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VIOLENCE HATES GAMES?

Revolting (Against) Violence in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games U.S.*

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> *The question is not: "What am I allowed to show?" but rather: "What chance do I give the viewer to recognize what it is I am showing?" The question–limited to the topic of VIOLENCE–is not: "How do I show violence?" but rather: "How do I show the viewer his [or her] own position vis-à-vis violence and its portrayal?"*
> *Haneke, "Violence and the Media" 579.*

EXCESSIVE IMAGES

Among the various norms that contemporary mainstream cinema has been eagerly transgressing, the limits of violence–either justified or not–happen to be challenged more intensely than ever before. Perhaps no other artistic medium has managed to deploy so profoundly the dogma which psychoanalysis stubbornly refers to: a subject's pursuit of excessive and Thanatic pleasure we know as *jouissance*. Yet, mainstream cinema rarely conspires with desires or the real and its traumatic experiences of emptiness; Hollywood, as a construct, cautiously trudges across the realms of fantasies instead. If violence is eagerly cherished and exercised there, then it is mostly because the films themselves refrain from inflicting violence on spectators, preserving their bloodthirsty images in impermeable bubbles. Spectacles of violence proliferate insofar as they are kept at a safe distance, which makes it possible to turn them into the harmless conditions for retributive *catharses* and the soothing moments when brutality

is overcome altogether. As constituents of more complex fantasies, representations of violence satisfy the compensatory needs of the spectators, construct their either collective or individual identities, and contribute to the middle-class myths demanded in the "risk society" (be it those of modern super heroes, self-made men, or survivors). At the same time, these bloodthirsty fantasies put scholars in a suspicious position; as Patricia Pisters notes, critics way too often tend to either perceive such tropes as mere aesthetical devices or lock them up within a moral framework, eschewing any considerations concerning their form (Pisters 80).[1] Neither moral nor aesthetic reductionism provides an insight into the intricacies of violence with regard to its political, social, artistic, or affective circulation.

A remake of Michael Haneke's seminal film, *Funny Games U.S.* seems to resist such a clear-cut binary and criticizes immensely the mainstream representations of violence. For Haneke, as he states briefly in a short essay devoted to the brutality depicted onscreen, cinematic violence can be divided into three predominant categories. First, be it in horror, science fiction, or Westerns, it functions in separation from the experiences of the spectator. Such a suspension of disbelief makes it possible for him or her to identify with the protagonists and yet reside at a safe distance. Second, in films concerned with terrorism, crime, or war—that is, issues far more realistic and palpable for the spectator—violence turns into a "liberating and positive" event providing one with a solution to the particular impasse. In this respect, violence might become an exaggerated allegorization of mundane struggles or a re-familiarization of an exceptional danger, which in either case meets a comforting closure at the end of the film. The last one, inherent in the postmodern cinema, incorporates violence into satire or as a joke (Haneke, "Violence and the Media" 576–577). What should be noticed is the fact that this incorporation of mockery in violence hardly suspends the latter; although the inherent displacement of postmodern cinema might result in ingenious strategies capable of deconstructing the ways

1. Importantly enough, Pisters as a Deleuzian scholar follows an entirely different path and perspective in her text.

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in which cinematic images thrive on brutality, it also contributes immensely to these representations.

This article aims at reading Haneke's *Funny Games U.S.* as a protest against the violence employed in the mainstream cinema. As I will argue, by confronting its spectators with unbearable cruelty devoid of closing catharsis, *Funny Games U.S.* challenges the clichés Haneke enumerates in his essay. At the same time, it resorts to affective violence against the spectators, exposing them to defamiliarized images of brutality and unmasking their bloodthirsty desire for retaliation. In other words, they become the very reason for the violence on screen. Following, among others, Jean-Luc Nancy and Henry A. Giroux, I would like to demonstrate how Haneke exhausts the norm of acceptable violence to reinstate such a limit anew.

