission to laugh over pain and suffering without risking social embarrassment.

In addition to firmly establishing the genre of the horror comedy, *nouvelle violence* films have also installed an ironic *mode of looking* in many contemporary viewers. Today, film spectators are inclined to understand excessive cinematic violence in films as funny and amusing rather than serious and shocking. The emergence of such an ironic understanding of violence and suffering can be well illustrated by the reception of *American Psycho.* When Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* was first published in 1991, it caused a wave of shock and outrage. When the novel's adaptation to film was released in 2000, however, the represented atrocities where largely understood as ironic. This can partially be ascribed to the film itself, which was more overtly ironic than the novel. However, it can also be explained by a change in the attitude of the audience, because in the years between the novel and the film, many people had grown accustomed to taking an ironic stance towards represented violence. Films such as *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* had 'taught' them to understand depicted pain and suffering as a non-serious, funny matter. As I will argue in the course of this paper, Haneke's *Funny Games* can be understood as an attempt to *un*learn this lesson.

Funny Games?

At first sight, *Funny Games* (2007) may seem similar rather than averse to Tarantino's nouvelle violence films. Like *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction,* Haneke's film contains the suggestion that violence is funny, and might therefore induce the same embarrassment in spectators as is evoked in Tarantino's films; that is, it has the potential to stir up the feeling which Willis compares to the sensation of 'being caught with your pants down.' Yet, Haneke's combination of the horrible with the funny produces an even bigger mismatch between fun and suffering than Tarantino's films. In addition, this mismatch has a slightly different effect on the audience. Instead of feeling ashamed for being caught laughing when perhaps they should not, the viewers of *Funny Games* are being caught watching when perhaps they shouldn't. In order to explain this effect, it is first necessary to explore where and why irony can be attributed to *Funny Games.*

While the Farber family is sitting on the couch of their living room, frightened and shocked because of the physical violence that has just been inflicted on them by the two perpetrators, Paul addresses them with a proposal: "We're gonna make a bet now, ok? We bet that in, let's say, twelve hours, all three of you are going to be 'kaput'.… *You* bet that you will still be alive tomorrow at nine o'clock, and *we* bet that you will be dead, ok?" Understandably so, the three family members—Ann, George senior and

George junior—are stunned by this absurd plan. Except for Ann's astonished "What?" they remain silent, which leads to Peter's disappointed reaction that "they don't want to bet." This, however, is not an option according to Paul: "A bet has to be made."

The two perpetrators consider the entire situation a game, a bet which will result in winners and losers. Furthermore, within this large game, a few smaller games are set up by Peter and Paul. One of these games, for instance, is called 'cat in the bag', in which Ann has to undress herself while her son George is being gagged by Paul. Another example is 'the loving wife', in which Ann has to say a prayer in order to be given the choice by which weapon her husband will be killed: a knife or gun.

Peter and Paul take their violent games very seriously. The rules have to be followed strictly, the bet *has* to be made, and the victims must play along. If not, the consequences will be severe. By emphasizing the seriousness of their games, the perpetrators seem to stress the graveness of their violence as well. However, the serious attitude of the perpetrators toward their violent games can be understood as ironic. It is ironic because in all cases, the perpetrators encourage their victims to follow the rules, make a bet, and play along in order not to spoil the *fun*. In the end, their violent games are meant to be understood as funny and amusing. The violence the two perpetrators use should therefore not be taken too seriously either.

All the more ironic is the perpetrators' (verbal) dismissal of any form of misbehaviour. Quite apart from their outbursts of physical violence, the two men express nothing but courteousness and politeness when they speak. For instance, shortly after Paul has broken George's kneecaps with a golf club, Peter asks George to "please have a seat" with a soft and kind tone of voice. When the badly injured man is finally seated, Peter continues his gentle approach: "Could you please take off your pants? If you don't let me see your wound I can't help you.… I'm happy to help, really, I just don't want to impose." The two young men keep insisting on polite manners, honesty, and tidiness; for example, they take great pains to keep the carpet clean. Whenever the Farbers use any physical violence in their defense, the two men are offended and disapproving. For instance, Paul tells George that the slap in the face George gave him "really wasn't an appropriate reaction." Moreover, Peter and Paul repeatedly offer the Farbers their sincere apologies for their own violent 'faux-pas.' However, these apologies for and verbal dismissals of violence cannot be taken seriously because the perpetrators *act* violently over and over again.

