



A vicious attack on an innocent public

'Funny Games' offers an especially pure and perverse kind of cinematic sadism, the kind that seeks to stop us from taking pleasure in our own masochism

BY A. O. SCOTT
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



It is customary to describe film directors who keep a tight rein on their audience's responses, who coldly and meticulously manipulate emotion, as sadists. Not necessarily in a bad way; filmmaking is to a large degree an art of control. Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick and Steven Spielberg can all, with some justice, be accused of sadism, a charge that hardly detracts from — indeed, that helps to explain — the way they provide entertainment.

Michael Haneke, an Austrian auteur who has worked for many years in France, has always been more interested in punishing his audience than in entertaining it. His scrupulously constructed, skillfully made films, many of which have won prizes at leading international festivals, are excruciatingly suspenseful and also, more often than not, clammy and repellent.

It is likely that Haneke would take the last two adjectives as praise — it's fine with me if they show up in advertisements — or at least as the acknowledgment of fulfilled intentions. His is an especially pure and perverse kind of cinematic sadism, the kind that seeks to stop us from taking pleasure in our own masochism. We will endure the pain he inflicts for our own good, and feel bad about it in the bargain.

Funny Games, Haneke's first English-language film — and a compulsively faithful replica of his notorious 1997 German-language feature of the same title — subjects its viewers to a long spectacle of wanton and gratuitous brutality. So, of course, do countless other movies, though few of them can claim this one's artistic pedigree or aesthetic prestige. And indeed, the conceit of *Funny Games* is that it offers a harsh, exacting critique of vulgar, violent amusements, a kind of homeopathic treatment for a public numbed and besotted by the casual consumption of images of suffering. That the new version takes place in America is part of the point, since Americans — to a European intellectual this almost goes without saying — are especially deserving of the kind of moral correction Haneke takes it upon himself to mete out.

Our problem is that we think violence is fun. Well, the fun stops here, people. Ann and George (Naomi Watts and Tim Roth) drive out to the country with their young son, Georgie (Devon Gearhart), towing their lovely wooden sailboat behind their Land Rover and listening to opera CDs.

Michael Pitt, below left and top, plays an unwelcome house guest in *Funny Games*, directed by Michael Haneke.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF VS CINEMAS



As they settle into their tasteful, gated vacation home, the family is confronted by two well-spoken young sociopaths, who in the course of the following night torment them with a knife, a gun, a golf club and impeccable prep school manners. These fellows variously address each other as Peter and Paul, Tom and Jerry and Beavis and Butt-Head (Leopold and Loeb would have given the game away), and they are played by Michael Pitt and Brady Corbet.

Pitt, blue-eyed and baby-faced, appears to be the calm, ironical alpha predator, while Corbet, acting skittish and high-strung, looks like the weaker, crazier one. But that might just be part of the game they and Haneke are playing, since the whole point of Peter and Paul is that they function without identifiable motive or affect.

When asked by George — his leg smashed, his hands tied, his eyes wide with terror — “Why are you doing this?” Pitt's character responds with answers that parody the kind of facile backstory usually applied in cases like this: unhappy childhood; sexual instability; class resentment; bad education. All of it is facetious, and none of it explains anything.

In his better movies — I admit to a qualified admiration for *Code Inconnu* (2000), *The Piano Teacher* (2001), *The Time of the Wolf* (2003) and *Cache* (2005) — Haneke uses extremity and shock to illuminate social and psychological realities, or at least possibilities. His ideas are often facile encapsulations of chic conventional wisdom about the terrible consequences of sexual repression, economic privilege or racial hypocrisy, but his formal dexterity gives these films a creepy power nonetheless.

You may try to dismiss what they are saying (which is basically that you, bourgeois cultural prestige-monger that you are, should congratulate yourself for having purchased a dose of Haneke's contempt), but their unsettling effects are not so easy to shake.

To some extent, the same is true of *Funny Games*, which efficiently induces a state of panic and dread, and which features some fine bits of acting, especially from Pitt and Watts. The images Haneke puts on screen (they are shot with crisp, glossy-magazine elegance by Darius Khondji) are shocking, but they don't unfold with the usual slasher-movie jolts of grisliness. The camera frequently stands still as the horror unfolds just beyond its range, and when a bloody event takes place, we are likely to be shown the face of a passive witness rather than that of the perpetrator or the victim.