DEPRAVING PLEASURE

Funny Games U.S. is a remake of an Austrian thriller of the same name, which this time manages to overcome the inevitable flaw of the original picture that has distanced the object of Haneke's criticism—that is, the American(ized) mainstream cinema—from the form of the film: the barrier of language and the actors' recognition. The beginning of *Funny Games U.S.* connotes a well-known structure of a worn-out and conventional thriller targeted at a white, middle-class, and heterosexual spectator (perhaps an instance of the masculine gaze). A happy couple, George and Ann Farber, are riding out of town with their little son, Georgie, to spend a relaxing weekend by the lake. Suddenly, the idyllic image of jokes and guessing games is interrupted with the cacophonic saxophone of John Zorn and the harsh growls of *Naked City*. After their arrival, the family recognizes that something really disturbing is happening to their friends, accompanied by two strangers, who, dressed in white, conjure up the image of the gang members in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. When the Farbers return to the house they have rented to make themselves comfortable, both men—having introduced themselves as Peter and Paul—visit them in order to, as they claim, borrow some eggs. Unfortunately, the unexpected visitors become more and more intrusive with every single minute: they break the eggs and implore the Farbers to give

them another two, they play with George's expensive golf clubs without his permission, and they drown the telephone in a sink full of water. Furious, Ann orders her husband to kick Peter and Paul out of their house. Having achieved nothing and facing only mockery and laughter instead, George slaps Paul in the face. This gesture commences the spiral of violence which will last until the end of *Funny Games U.S.*; Paul grabs a golf club and breaks George's leg with it, forcing the Farbers to accept a gruesome bet– they have to survive until the next morning. From this moment on, Haneke's work imposes on its spectators excessive images of torture, mutilation, injury, and eventually murder.

By no means is Haneke interested in moving or transgressing the acceptable norms of visual representations of cruelty. Indeed, the way his protagonists contribute to the excessive images of violence poses the question of what can be shown on screen and unmasks the arbitrariness of this division. Still, as he admits himself, these are secondary issues; rather, Haneke aims at uncovering the spectators' position towards the brutal spectacle of *Funny Games U.S.* (Haneke, "Violence and the Media" 578–579). The reason for that stems from the strive for such an aesthetic of violence that resists being subsumed under any of the voyeuristic categories he diagnoses in contemporary cinema, be it identification, liberation, or postmodernist mockery. With regard to Zygmunt Bauman's idea of fatigue with violence, Henry A. Giroux argues that

> [h]yper-violence and spectacular representations of cruelty disrupt and block our ability to respond politically and ethically to the violence as it is actually happening on the ground. In this instance, unfamiliar violence such as extreme images of torture and death becomes banally familiar, while familiar violence that occurs daily is barely recognized, becoming if not boring then relegated to the realm of the unnoticed and unnoticeable. (Giroux 39)

Such a transition is founded on what Giroux calls the "depravity of aesthetics" (Giroux 31), which intertwines the proliferation of violence and its obscene representations with the biopolitical apparatus of "collective pleasure" and "instant gratification." Although it is not my intention to examine whether Giroux's argument is tenable or not when it comes to the political aspirations

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it eventually states, the depravity of aesthetics—understood as a practice of looking—neatly corresponds to Haneke's strategy. The mode of reception theorized by Giroux situates the spectator in the bubble, where his or her unreachable position makes it possible to join the excess of violence with transgressive pleasure, *jouissance* as Jacques Lacan would have it.[2] Since the aesthetics of violence and its norms constantly expand, absorbing and accumulating more and more obscene representations, violence has to be overloaded in a different manner. It has to be defamiliarized in such a way that contributes equally to the recognition and unfamiliarity of brutality and, at the same time, does not locate it as something inaccessible or abstract. As I will demonstrate further on, Haneke attempts to include the spectator in his film, assuming that his or her participation in the spectacle blurs the boundaries of the familiar and the unfamiliar. When the spectator turns out to be incapable of situating himself or herself at a safe distance, indifference can hardly be upheld, whereas the voyeuristic transformation of violence into pleasure is blocked. Haneke still operates within the framework of responding to sadistic impulses; however, instead of gratifying them, he uncovers the bloodthirsty agenda lurking behind.