Funny Games doesn't raise much doubt on the critical intention of the ironic stance the two perpetrators expose. Their ironic mocking of violence doesn't seem to be aimed at criticizing violence at all. Instead, their irony functions as an accomplice to their abject violent behaviour. It is their ironic attitude that provides them with an excuse, or perhaps even a reason, to use the most horrific brutal violence. For it isn't that serious, is it?

However, because the ironic attitude of the perpetrators stands in stark contrast to the suffering of their victims, it seems impossible for the spectator *not* to take the brutal acts in *Funny Games* seriously. For how can the excruciating pains the Farbers have to go through possibly be considered as futile or funny? Unlike Tarantino's films, which seduce the spectator to take up an (embarrassingly) indifferent and amused attitude towards violence, *Funny Games* doesn't make its audience laugh.

An important reason for why the urge to laugh at the represented violence in *Funny Games* never occurs is that, unlike in Tarantino's films, the atrocities in Haneke's film aren't presented in a laconic style. It is merely the perpetrators who are ironic, but this irony isn't sustained by the rest of the film's characteristics. There are no cheerful melodies or over-the-top tableaux like cars filled with blood to accompany the ironic attitude of the criminals. In *Funny Games*, the violent scenes are represented in a sober manner. It isn't splashing blood or cut off ears we get to see, but the tormented faces of the suffering victims, crying and sweating from pain and fear. The ironic attitude of the perpetrators doesn't make the suffering of the Farber family funny. Instead, it makes the violent behaviour of the two young men all the more grim and abject.

The contrast between the soberly represented suffering of the victims and the ironic attitude of the perpetrators towards this pain and suffering produces a desire in the viewer to radically disidentify with the violent behaviour of Peter and Paul as well as their ironic attitude towards this violence.[6] So, although the irony used by the perpetrators is far from critical towards its target, the effect of Peter and Paul's ironic stance towards violence does have a possibly desirable critical effect on its viewers.

The viewer's wish to disidentify with Peter and Paul's ironically acted out violence, however, is disrupted by the film. This is because the viewer of *Funny Games* is involuntarily made an accomplice to the ironic stance of Peter and Paul, and consequently to the violence they use. As I will explain in the next section, the spectator of *Funny Games* is placed in this uncomfortable position of accomplice through a combination of the perpetrators' ironic stance towards violence and the fact that the two criminals repeatedly address the viewer.

Caught Watching

The first interpellation of the viewer is merely visual and comes somewhat as a surprise. When Paul is playing one of his first little games—a game in which Ann has to look for the corpse of her killed dog while Paul provides her with clues about where to search—he suddenly looks over his shoulder, straight into the camera, and smirks. Since there is no one else standing behind him, this brief smile, accompanied with a knowing glance, is likely to be meant for the spectator. Yet, because the smirk is such a brief, non-verbal gesture, it leaves the spectator in doubt. Was this gesture directed at me?

This question can quickly be answered in the affirmative. Shortly after Paul's smirk, he addresses the viewer verbally, again looking directly into the camera: "What do you think? You think they stand a chance? Who are you betting on, mm?" By these questions the spectator is dragged into the 'games' of Peter and Paul as one of the players. Although the viewer cannot physically partake in the whole, his/her role as a passive participant or witness is accounted for in the set-up of the games, and therefore inescapable for anyone who watches the film. In short, watching *Funny Games* turns into an act of playing along with the perpetrators' funny games, whether the viewer likes it or not.

