A Companion to Michael Haneke

Edited by Roy Grundmann
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How to Do Things with Violences

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But, I said, I once heard a story which I believe, that Leontius the son of Aglaion, on his way up from the Piraeus under the outer side of the northern wall, becoming aware of dead bodies that lay at the place of public execution at the same time felt a desire to see them and a repugnance and aversion, and that for a time he resisted and veiled his head, but overpowered in despite of all by his desire, with wide staring eyes he rushed up to the corpses and cried, There, ye wretches, take your fill of the fine spectacle!

In 1975, when Jean-Louis Baudry returned to Plato’s Republic in order to locate in the founding text of Western metaphysics an anticipation of cinema’s simulation machine, he did not turn to the above moment. Instead, he famously wrote of Book VII’s Allegory of the Cave, the defining idealist parable for the lure of illusions taken for the real. In Baudry’s account — and in the apparatus, ideological, and psychoanalytic film theory that followed in the 1970s and 1980s — image and recorded sound were (in different ways) aligned with the illusory, the fraudulent, the degraded, the removed, the absent. To this day, the Allegory remains a privileged model for articulating cinema’s relationship to the mediation of the real. By contrast, the brief aside quoted above — made in the context of a discussion of reason, affections, the irrational, and the appetitive — offers a very different scenario of vision centered around precisely what is missing in the Allegory: embodiment, ambivalence, passion, and affects such as disgust and horror. The prisoners in Plato’s cave take cast shadows and rebounding echoes for reality itself, and fail to realize the cheat, the lie, the dim dimness of their perceptions. There is an illumination higher than the enabling condition of shadowy representation, and it is only through suffering into that blinding light that one sheds degraded appearance for the nobler cloth of idea and truth. But the case of Leontius offers a reversal of the shadows-taken-for-things model of vision and knowledge — here, vision is irrefutably, unpleasantly immediate, present, insistent. Instead of deceiving or placating, vision speaks of a revolting truth: the desire to gaze upon
the abject sight of the dead. The final line – the affective cry from the depths of the tortured and distended body – is an address to the eyes themselves: There, ye wretches, take your fill. Look. Here. This is this.

Although the event with the corpses lacks the Allegory’s elegant parallels to the dark, static, immobile frontality of cinema, we can nevertheless glimpse in this alternative model another scene of how vision functions, how eyes address the world and are, in turn, addressed by and through it. In place of structure-passivity-illusion-deceit-shadows-echoes-imprisonment, here we have something like event-activity-truth-embodiment-immediacy-ambivalence-affect. If the history of metaphysics is itself a history of other scenes inscribed into it by the logic of substance, permanence, being, and the tyranny of first principles (what Nietzsche angrily called the philosophers’ “hatred of even the idea of becoming”), each necessitating degraded others – then this imagining otherwise of eye-work suggests that a non-metaphysical, supremely immanent model of vision is inscribed within, and pushes against the skin of, resists and stresses the tense edges of, metaphysics. This seeing without enlightenment is marked not by remove or distance but by a horrific overproximity to the tiny horrors of the real (and a reluctant, persistent ecstasy); it is a seeing that is of violence done and is itself violent, is itself doing violence.

Michael Haneke’s Benny’s Video (1992) tensely hovers between these two models of vision in the philosophical mythology of the West. On the one hand, it everywhere suggests a Platonic view of imaging in which there is an outside at a remove from the scene of appearance and shadows, often setting up formal binaries between interiority/exteriority, darkness/light, sound/image – even if only to trouble those binaries and the epistemologies they sustain. At the same time, there is a form of seeing in Benny’s Video that aligns with the Leontius model: a vision that is immediate, insistent, and insistently present, not removed at all; a vision that hurts, that is aligned with violence and that is violent in its phenomenological and ethical dimensions. While Benny’s affectlessness is at a far remove from the passion spoken to the wide staring eyes of Leontius, the images of Benny’s Video (and many of Haneke’s other films) create a counter-narrative to that coldness, one blushing with tortures to the flesh that do not go unseen but that compel the eyes to look on the face of death.