SUSPENDING VIOLENCE

In *Funny Games U.S.*, the scenes of cruel torture and ruthless killings are entangled in the ongoing masquerade, during which swapping roles, theatrical gestures, and temporary identities destabilize the seemingly fixed positions of the perpetrators and their victims, and tamper with the motivations behind the carnage. Whereas the Farbers seem to fit in the convention of a popular thriller, Peter and Paul do not belong there. They are dressed in plain white clothes, more suitable for members of a pantomime

2. Todd McGowan claims that *jouissance* "marks a disturbance in the ordinary symbolic functioning of the subject, and the subject inevitably suffers its enjoyment. One cannot simply integrate one's enjoyment into the other aspects of one's daily life because it always results from the injection of a foreign element—the real—into this life. [...] The subject cannot simply have its enjoyment; it is more correct to say that this enjoyment has the subject" (McGowan 10–11).

group than a couple of psychopathic murderers, and wear white gloves. As their appearances are highly depersonalized, and even the props themselves enable them not to leave any fingerprints at the crime scene, it is emphasized that both men are deprived of any fixed identity. Peter and Paul juggle with different stories about themselves, constantly undermining or denying things they have said before, and they turn most conversations into mockery. Furthermore, even their names—or nicknames—are not permanent; both men regularly change the way they call themselves, for instance, Tom and Jerry or Beavis and Butthead. If we bear that in mind, the choice of murder weapons—golf club, knife, and shotgun—surprises us even less. These props, just as the aforementioned nicknames, point to the emblematic cartoons that present irrational violence deprived of consequences. Therefore, if Haneke pinpoints the identities of Peter and Paul, then it is the identity of the American(ized) film industry with its insatiable hunger for violence that contributes to the state Giroux recognizes. This last remark might prove why Haneke decided to remake *Funny Games* in the first place. *Funny Games U.S.* does not provide any ground-breaking elements in comparison to its predecessor; quite the contrary, it purposefully uses the very same locations and props (Monk 426–427). The difference lies in employing well-known actors, whose status does not grant them any form of immunity to cruelty and painful death, and using English—that is, the language of the mainstream violence—in order to narrow the distance between Haneke's critical toolbox and the object of his criticism.

Temporary identities are accompanied by the inversion of hierarchies and orders organizing the brutal realm of *Funny Games U.S.* As has been hinted at above, canonical thrillers or slasher films would most probably end with a closing catharsis, marking the reunion of the victims and the punishment of the perpetrators. Such a resolution would provide us with *sui generis* working through particular higher values. In other words, such violence would belong to Haneke's second category, being the "positive or liberating" one. In *Funny Games U.S.*, not only do the Farbers lose their bet and are murdered by Peter and Paul, but also Paul is invited to a new house to start the spectacle of violence once

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again. Moreover, these genre-oriented inversions—if not the ethical ones—coexist with the blurred distinctions into victims and perpetrators. On a superficial level, this relation is straightforward, as it is organized by the gruesome bet and the asymmetry it entails; however, the deeper level of this film is furnished with interpretative twists. Although Peter and Paul kill the Farbers' dog before they are confronted by the furious family, George and Ann are unaware of this fact; hence, despite the fact that both men in white are intrusive, it is George who resorts to physical violence first, when he slaps one of them in his face. Further on, Peter and Paul agree that they equally suffer from the situations they are in as the Farbers do. Deprived of motivations, the perpetrators claim that there is neither an inspiration nor a cause behind their actions; instead, their deeds stem directly from boredom and an existence devoid of any sense.