Being addressed directly and being forced to participate in the game causes more than just a feeling of unease in the viewer. This experience also likely induces a feeling of shame. In order to understand this response, it is important to realize that the film viewer is usually a distant witness who is allowed to sit secretly and anonymously in the dark. According to Christian Metz (1982), viewing a film in the cinema somehow resembles an offence because of the viewer's hidden position in the dark. No one really knows or sees that you are watching. Even apart from the dark cinema, Metz argues, watching a film is in general more 'scandalous' than, for instance, watching a play or even a peepshow. In all three cases the spectator can be said to be a voyeur. The difference, however, is that as long as performers of plays or peepshows aren't forced to act on stage, the permission to watch them is sufficiently guaranteed by their physical presence: they want to be watched, otherwise they wouldn't be there. This doesn't count for film. The viewed actors (or as Metz puts it: objects) are physically absent and therefore they cannot give the spectator permission to watch. This is why the film viewer is a sort of peeping Tom. He or she is an unauthorized voyeur who secretly watches actors without their consent.

When the presence of the viewer is acknowledged in *Funny Games* by two of its protagonists, this doesn't immediately make the act of watching more appropriate. Instead of feeling authorized to watch, viewers are more likely to feel taken unaware when Paul first turns to them with a blink. This is because the spectator, who is used to a detached, anonymous place in the dark, is now suddenly 'caught' watching. This probably wouldn't be so very embarrassing if the film would show things we are—according to social conventions—allowed to watch with pleasure. The main subject of *Funny Games*, however, is not something we are supposed to enjoy. The question that is raised by being addressed and acknowledged as a viewer of *Funny Games* is: why do you watch this? Doesn't the fact that you are watching imply that you secretly enjoy seeing these atrocities, this violence, this suffering?

These questions are made even more poignant by the fact that Peter and Paul clearly presuppose the viewer is amused by the violence they inflict on their victims. This is for instance indicated by Paul's blink. His gesture doesn't just acknowledge the presence of the spectator, it also implies that he or she should 'get' the joke; this

violent act shouldn't be taken seriously, it is funny.[7] Such tête-à-têtes suggest a mutual understanding between the perpetrators and the viewer, yet without the consent of the viewer. This way, the spectator is somewhat forced into sharing the ironic stance of Peter and Paul towards violence. Whereas Hutcheon has argued that interpreters of irony are free and conscious agents who can refuse to attribute irony where it might be intended in the same way they can attribute it where it might not be meant (1994:12), such a refusal of irony is hardly possible for *Funny Games'* viewers. By merely watching, they are presupposed to share the ironic stance of Peter and Paul towards violence, and consequently to enjoy watching the violence the two young men use.

What is more, Peter and Paul do not only presuppose the viewer is amused by their violent game, they also indicate that they are playing their game *in order to* amuse the viewer. "Do you think it's enough?" Paul asks the spectator after a long violent scene. His next question already suggests an answer to the previous one: "I mean, you want a real ending, right? With plausible plot development, don't you?" Following this question, Paul continues his torture of the Farber family. Thus, the viewer of *Funny Games* is not only inflicted with a feeling of guilt for merely *watching* violence, but is also indicated by the protagonists as the *reason* that the violence is carried out in the first place. The two protagonists are putting up a spectacle in order to entertain their audience. "It's boring when mutes suffer" Paul says, upon which he removes a lump of cloth by which Ann is being smothered. "We want to entertain our audience, right, show them what we can do."

By having the protagonists put up a spectacle in order to entertain the audience, *Funny Games* resembles the previously mentioned 'cinema of attractions'. As in Haneke's film, the actors in these early movies clearly show an awareness of the camera. By addressing the viewers and putting up spectacles in order to entertain them, they explicitly perform for a (future) audience. Pascal Bonitzer has described these scenes as a world of 'pure' spectacle, in which guilt does not (yet) seem to exist (1981, 23). The difference between *Funny Games* and the cinema of attractions could be said to lie precisely in this absence or presence of guilt. Whereas the spectacles shown in the cinema of attractions consist of relatively innocent acts, such as pulling funny faces or physical slapstick, the spectacles put up in *Funny Games* comprise torture and murder. It is the contemporary spectator who is to blame for this horror show, since it is the viewer who wishes to be entertained by these kinds of abject 'funny games' instead of by harmless funny faces. At least, this is what *Funny Games* implicitly suggests.