For the moment, I want to risk stating the obvious (to stave off the greater risk of leaving these things unsaid) – Benny’s Video is, above all, about a death (each time a singular death, though there are at least four: the pig’s, the girl’s, Benny’s grandfather’s, which likely took place, and Benny’s grandmother’s, which likely did not); about death as an ungraspable, meta-phenomenological limit and death as a plastic banality; about the murder that produces the cruel central death (a messy murder, a time-consuming, sloppy ending of being); about things that can and must be done with corpses (the post-Psycho problematic); about the family and the nation, and the guilt that binds them; and about video, film, and other proliferating technologies of mediation. More broadly, it is a meditation on the
image, on violence, on the image of violence and the violence of the image, and most broadly it concerns presence and absence, simultaneity and distinctness, and the messy reversibility of cause and effect.

Critical work on Benny's Video has focused on the historical context of postmodernity that seems to account for Benny's wildly complex media environment, saturated with too many horrific images and all the signs of late capitalist visual decadence. The dominant critical theme, despite important differences in the literature, is that there has been a collapse of the mediate and the real, a fall to the recuperative logic of the same. Thus, even when he is not explicitly invoked, the traces of Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum smudge the pages that read Haneke's text. For Baudrillard, one of the most horrific transformations of postmodernity is the exorcizing of the powerful fantasy of the double as a copy distinct from the self, "a perfect duplicate" of one's own being. The transformation of this fantasy into cloning's pure repetition commutes the operation of the double from a subtle interplay involving death and the Other into a bland eternity of the Same" (1993: 114). Baudrillard seems to be the ideal diagnostician of Benny's world: a subject incapable of thinking difference or otherness, and doomed to the pure repetition of equalized images on a homogenizing screen that flattens the news, horror films, home videos, and snuff into each other. This critical impulse to diagnose a logic of the same has informed so much of the work on Benny's Video that it is the rare text that does not invoke some plain about a lost origin and lost differences in its analysis of mediation, the image, the real, and violence.

However, behind theories of media convergence in the age of the spectacle lies the fantasy of endlessly translatable experiences. Is this not the oldest dream of metaphysics, the possibility that within this homogenized mediascape resides a culture predicated on a universal language of all-image-all-the-time? In a sense, Haneke criticism does not diagnose a world in which images and the real are collapsed as much as desire that world, for the flattened logic of the universal screen supports the most comforting of promises: that against this we can position some otherwise originary real. An awkward collusion thus exists between Haneke criticism and the figure of Benny himself, one predicated on respective avowals of metaphysical tropes in the attempt to suggest that that classical model is now obsolete in the modern age of media.

The antinomies of Benny's Video criticism are: (1) Benny is an anti-psychological symptom of familial breakdown and emotional numbing in postmodern late capitalism and Benny is a fully psychologized, Oedipally rebellious child whose guilt over the murder ultimately leads to a redemptive revenge against his parents and a moral/theological salvation; (2) Benny's Video deconstructs the dangers of media violence by deploying sound to affectively shock the viewer back into a recognition of taken-for-granted horrors and Benny's Video perfectly conforms to the seductions of media violence by flattening and flatly repeating its own violent events and is thus identical to the object it critiques; and (3) Benny's Video deploys the modernist language of fragmentation, alienation, and provocation to critique
a postmodern mediascape that treats images as reality and Benny’s Video performs the postmodern collapse of images and reality to suggest that no exteriority or critique is possible from within late surveillance society.

Consider the third antinomy: The initial claim is exemplified by Brigitte Peucker’s argument that Haneke’s films employ modernist techniques (formal rigor and anti-psychological characterizations) to violently move spectators. While the images are often bereft of violence, the assaultive realism of sound “wages war against the inauthenticity of postmodernity” (2007: 131). The coldness of mediation run amok is countered by the warmth of the affective jolts experienced by the sensitive plane of the spectator’s body. Thus, while Peucker argues that “Benny’s Video, the film, revolves around a postmodern consciousness for which representation and reality are nearly indistinguishable” (135), difference and possible critique are engaged on the level of a very real spectatorial working-over. This claim rests on the notion that Benny’s Video is about a world in which representation and reality are increasingly indistinguishable, and violence has to escape representation altogether to make itself directly and assaultively present to the senses via affect. By contrast, the second half of the antinomy is represented by Fatima Naqvi’s discussion of victimization and violence in postmodernity, in which the proliferation of images flattens, compromises, or otherwise indifferently equalizes a now-interchangeable series of encounters with the world. The failure of inter-subjective recognition involves amplifying invisibilities and co-optations because “in the all-encompassing mediatization to which Benny’s Video is part one and Funny Games the sequel – there is such a pervasive sense of non-recognition in a culture of images” (2007: 65).