“Why don't you just kill us and get it over with?” George whimpers. His would-be killer's reply — “What about

entertainment?” — carries beyond the screen, where the voyeuristic masses are implicated in the gruesome spectacle of senseless cruelty. Are we, though? What if the guilt trip never takes off? Or, even worse, what if the American audience, cretins that we are, were to embrace Haneke's vision not for its moral stringency but for the thrill of, say, watching Watts, bound at the ankles and wrists, hop around in her underwear? Who will be implicated then? I started out by calling Haneke a sadist, but it seems to me that he may be too naive, too delicate, to merit that designation, which should be reserved only for the greatest filmmakers.

At least with the remake *Funny Games*, Haneke shows a certain kinship with someone like Eli Roth, whose *Hostel* movies have brought nothing but scorn from responsible critics. (If Haneke wanted to break into the American market, rather than take solace in the ambivalent embrace of the intelligentsia, he should have undertaken not a remake but a sequel.) The *Hostel* pictures and their ilk revel in the pornography of blood and pain, which Haneke addresses with mandarin distaste, even as he feeds the appetite for it.

Like Peter and Paul, who wear immaculate white gloves as they go about their awful business, *Funny Games* tries to insulate itself from its own awfulness in the fine cloth of self-consciousness. On a few occasions Pitt turns to address the audience directly, mocking us for rooting for Ann and George's survival, deriding our desire for neat resolutions. At these moments, using techniques that might have seemed audacious to an undergraduate literary theory class in 1985 or so, the film calls attention to its own artificial status. It actually knows it's a movie! What a clever, tricky game! What fun! What a fraud.

Film Notes

FUNNY GAMES

DIRECTED BY: Michael Haneke

STARRING: Naomi Watts (Ann), Tim Roth (George), Michael Pitt (Paul), Brady Corbet (Peter), Devon Gearhart (Georgie), Boyd Gaines (Fred), Siobhan Fallon Hogan (Betsy), Robert LuPone (Robert)

RUNNING TIME: 112 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY



■ You Don't Mess With the Zohan (特勤沙龍)
NT\$7,897,892



■ Mamma Mia! (媽媽咪呀！)
NT\$4,554,462



■ Cape No. 7 (海角七號)
NT\$3,369,823



■ The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor (神鬼傳奇3)
NT\$2,351,327



■ The Dark Knight (黑暗騎士)
NT\$1,503,782



Don LaFontaine, the voice behind thousands of Hollywood trailers, died on Monday.

PHOTO: AP

Getting Married stars Anne Hathaway as a recovering drug addict who shakes up her sister's wedding with an overdose of honesty about their dysfunctional family.

With the action packed into a wedding weekend at a sprawling family home, the film, which also stars Debra Winger as the sisters' mother, intentionally has the feel of a home video.

“My documentary work really came into play in a big way,” Demme said.

The idea was “to make it feel as much as possible like a home movie ... (with) the implication of truth, (to) enhance the sense of involvement for the viewer,” said Demme, who won an Oscar for *Silence of the Lambs* in 1991.