The Right Side

Of course, the viewer of *Funny Games* is not likely to feel entertained by the horrible acts that Peter and Paul perform because these violent acts aren't funny in any way. The problem, however, is that the film offers no excuse for

the viewer to watch the film. The only possible reason for watching the film seems to be that the viewer enjoys it, which, presumably, they don't. Still, there is no comfortable moral stance that spectators can take up or identify with in order to justify their watching. The film does present spectators with some possible escapes from their uncomfortable position as pleasure-taking voyeurs of violence. These escapes, however, are consistently undermined in the film, which is why I called them cul-de-sacs. One of these cul-de-sacs is the possibility for the viewer to choose the right side: the side of the victims.

This choice is easily made when watching *Funny Games*. It is hard to sympathize with the perpetrators, since they are vile and cruel. More importantly, it is difficult to identify with them because at first sight there seems to be no understandable reason for their violent behaviour. In fact, they even mock the fact that they don't have any motives for their cruelty, making up all kinds of fake excuses, such as blaming a deprived background, alcoholic and abusive parents, drug-addiction, or the emptiness of existence in general. Because the violent behaviour of Peter and Paul is reprehensible and incomprehensible, the viewer will more likely identify with their victims instead. Moreover, the suffering of the Farber family produces empathy for them in the viewer since it is easy to imagine oneself in the position of the suffering family members. Viewers can see their fear and pain, and it is easy to understand these feelings after having first seen what atrocities were inflicted on them. In short, the viewer is encouraged to identify with the suffering Farbers.

Identification with suffering persons can be considered utterly comforting and even uplifting. According to Ernst van Alphen, this can be explained by the fact that the suffering person is a victim, and therefore without guilt. As van Alphen puts it: "The identification with the represented victims posits the viewers also without guilt and reconfirms their conventional morality" (2). In the case of *Funny Games*, the viewers' identification with the victims, which is encouraged by the film from the beginning, could provide them with a comfortable position, one that confirms their 'conventional morality' and acquits them of the guilt the film installs in them for watching violent scenes.

However, there are two ways in which the film undermines this possible comfort for the viewer. First, the distinction between innocent victims and guilty violators is constantly blurred in the film. Consequently, identification with the victims doesn't necessarily posit the viewer without guilt, because the victims themselves aren't completely innocent either. Although Peter and Paul are the ones who use the gravest forms of violence and finally even murder their victims, it is the Farbers who use physical violence first. Ann, George and little Georgy each attack the two young men with blows and punches before they have even been hit and kicked by Peter and Paul themselves. Apart from physical violence, the Farbers are the first and only ones to become *verbally* abusive. Whereas they rail at their perpetrators and call them names, Peter and Paul keep addressing their victims with polite phrases

in a kind tone of voice. Altogether, the victimized Farbers aren't completely innocent. They *start* acting violent—both verbally and physically—and therefore the violence that is subsequently inflicted on them by Peter and Paul can be considered as punishment for this, albeit a disproportionately severe one.[8]

Second, identification with the victims cannot acquit the viewer of guilt because in *Funny Games* this identification is part of the 'funny' game. As I have explained earlier, the role of the viewer is accounted for in the set-up of the perpetrators' game. While sitting and watching motionless, the spectator is supposed to do something; that is, they are supposed to identify with the Farbers because that's what makes the game of Peter and Paul more exciting and all the more amusing (especially for the spectators, according to the two perpetrators). Paul's question to the viewer "Who are you betting on?" is followed by the remark "You're on their side, aren't you? Ok, so, the bet is on." Thus, by identifying with the victims, the viewer meets the expectations of the perpetrators. This isn't a very comfortable position for the viewer. In spite of being on the 'right side,' the viewer is left uneasy because the distinction between the right and the wrong side isn't clear cut in *Funny Games*.