When Kant grappled with his famous antinomies, his resolution involved critiquing the methodological and metaphysical errors that made both halves of the contradictory claims equally demonstrable. The shared assumptions in the above antinomies are equally metaphorical, searching for a locus of truth in either the figural idea of Benny or the literal psychology of Benny, a sign of the possibility of critique or the failed self-inscription of futile attempts at media deconstruction. I suggest that the critical error (whose identification leads to the possible resolution of these aporias) is the failure to interrogate how key terms in each argument – “image,” “mediation,” “violence” – are treated in Haneke’s film. It is because violence and the image are treated as separable items in criticism (the one, the medium; the other, the object of mediat capture) – and this is nowhere more true than in criticism that suggests a postmodern collapse of the real into the spectacle – that Benny’s Video is viewed as both a diagnostic of a problematic and a preeminent example of that problematic. Contra the view that more images in Benny’s world equals greater homogeneity and a flattening logic of the same, I contend that media proliferation produces ever more distinctness, more difference, and that the violence of form is neither modernist (not a metaphorically violent alienation) nor overpresently real (in the sensorial attacks of horrible sounds) but the violence of the image, multiplied and extended and expanded. In this essay,
I argue that Haneke's effort in the film is to make the image synonymous with violence, and violence synonymous with the image, not as a historical claim about postmodernity but as an ethical claim about representation's potential.

At this point, surely it is expected that the writer will oblige with a plot summary to frame the discussion of the film. You no doubt want to learn all about little Benny and his naughty little films. But I believe that it is an error to read *Benny's Video* from narrative's left to right of forward progress (for it puts linear time in question) or events that take place (for it puts the event in question). For *Benny's Video* is a series of shapes, not events; structures, not subjects. Consider, instead, the two dominant forms of the film, one effecting a logic of space and the other a logic of time. Imagine a darkened rectangle in the aspect ratio of the cinematic screen, almost completely black, so that shape and texture come to presence by even darker lines tracing where matter may be taken up thickly in the room. Behind this room in diegetic space, but squarely in front of the spectator for whom all retreats into perspective present themselves on the same flat screen, there is an entry into another space marked by a blinding, almost washed-out light. Sometimes this structure cashes in the promissory note of offscreen space, leading through the depths into the light — so begins the film as the dark gives way to an overexposed sunlight, captured on grainy video, the light which gives no warmth but bounces instead off the mass of the pig that in the future — but not yet, not yet — will reel back in the throes of a death captured by light but uncaptured in substance on the film within the film. Other times, however, the structure is flattened into its elements in a tableau of negative space and line: The twice-seen, ultimately damning, shot from inside Benny's room at night as his parents worry over the logistics of corpse disposal and reputation management is preceded by Benny's request to keep his door and the living room door open. The result is a frame of almost entirely absent space: a thin vertical slice of light from the door in the upper left third of the image, a short perpendicular streak of light at the bottom edge of the opened door, and only the faintest cast illuminated triangle.

The aesthetic language of the film is entirely based around these vertical light lines and tall thin rectangles of luminosity. Benny's room is a study in upright forms: lined-up videotapes cut the mise-en-scène into hundreds of little black bars, as though the markers of a prisoner's interiority in relation to some exteriority had been refuged, barring bars now folded fully into the room they bind. Tall lockers structure the room alongside the elongated windows covered with shades from which the thinnest thread of light continually makes its tensile edge known. Even at the moment of flattest squareness — the empty frame of Benny's room in which he has just silenced the girl, her corpse the substance of the offscreen space for a frame that speaks violence only through its absence — the video screen's image of lockers descending in height, creating a slant of receding vertical blocks, is a cruel mockery of Renaissance perspective at the moment when the human is no longer the measure of space but the blunt corpse excepted from it.
Things substitute for that sliver of light, and it is importantly neither aligned with transcendence nor privileged as the “real.” The question of the film is whether the perpetually animated television screen, with its blue-cold light, is a substitute for the light at the end of the hallways and rooms that pepper the film—it is identical to those spaces beyond that illumination designates elsewhere, or is it a degraded approximation of that light, set in contrast to the rays of the sun that ever threaten to burst from behind the flat shades that press them out? Peucker reads Haneke’s signature shot as calling attention to “the materiality of the cinematic medium . . . for the light that permits the image enters the ‘dark chamber’ from which it is shot through a partly opened door, which suggests the work of the shutter that admits light into the camera itself” (2007: 137). The repetition of this shot, first at its “original” moment and then as evidence against Benny’s parents, blurs “postmodern and modern velleities.” The modernist investment in the materiality of film is set alongside the indeterminate ontology of those images. To this argument, I would add that this image also evokes a logic of light and darkness that is saturated with the visual language of classical metaphysics. It could be argued that postmodernity precisely allows for the coexistence, and ultimately co-optation, of these various registers of representation, but I resist the notion that these registers are flattened into each other, that they must be victims of the logic of the same.