Even though Peter and Paul's denials might be read as yet another eponymous game, the inclusion of the spectator in the film might suggest otherwise, exposing to what extent both men remain highly determined characters. *Funny Games U.S.* cherishes breaking the fourth wall, since both men tend to recognize the presence of the spectator: they blink, emphasizing the arbitrariness of the whole spectacle of cruelty, they ask him or her about the expected result of the bet, finally, they accuse the spectator of supporting the other side—the family. As Roy Grundmann suggests, the manner in which both realities interweave does not necessarily pose the spectator as a witness or a participant of the carnage, but rather incorporates him or her as the cause of violence (Grundmann 28). Paul reminds us of it when he stares at the camera and ominously asks whether he should disclose the real ending of this film. This is the first time when his face covers the screen entirely. Consequently, it becomes a mirror in which the faces of the spectator and the perpetrator meet, breaking the safe distance and appropriating the outside into the expanding space of the film. Haneke's space of suffering is the realm in which the perpetrators turn out to be determined, as they merely respond to the most hidden Thanatic fantasies of the bloodthirsty audience; Peter and Paul reflect themselves as the vicious *alter egos* of the spectators in the space of depraved

aesthetics. The same aesthetic gesture is repeated in the final scene of *Funny Games U.S.*; this time, covering the screen once again, Paul presents his terrifying manifesto: "You will be next." Yet, is it indeed Paul speaking, threatening the spectator who now must confront the fact that representations of violence transgress its visual content and affectively transform the audience—just as Giroux has it? Or, perhaps, is this the hidden voice of the spectator—reflected in Paul's face—who identifies the objects of his or her bloodthirsty desires anew? Those people—although not known yet—might already be the addressees of wrath and blind retaliation, of boredom or hollow existence. Or, does it really matter at all whether this charge of the death drive leaves the screened reality or not, if we bear in mind its affective potential?

VIOLENCE HATES GAMES?

Funny Games U.S. is predominantly about playing; still, the eponymous games do not boil down exclusively to bets, counting rhymes, or guessing games, which Peter and Paul force the Farbers to accept and take part in. Turning violence into a ruthless game in which the perpetrators play with their victims, as the film medium suspends responsibility, also does not exhaust the title of Haneke's work. If we bear in mind that *spielen* in German encompasses a broader range of meanings than a game, we can assume that *Funny Games U.S.* is about a playing a different sort of game: namely, acting (Peucker 136–137). It is the idea of acting, sewing together both realities of *Funny Games U.S.*, that entails the arbitrariness of defamiliarizing violence onscreen and disallowing one to naturalize it. Since 'games' are so well-furnished in meanings and references, Haneke's film interestingly corresponds to Jean-Luc Nancy's reading of violence and visuality, in which the philosopher claims that "Violence does not play the game of forces. It does not play at all. Violence hates games, all games; it hates the intervals, the articulations, the tempo, the rules governed by nothing but the pure relations among themselves" (17). As Nancy argues, violence yearns for being shown, or for showing off; it demands to be—monstrously—demonstrated and turned into its own image, since any other relations—or rules—are already exhausted. Either without the image or because of it, violence turns into "a sign

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of its own rage" (16), or "[a] pure, dense, stupid, impenetrable intensity" (17). By no means does it imply that violence avoids partaking in any social constructions or cultural spectacles aiming to institutionalize it; quite the opposite, the symbolic inclusion and regulation of violence—in arts, sports, or state control, to name a few instances—proves its empty form that demands to be shown, made present, and represented. These instances turn out to be discursive sites that re-negotiate the spectrum of violence with the faint recognition that violence, being after all a transgressive event, neither is interested in establishing limits nor respects them. As the authoritarian and totalitarian states demonstrate it most explicitly, violence has to be shown: it "always completes itself in an image" (Nancy 20). Nancy continues: "If no image can exist without tearing apart a closed intimacy or a non-disclosed immanence, and if no image can exist without plunging into a blind depth—without world or subject—then it must also be admitted that not only violence but the extreme violence of cruelty hovers at the edge of the image, of all images" (24). The congruence violence bears with image, or image with violence, allows us to think of Haneke's picture differently. Precisely, perhaps one should set aside the violent representations onscreen to focus on the affective violence that *Funny Games U.S.* inflicts on the spectator. After all, violence is but a destructive event. Since the representations of cruelty do not exhaust relations as they are incorporated into a greater machinery of identification and compensation, then the violence they present is suspended. The desperate protest against its ubiquity and boredom has to be therefore spurred by employing the intensities of the image that shatter relations, disturb one's boundaries, and set limits of perception anew. Let us consider two instances of such violence.