All is Well That Ends Well

Next to the opportunity to identify with the suffering victims, there is another way by which the viewer of violent films can usually be put at ease: a righteous ending, one in which violence is condemned after all. As van Alphen writes:

> Action films that take delight in excessive violence as an end in itself are usually rounded off with a closure in which the bad guy is killed or caught and the good guy is rewarded. Unconvincing as such closures may be, they fulfil society's official precept to condemn violence and to show that violence does not pay. (6)

When violent films are rounded off with bad luck for the bad guys, the viewer is provided with an excuse to watch; it is more justified to watch violence if this violence is judged by the film in the end. Moreover, by condemning the violence that was shown, a film offers its viewer the opportunity to follow or identify with the moral position implicated by the film. No matter how pleasurable it might have been to see the spectacles of violence, in the end we can agree with the film's assertion: violence is wrong and doesn't pay. Like identification with the victims, a right ending can confirm the viewer in his or her conventional morality. All is well that ends well.

Even Tarantino's films, which I have discussed before, can be said to submit to "society's official precept to condemn violence" in this respect, no matter how cool and funny the violent acts seem. For although the good guys in Tarantino's films usually do not get off too well, the bad guys aren't exactly rewarded either. They get killed (most of the time by each other), and when they aren't killed it is because they have earned their survival by doing

something good first. For instance, in *Pulp Fiction*, bad guy Butch rescues his enemy Marcellus Wallace from anal rape and therefore escapes death. Likewise, gangster Jules judges the violent milieu he belongs to and in the end decides to retreat from it, thereby putting an end to a potentially ongoing series of violent episodes. Both guys get to live after a 'change of hearts.' For the viewer, who felt like being "caught with his pants down" before, these righteous endings can provide some comfort. After having inappropriately laughed over violence, the viewer can now "put his pants back on," and retreat into the more or less safe moral position offered by Tarantino's films in the end: violence might be cool, but it doesn't really pay in the long run.

Alternatively, the viewer of *Funny Games* is left "with his pants down" in the end. The film ends badly for the victims, who all get killed. The perpetrators, on the other hand, get away with their crimes. After having thrown Ann overboard of a sailing boat as a tied up bundle of human waste, leaving her to drown in the vast lake, the two perpetrators are already heading towards another holiday home on shore. This is how *Funny Games* ends: Paul knocks on the door of a house. A woman opens it. The decent looking young man says: "Anne sent me because some guests dropped by, and she was wondering if you could help her out with some eggs." The screen turns black and the closing credits begin to roll. Whereas the film has ended, the 'funny games' haven't.

The peculiar thing, however, is that the film *does* provide the viewer with a righteous ending. About twenty minutes before the film ends in the way I have described above, Ann grabs a gun and shoots Peter. Paul starts panicking, there's chaos all over, and for a moment the situation is in favour of the victims. At this point they can free themselves and take revenge on their violators. But then Paul starts screaming and searching; "Where is it?! Where is the fucking remote?" He finds it, pushes a button, and the whole scene rewinds up to a moment before Ann has laid hands on the rifle. Now, the scene is repeated all over again, but this time Paul sees Ann's attempt to seize the weapon, and he prevents her from using it. From this point on, the 'game' takes a bad turn for the Farbers, while Peter and Paul live and get the chance to ask another family for eggs.

The righteous ending that is shown before the actual end of the film invites the viewer to feel soothed because justice seems to have been served. This sense of relief is dashed, however, as Ann's successful defence against her perpetrators is quickly rectified by Paul's rewinding of the scene. Again, the viewer is lured into a cul-de-sac. Peter's death promises a righteous ending that could have provided an excuse to watch the violence. But this righteous ending is then undermined in *Funny Games* even before the conclusion of the film has completely unfolded.