The cruelest visual sketch of classical metaphysics is the horizontality of lighted sky above the darkened mass of the earth, separated by a line traveling from left to right splitting the elements and hierarchizing the valuation of each realm. (It is no coincidence that the Allegory of the Cave is the tale of ascending movement from the depths of cold, damp, lizard-ridden earth into space-above.) Haneke’s insistent vertical rectangles of light evoke the divided metaphysical world, but, now, quite literally, turned on its side. Instead of the hierarchy of above/below, dark and light are co-present, co-extensive, side by side in difference but not priority. If light is beyond or other, it is not aligned with idealism or supersession; indeed, into that light are the horrors of the earth: where the fat pig will die, where the parents’ cruelty will calmly articulate its reason. A reading that seeks redemption, confession, or salvation in the end of the film might note that in Egypt the world is turned a crucial ninety degrees and on film for the first time is the shocking appearance of the horizon, of set planes of sky, sea, and earth in their proper hierarchized order. This reorientation of the divided world is underlined by shots taken through the bus windows as the travelogue commences, each horizontal rectangle replaced with another as Benny and his mother take their tour of what is now, literally, a different world.

But this spatial reorientation does not promise transcendence or hint at redemption, and that is in part because of a second form that structures and shapes Benny’s Video. If the first dominant form of the film is the antechamber of darkness that shapes the world-on-its-side of perverted metaphysics, the second structure takes the form of the pyramid. Though they are ignored in much criticism, or mentioned
only to describe the narrative bookends, the pyramid schemes in which Benny and his sister attempt to participate are crucial for thinking about temporality and causality in the film as a whole. Any pyramid scheme – including the classic “Airplane Game” version in the film – involves an exchange of money for the exponential enrollment of other members; it definitionally offers neither product nor service. It has, and this is why it is always a scam, no end benefit; it is unsustainable and it is purposeless. The pyramid-scheme structure has often been mentioned in relation to late-stage capitalism in relation to the non-delivery of products and services in the new global market and the inevitable benefit to early entrants at the expense of later entrants. Late capitalism is no doubt the historical context for Benny and his family, but I am not suggesting that this scheme is invoked multiple times in the film merely to suggest themes such as social decay, excess material goods, and the exploitation of workers, for tropes are not the issue in this anti-psychological formalist film. Instead, the pyramid must be taken in its literal dimension: as a shape, as a theory of hierarchization, and as a specific form of troubled temporality.

The pyramid scheme is invoked three times, like all proper betrayals. The second embedded video that the audience encounters after the initial images of the slaughter is amateur footage of Benny’s sister’s pyramid scheme party; later, in the locker room at school, Benny tries to solicit participants in his own scheme; finally, after the return from Egypt, Benny’s sister has a second party, now with parental approval, and the plane gets off the ground. The pyramid scheme structuralizes a hierarchy premised on exploitation in place of transcendence and truth; like the games in Haneke’s Funny Games (1997) wagered with the complicity of cinematic inscription – games the family cannot fail to lose – it ensures the success of the few over the losses of the many. It suggests one thing more regarding causality and temporality: Because there is no end benefit produced by the scheme, income that should properly be the result of a service or product is acquired in advance from recruitment alone. The pyramid’s reversal of profit before product involves an effect that precedes its cause, both an affront to Hume and to narrative cinema’s love of forward temporality. If the possibility of an effect before its cause is anathema to the metaphysician, it is not a problem for the modern physicist who takes for granted backward causation, cyclical time, and their consequence – that the fixity of the past is not guaranteed.