One of the means Haneke uses in order to puncture the stable boundaries of the spectator is to entangle him or her in the play of noise and silence. Encouraged by his parents, Georgie manages to flee and hides in a nearby house. His escape cannot be left unnoticed, and one of the perpetrators decides to pursue him. Convinced that he has found the boy, he inserts the *Naked City* record in a hi-fi set, playing the opening track of *Funny Games U.S*. The scene holds spectators in uncertainty for a few

more seconds and then ends. Although the harsh soundtrack and the tension it creates might suggest otherwise, young Georgie is spared and brought back to his parents the very moment one is convinced of his imminent death. He will be killed in the least expected moment, when the sudden gunshot tears the calmness of another scene, a filler of sort, focused on Peter looking into a fridge for something to eat. These two scenes are employed to deconstruct the expectations of the spectator, surprising him or her for the first time with mercy when both the film reaches its arguable climax and death is most plausible, and for the second time—with a murder that occurs unexpectedly. Cruelty takes place in silence. After her son is killed, Ann turns off the bloodstained TV set and begins to mourn. In the realm of TV entertainment, brutal scenes of death lack their counterpart in grief that, just like suffering, occurs in silence. *Naked City* with its harshness of vocals and shrieks of the saxophone provocatively signals those excessive moments which are unbearable in the realm of the brutalized film industry: a quiet lack of violence. Conversely, it is silence that disturbs the boundaries of the spectator and transforms itself into a powerful affective means.

Haneke's *Funny Games U.S.* not only reveals the bloodthirsty expectations of the spectators, but also deconstructs their yearn for retaliation, unmasking the arbitrariness behind this impulse. After her child is murdered, Ann is desperate for either survival or revenge; she manages to grab a shotgun and fatally wounds Peter. Panicked, Paul picks up the remote control, rewinds the scene before Ann came into possession of the weapon, and prevents her from doing so. Therefore, the spectacle manifests itself as determined and well-planned; when a happy ending is no longer a possibility, what remains at stake is only the time in which the scenes of the fixed sequence will take place. As Leland Monk suggests, one might be tempted to wonder why Ann does not pick up the remote control herself and rewind the film to the much safer circumstances; this is, however, pointless (Monk 425). For rewinding is incapable of going beyond the opening scene in which the Farbers are already on the move and are bound to meet Peter and Paul, the only way to save them is to kill the perpetrators when they are unarmed at the beginning of the film (Monk 425–426). Simulta-

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neously, such a hypothetical re-position—motivated by empathy towards the victims—would contribute to the justified and positive violence of the second category; yet, in light of such a dramatic rewinding of the film, victims are not yet victims, whereas Peter and Paul's brutality is yet to come. Monk's observation proves that the fatal position of the characters depends predominantly on the inevitability of violence; the spectator might be tempted to support retaliation at any cost which, in an extreme case, might turn the Farbers into the perpetrators within an atemporal projection when there is nobody to be avenged. At best, the scene with the remote control evokes sympathy and regret that Ann has not managed to kill the murderers of her son. In either case, the plot of *Funny Games U.S.* demonstrates that supporting the Farbers is hardly separable from, a more or less conscious, yearning for committing violence against Peter and Paul.