Paul's manoeuvre with the remote control is rather confusing. His turning back time in order to prevent Peter's death, indicates his ability to intervene in the film's fabula. This raises questions about Paul's status as a protagonist. Not only does he determine the rules of the violent games,

he now also seems to have authority over their entire evolution and results. More importantly, his intervention in the course of events also exposes the artificiality of the film, which points to another strategy by which *Funny Games* forces the viewer into an insecure position.

It's Only a Movie

Although the rewinding scene deprives the viewer of a comforting righteous ending, it does provide the viewer with a new excuse to watch Haneke's violent film. As I mentioned above, Paul's manoeuvre exposes the artificial character of the film. Subsequently, the spectator is provided with the excuse that 'it's only a movie'. The represented violence can be considered less grave because it is not 'real'. However, after taking a closer look at *Funny Games,* this comforting idea turns out to be untenable.

Funny Games cannot be considered 'just a movie' because the film both exposes *and* denies its own fictionality. On the one hand, devices are used which counter the idea that the film forms an accurate, transparent representation of reality. One of these devices is the previously noted rewinding of time. Another one is the perpetrators' awareness of the fact that they are acting in a film. For instance, Paul's presupposition that a spectator is watching their performances—a viewer who moreover wants a 'real ending' with plausible plot development—indicates that he takes cinematic terms and conventions into account. The previously discussed interpellation of the viewer also breaks the 'realistic spell' of the film, because it points out that the film doesn't represent a contained, separate reality in its own right. Instead, the represented events are related to the present moment and space in which the viewer resides. This relation would only be probable and realistic if the film would present us with a 'real time' representation of events, which would suggest the torturing of the Farber family was happening right now, but in another place. This is not the case, however, because the film's fabula of about twelve hours is represented in ninety minutes.

On the other hand, the film makes use of devices that *do* suggest it is a realistic representation. It is mainly aspects of the film's style which imply that the film is non-fictional. The mise-en-scène is simple and sober, and the colors and the lightning are inconspicuous. What is more, there is no extra-diegetic music that accompanies the story, and the montage is limited to a minimum. In short, these aspects draw as little attention to themselves (and consequently to the artificiality of the film) as possible, which results in a documentary-like appearance. The often large elapses of time between cuts produce an especially realistic effect. In these long takes, nothing much happens. For example, Ann and Georgy are filmed from the same static angle for ten minutes, while they are sitting motionless on the floor of their living room. Similarly, when George tries to blow-dry their wet and ruined phone, he is filmed in close-up for three minutes. It is through such slow, static scenes that *Funny Games* differs from conventional fictional action films. The film's sober representation of uneventful situations rather resembles a documentary mode of filmmaking.

The combination of artificial interventions and documentary characteristics produces doubt. On the one hand, the spectator is shown that *Funny Games* is 'only' an artificially produced movie. On the other hand, the spectator is presented with realistic characteristics which contradict the idea that the film is a fictional construct. The doubt that is consequently produced on the status of the film as a representation of either fictional or real events undermines the comforting idea that all violence shown in *Funny Games* is fictional.

The distinction between fiction and reality is put under further scrutiny by a conversation between Peter and Paul. In this conversation the two perpetrators discuss a science fiction film Peter has seen. Peter explains how the protagonist of this film is trapped in a fictional world, upon which Peter says: "But isn't fiction real?" When Peter asks why that is the case, Paul answers: "Well, you see it in the movie, right? Then it is as real as reality." The discussion indicates that both perpetrators are preoccupied with the distinction between fiction and reality, but that they have problems with making this distinction as well.

The difficulties Peter and Paul have with telling fiction and reality apart can be considered the cause of their violent behaviour. Considering the fact that violence is often presented as amusing and entertaining in many contemporary action films, together with the fact that the difference between films and reality is unclear to Peter and Paul, it is possible to conclude that the two perpetrators may have taken over the violent behaviour shown in films without even pondering the distinction that *should* be made between these films and reality. The perpetrators no longer notice that violence isn't funny in reality.