This uncausal logic evokes another in Benny’s Video – that of video technology, in which any and every effect can be made to precede its cause through the wild potentiality of the rewind button. Pecker reads the scene in which Benny rewinds and then replays in slow motion the taped moment of the death of the pig as a desire to control “narrative flow and time... in order half-seriously to interfere with the inevitability of its narrative and to reverse ‘reality’” (2007: 136). I suggest, instead, that it is not simply the case that the manipulation of the incomprehensible image evokes an attempt to interfere with the inevitability of the event, but that in the forward temporality of the meta-film, Benny’s Video, the effect of the
in which Benny temporality and the classic "Airplane" the exponential duct nor service. is unsustainable of products and early entrants at historical context scheme is invoked formal decay, excess not the issue in not be taken in its specific form.

 Bett's betrayals. The initial images and scheme party; parts in his own second party, now pyramid scheme inscrutability and the complicity it ensures the more regarding reproductions by the duct is acquired oft before production and to narrate an effect before for the modern, and their concept of technology, through the wild in which Benny the death of the half-seriously to try" (2007: 136). on of the incommensurability of the event, the effect of the pig's fall in advance of its resurrection in advance of finitude makes the death of the pig into a fundamentally different event. It makes every death of the pig a death in-process of the pig, makes every death a dying. There is no inevitability to the visual narrative, though certainly that is the animating myth of video logics; instead, what the rewind function does is produce an aesthetic of backward causation that undermines the fixity of the past instead of and against securing it. The pig is both alive and dead; alive then dead; dead then alive; and none of those orderings are privileged or, in fact, existent, independently of their visual presentation in the images given over to the spectator to Haneke's film. The temporal foldings of Benny's Video suggest that an event does not have materiality outside of its representations and, therefore, that the manipulation of representation does not just interfere with the inevitability of any one narrative, but undermines the inevitability of narrative as such.

Against the critical preference for the logic of the same, Haneke's is an aesthetic of distinctions, differences, effects that precede their cause, and images that convey intensity over signification. Critique is made possible not by examining character or narrative but by theorizing the film's form: structures of negation that are subtractive, not additive, entropic, not progressive. Haneke has generalized of his work, "I believe that every art form works with structures, and structures are produced by repetitions. Without exception the repetitions and variations in my films have their basis in music" (2000: 161–2). Certainly, this substitution of repetition for development aligns Haneke's modernism with the larger aesthetic shifts of the serial and post-serial twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While 71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance (1994) takes a "contrapuntal form," as Haneke avows (as does Code Unknown, 2000), Funny Games is Haneke's most Cagean piece, marked by interruptions, digressions, and even a dared invitation to abandon the diegesis altogether—and, also, yes, a playfulness that shocks. (To round out the idiosyncratic analogy, perhaps Time of the Wolf [2003] is Haneke's visual translation of Xenakis's murky sound mass.) But Benny's Video can be understood through none of these signifiers: Its structure is not post-Wagnerian counterpoint, neither wild Cageanism nor a cloudy nod to Xenakis. For Benny's Video repeats. It repeats in a very specific way. In the auteurist-authorized taxonomy of structural allusions to musical form, Benny's Video is Haneke's Morton Feldman work.

Haneke occasionally employs the repetition of minimalism, a repetition with little difference (or little differences), as in his detailed attention in The Seventh Continent to fragmented, identical repeated motor gestures of routinized activities. That repetition draws connections, forms an organic totality. Now, though, a different repetition: irregular, halting, awkward, a non-metronomic repetition that does not theorize sameness but uses repetition to introduce difference, distinctness, fragments, and breaks. Feldman's compositional desire in works like Rothko Chapel (1971) was to present sounds as such—he Husserlian cry: To the sounds themselves—but in an entropic trajectory of decay rather than amplification and growth, as if to undo listeners' memory in "intervals that seem to erase or cancel
out each sound as soon as we hear the next" (2000: 7). Rejecting an aesthetic priority of sublation and persistence over negation and absence, Feldman wanted to express "where the sound exists in our hearing -- leaving us rather than coming toward us" (25). Repetition functions to produce discontinuity, to repeat so that things might become absent, so that not hearing, barely hearing, frustratedly hearing becomes the basis for an aesthetics of refusal, withholding, and impermanence. In place of a logic of repetition as additive, Feldman's repetition subtracts, depletes musical material through iteration, a compositional technique often described as "negation." Figuring repetition as an absenting force requires repudiating the assumption that repetition is always of presence and for presencing. In place of a climax, Feldman's dream for a piece was to die a natural death, formal finitude being the telos of a repetition on the side of absence in these compositions of decomposition.