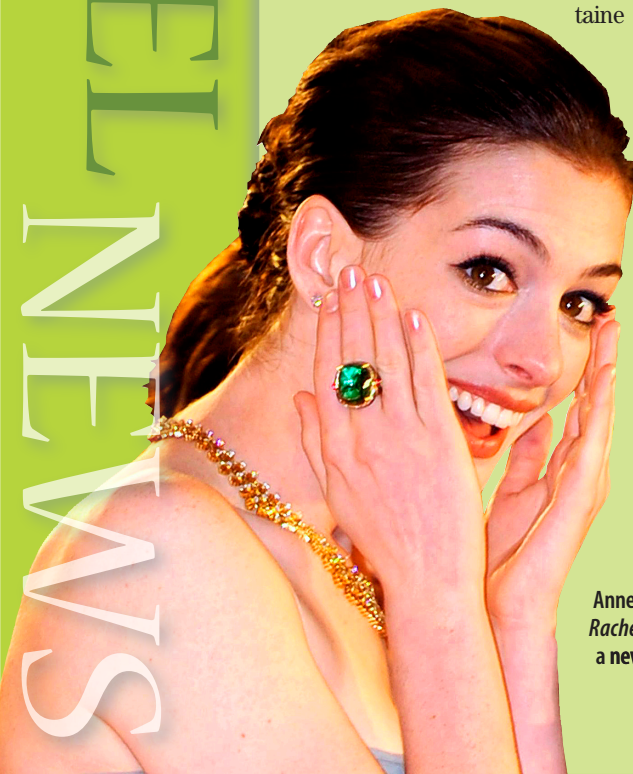
Asked about the multi-cultural aspect of the film — Rachel (Rosemary Dewitt) is white, Sidney (Tunde Adebimpe) is black, and the bride and bridesmaids wear saris — Demme said it reflected “the America that I feel very deeply connected to.”

— AGENCIES

REEL NEWS

Reel News is sad to report the death earlier this week of Don LaFontaine, the man who popularized the now loved-catch phrase, “in a world where ...” and lent his voice to thousands of movie previews. He was 68.

LaFontaine



Anne Hathaway stars in *Rachel Getting Married*, a new film by Jonathan Demme. PHOTO: EPA

died on Monday at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles from complications in the treatment of an ongoing illness, said Vanessa Gilbert, his agent. He made more than 5,000 previews, called trailers, in his 33-year career while working for the top studios and television networks.

In an interview last year, LaFontaine explained the strategy behind the phrase.

“We have to very rapidly establish the world we are transporting them to,” he said of his viewers. “That's very easily done by saying, ‘In a world where ... violence rules ...’ ‘In a world where men are slaves and women are the conquerors ...’ You very rapidly set the scene.” LaFontaine insisted he never cared that no one knew his name or his face, though everyone knew his voice.

LaFontaine went to work in the promo industry in the early 1960s. As an audio engineer, he produced radio spots for movies with producer Floyd Peterson.

When an announcer didn't show up for a recording session in

1965, LaFontaine voiced his first narration, a promo for the film, *Gunfighters of Casa Grande*. The client, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, liked his performance.

LaFontaine remained active until recently, averaging seven to 10 voiceover sessions a day. He worked from a home studio his wife nicknamed “The Hole,” where his fax machine delivered scripts.

The 33rd Toronto International Film Festival opened yesterday, departing from the earnest films of yesteryears about war in Iraq, terrorism and US politics, to promote a bit of laughter.

“Curiously, we've moved away from Iraq and what we've seen in American cinema (of late) is a rediscovery of comedies,” festival director Piers Handling said.

The Toronto film festival had seemed fixated in its last three years on war and US President George W. Bush, showcasing a plethora of documentaries, feature films and shorts on these and related subjects.

It had become a reservoir for a flood of filmmakers disenchanted with American foreign policies.

“We could say we are (still) living in quite difficult times with

Wars and economic problems, but I think filmmakers understand that audiences just need a break sometimes from that,” said festival chief Cameron Bailey.

The festival features a dozen environmental films on “the planet and how we take care of it,” Bailey said, such as the condemnation of Japanese whalers in *At the Edge of the World*, and *Upstream Battle* about Native Americans' struggle for their traditional fishing rights.

It also features nearly 30 comedies, including *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* starring Seth Rogen and Elizabeth Banks, Anne Fontaine's *La Fille de Monaco*,

and the Coen brothers' dark comedy *Burn After Reading*.

Actors Ben Kingsley, George Clooney, Peter O'Toole and more star power than ever before are expected to be on hand, with one exception — Tea Leoni has cancelled appearances to promote her film *Ghost Town* since her husband David Duchovny checked himself into a clinic for sex addicts last week.

In Venice, *Silence of the Lambs* director Jonathan Demme jolted film critics on Wednesday with a stirring new family drama that tightens the race for the festival's Golden Lion prize.

His emotion-packed *Rachel*