On the other hand, it is questionable whether the world shown in Haneke's film should be understood as reality. Are Peter and Paul themselves part of a fictional world or should their acts be understood as real? Their awareness of being in a film, which I mentioned earlier, can perhaps be considered apart from the fact that they actually *are* represented in a film. Peter and Paul are generally convinced of the fact that reality is like a film and vice versa.

This leaves the spectator with the question: what do you think? Where can and should the line be drawn between representation and reality? Can you still make a distinction between them? What is the difference between realistic and fictional representations? And does it matter if the violence that you are watching is real or staged? The film provides no easy answers to these difficult questions, but rather imposes the inconvenient task of answering them upon the spectator.

Don't Laugh, Don't Look

The three most obvious possibilities that could provide the viewer with an excuse to watch the perpetrator's violent games are undermined in Haneke's film. Identification with the victims, a righteous ending, and the fictional nature of the film all turn out to be ambiguous solutions at best. The viewer is involuntarily placed (and kept) in the position of an ironic, amused voyeur of violence. This can only lead to feelings of repulsion and resistance. Since the suffering of the victims isn't presented in a laconic style, but in an utterly sober manner instead, it is impossible to consider the violence amusing in any way. The idea that the violence is shown to satisfy the viewer makes it all the more abject and horrifying to view the film, and is likely to induce strong feelings of shame for watching. Precisely by producing these negative feelings in the spectator, *Funny Games* has a strong pedagogical effect. It corrects the contemporary inclination to watch representations of violence with an ironic, laconic, and amused attitude by making the viewer feel ashamed for and complicit in the suffering of the family on screen.[9]

In fact, the film raises the wider issue of whether watching violence is acceptable *at all*. For in order to escape from the involuntary position of an amused, ironic accomplice to the depicted violence, the viewer of *Funny Games* has to find another reason for watching Peter and Paul's violent games. And that is precisely the poignant question the film imposes on its viewer: why do you watch this violence? Why *would* you watch violence, pain and suffering? The film provides no easy answers to these questions but one: there is no excuse to watch this, so don't. The violation of others is not funny. It is not to be enjoyed. So despise your impulse to watch pain and suffering and look away. Perhaps all those viewers who actually left the cinema during the film's screenings just 'got the point' before the movie ended.

To conclude, *Funny Games* seems to succeed in fulfilling one of the director's aims. As Haneke once expressed, he wished to "give back to violence that which it is: pain, a violation of others" (qtd in Sharret). I would add to this that *Funny Games* also takes something away from violence: the humor and laughter with which it has become so strongly intertwined in cinema over the last couple of decades.

END NOTES

1. The German spoken *Funny Games* (1997) and its English remake (2008) are nearly identical. I will focus on the English version (also titled *Funny Games U.S.*) in this paper.

2. *Funny Games* was described by critics as "perverse," "scandalous," and "a lascivious celebration of violence." Moreover, viewing the film proved to be unbearable to many spectators, with lots of abandoned cinema seats as a result.

3. Although the relation between humor and suffering can best be explained by relief theory, two other major theories of humor can shed some light on funny representations of violence and suffering as well. The so-called incongruity theory holds that people laugh at what surprises them (Berger 1976, McGhee 1979). Differences from the norm or violations of accepted patterns provoke humor in the mind of the perceiver. From this perspective, jokes on suffering and violence are humorous because they deviate from the norm that suffering is a grave matter. Regardless of their content, jokes on violence produce laughter by breaking the moral law that the suffering of others is to be approached with a serious, lamenting attitude. The superiority theory, in addition, notes that people laugh at others because they feel superior to them (Feinberg 1978, Gruner 1997). Adherents of the superiority theory argue that humor results from seeing oneself as right and triumphant in contrast with the target of a joke, who is seen as inferior, wrong, or defeated (Meyer 2000). Following superiority theory, laughing over the suffering of others expresses a negative stance towards the violated victims; it posits them as wrong, inferior beings (and therefore as rightful victims). The perspectives which the incongruity and superiority theories offer on the relation between violence and humor are not incompatible with relief theory, though. Both the above mentioned deviations from the norm of 'seriousness', as well as the ventilation of feelings of superiority over victims can relieve the viewer of violence from the conventional compassionate stance towards suffering others. For more elaborate overviews of the three major theories of humor, see Meyer (2000) and Martin (2010).