Delving into the congruence of violence and image suggested by Nancy, these two scenes put forward not only the *images of violence*, but also the *images as violence*, bringing Haneke's *Funny Games U.S.* closely to the *cinema of intersection*, theorized by Todd McGowan. McGowan claims that

> the deeper problem with Hollywood's fantasies lies in their failure to envision the impossible as such. Hollywood remains in the domain of the possible, even when it colors this domain with the image of impossibility. Hollywood's escapist films, for the most part, belong to the cinema of integration rather than the cinema of intersection because they transform the impossible object into an ordinary object. Cinema truly realizes its radical potential when it treats the ordinary object as an impossible one. (McGowan 165)

If we revise the brutal representations of the mainstream cinema Haneke criticizes, we should note that they belong to the cinema of incorporation as well; in each of the three instances of cinematic violence he mentions, excessive brutality is eventually reduced to an element that does not break the integrity of the subject but fulfills a particular fantasy instead: violence is kept at a distance, prevented from taking place, stopped from spreading, or suspended by mockery. The significance of *Funny Games U.S*, however, does not lie entirely in its critique of how the mainstream cinema deploys its strategies of violence, but also in the way Haneke's film inflicts

violence on the spectator, reaching this elusive element that resists being absorbed in a fantasy. For McGowan, the gaze inherent in the cinema of intersection is a means of political activism that engenders the liberation of a subject. This sense of freedom is understood entirely in psychoanalytical terms, nonetheless; it marks the traumatic event that breaks the confines of ideology in favor of reaching the emptiness of the object of one's desire. McGowan adds:

> Through enacting a traumatic encounter with the gaze, this cinema shows us that we can do the impossible. At the moment we encounter the gaze, we see the field of representation thrown into relief and redefined. Everything outside of the gaze loses its former significance in light of this encounter. Through this cinematic experience, we can glimpse the impossible. We see the filmic world from the perspective of the gaze rather than seeing the gaze from the perspective of the filmic world (as occurs in the cinema of integration). After this encounter, the normal functioning of the world cannot continue in the same way and undergoes a radical transformation. Though we can accomplish the impossible, we can't do so without simultaneously destroying the very ground beneath our feet. (McGowan 177)

McGowan's observation reveals the psychoanalytic potential of Haneke's *Funny Games U.S.*; its play with convention, expectations, the roles of victims and perpetrators, or the safety of the film screen that exposes the elements that hardly belong to its reality and disturb the viewing practices of the spectator. At the same time, these practices detach violence from its social and generic superstructure. Rather, they reframe brutal and bloodthirsty images as an ungraspable intensity that is recurring onscreen over and over again in its imperative to be shown; yet, this loop-form barely leaves the spectator-subject unscathed. Inflicting violence on a spectator, *Funny Games U.S.* allows him or her to experience the real that punctures through the thin veil of Haneke's picture. Precisely, it is the encounter of the spectator with a formless and brute violence manifested in a traumatic element that escapes the completeness of a filmed fantasy and the subject's control.

ABANDONING FRONTIERS

Adopting the spectacle of cruelty and suspending its limits, Michael Haneke's *Funny Games U.S.* manifests a dramatic protest

against the disturbed norms of violence in the contemporary cinema and the growing apathy that intoxicates the spectators, which Henry A. Giroux's depravity of aesthetics and Jean-Luc Nancy's reflections on violence helped us conceptualize. Since cruelty on screen is easily captured in the processes of compensation and identification, as Haneke points out in his categorization of cinematic violence, it is not enough to confront the spectator with excessive violence and its representations. Haneke is forced to find a solution elsewhere; hence, his resistance to the *status quo* is oriented towards the most tragic means, that is, mobilizing the cinematic medium created for the spectators against them. Consequently, by means of structural twists and its play with convention, Haneke construes an affective machine capable of unmasking the bloodthirsty and voyeuristic fantasies that are projected on the film, and the depraved agenda behind them. The critical project *Funny Games U.S.* initiates and finds its affirmative counterpart in the affective violence inflicted on the spectator and breaking his or her safe position outside of the film. Therefore, it punctures the strategies of distance that are already at play. What is affirmed is such violence that is no longer a result of excessive representations, but rather one which stems from these capacities of the medium that resist discursive fancies.

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