4. Following Hutcheon, I understand the trope of irony as a relation between the "said" and the "unsaid" in which the "unsaid" challenges the "said."

5. Following Willis, I would say that Tarantino's films present an indifferent stance towards violence as *cool,* in order to identify with the black American culture. According to the filmmaker himself, black people are the only ones in America that do not take violence in films serious. It is this attitude towards violence that Tarantino admires and imitates in his films. This doesn't mean that (the irony in) his work has a desirable political or critical effect, though. As Willis argues, Tarantino's films acknowledge (and enter into) ongoing conversations between the dominant white culture and the African American culture, but in the end "Tarantino's ahistorical reading of these conversations in deeply fetishistic" (216).

6. This desire to disidentify with the perpetrators' vile behaviour *because* it is acted out with an ironic attitude towards it, forms an interesting deviation from some theoretical ideas on irony by Slavoj Zizek (1997). According to Zizek, disidentification can most effectively be produced by a too literal, exaggerated form of overidentification. For instance, a naïve and exaggerated imitation of certain conventions will cause the desire to safely disidentify with these conventions in its audience, because the critical intention of such over-identification is awkwardly inscrutable. Irony, on the other hand, isn't capable of producing such disidentification in Zizek's eyes, because when it is used to create a critical distance from its target it usually produces indifference. Irony can function as an excuse to *behave* in the verbally criticized manner anyway, thus Zizek. Opposed to Zizek's theory, *Funny Games* proves that irony can produce disidentification. That is, when irony is used without a clear, critical intention of producing distance from its target, but is overtly used as an excuse to do something horrible instead.

7. Meyer argues that two of the main rhetorical functions of humor are unification and division. By making a joke, a rhetor can unify his audience and get them on his side. At the same time, jokes often differentiate the 'laughing ones' from the target(s) of the joke. As Meyer explains, "politicians especially find humor a useful tool for uniting their audience behind them and dividing them from the opposition" (311). Although the vicious protagonists of *Funny Games* explain that their 'funny' games do not have a serious cause nor serve any purposeful goal, Peter and Paul do show awareness of the above mentioned rhetorical functions of humor. They know that their jokes create a division between the ones who do not find their jokes funny (most importantly the suffering targets of their games) on the one hand, and the laughing onlookers on the other hand. This division may not serve the perpetrators' political or ideological convictions (which they do not have), yet it does sustain their notion of violence as a game with competing opponents. Within this game, the viewer is presupposed to side with Peter and Paul in finding their violent acts funny and amusing. As I will explain later on, Peter and Paul suggest that even the viewer's empathy with the victims does not preclude the fact that he or she is feeling entertained by perpetrators' violent jokes and tricks, as these feeling of empathy are considered to be an amusing part of the game.

8. This is also suggested by Peter and Paul themselves. For instance, Peter tells George that he is sorry about having his broken kneecaps, but that it is really George's own fault. George shouldn't have let Peter beg for eggs, but instead he should have just given them without being so rude and uncooperative. "The pointless begging… was really uncomfortable for me. Degrading, actually," says Peter.

9. It is telling in this regard that the original German version of *Funny Games* was remade as an American movie. Whereas the German version mostly reached a European art-house audience, the U.S. copy was marketed as a mainstream fiction film and played in regular theaters all over the world. This way, the film expanded its scope of re-education from a small elite group of filmgoers to the mass audience of mainstream cinema. Besides the quantitative increase of viewers, it can be argued that the U.S version could aim precisely at those viewers who needed its lessons the most: the desensitized spectators of violent blockbusters and lighthearted mainstream horror comedies.

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