Haneke's aesthetic in Benny's Video is what I term "negative repetition"; it iterates in order to deplete, reappears via a logic of non-presence, cancels events out, introduces discontinuities and distinctnesses. Fully repudiating the logic whereby repetition ensures sameness, continuity, and progress, Haneke's Feldmanesque treatment of structural repetition everywhere promises that it too, formally, will die -- though not a natural death. Benny's Video repeats; "VCR logic," Mattias Frey's term for the endless playability that subtends the film, is a logic of rewind, play again, pause, slowly press on, pause again, rewind to the beginning this time, now faster, faster on to the end, to the snow, to the final static. The very ontology of the title is a repetition in question, as much by its possessive structure as its singular noun, for there are many of Benny's videos, objectifying cluttering the mise-en-scène and circulating as embedded texts within Haneke's film, itself yet another object of the title. There is the repetition of the footage of the pig, the repetition of that slaughter in the murder of the girl, and the repetition of its videogetic documentation (each of these a literalization of Bazin's definition of obscurity as the replay of a recorded moment of real death).4

Consider the fecundity of these repetitions (they are not mutually exclusive):

- Technological repetition; spectatorial repetition. The identical repetition of an event, ontologically and phenomenologically repeated for diegetic viewer and extra-diegetic spectator, made possible through mechanical reproduction (intertextually, this includes the embedded televisual footage, available for rebroadcast within the diegesis; it also includes some of the screenings Benny puts on for his parents, footage the audience has already seen and now sees, identically, again; extra-textually, it includes Haneke's own film, distributed and repeatable without difference).
- Technological repetition; spectatorial difference. The repetition of an event that maintains inscriptive homogeneity but is recontextualized through its distribution and conditions of exhibition (this includes the repetition of the pig slaughter video in the twin contexts of Benny's private viewing and his exhibition of it as an object of both history and futurity for the girl prior to
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her death; it also includes the repetition of identical video clips deployed as markedly different objects: to shock or provoke, as to his parents; to trap or accuse, as to the police).

- Mimetic repetition; the repetition of the event. These are resemblances, mockeries, performances. Every event comes into presence as a narrative appearance in the film through the occurrence of multiple reappearances. Four deaths. Four interrogations: Benny's of the girl, replete with a parody of a head-tilted, chain-smoking interviewer; Benny's parents of him after the revelation of the murder tape; the one that never takes place, by the principal of Benny; and the flat querying by the police at the end.

- There are countless other repetitions on a structural level: minimally, there are the architectural recurrences of Benny's room, the school, the video store, Benny's room, the living room, the bathroom, Benny's room, and so forth; the repetition of Bach and the agonies of the dying girl in a sonic fold of return; the repetition of the spoken "so halt" ("whatever," "because"), signifier of causelessness; finally, the repetition of actors, in Funny Games, and, more ephemerally, the repetition of surveillance from Benny's Video to Caché (2005), in which the latter film's absent cause leaves room for a now-grown Benny to spectrally occupy that space.

The result of this wild particularizing of the gesture of repetition in Benny's Video is that repetition ensures distinctness and difference over and in place of continuity and sameness. Recurrence, replication, and reappearance function within an overriding logic of negative repetition. In place of an affirmative production of contiguity and history, negative repetition brings to presence fragmentation and the break, non-identity, divergence and dissimilarity. Negative repetition escapes both the classical logic of development and the modernist logic of fragmentation; it resists all dialectics and possibilities for sublation to, instead, fold upon itself at multiple sites of difference and distinctness. Contra the critical view that Benny's world is ethically toxic, flat, homogenized, and standardized, the formal language of Haneke's text introduces everywhere multiple, irreducibly distinct, generatively self-showing differences.

I opened this essay by invoking two divergent models of vision in play in Benny's Video because criticism privileged the Allegory model over, and at the expense of, the Leonitus form. Indeed, it is in criticism that most rigorously interrogates Haneke's film from the viewpoint of the image in postmodernity that the logics of the Allegory are most fixedly invoked. The second model of a vision that is too close, too real, and that is itself violent – shaking wide open eyes to their retinal core – is the ground for my argument: That, far from suggesting that the contemporary image has become a substitute for reality, at the risk of an ethical and political loss, Benny's Video offers a model of the image as co-extensive presence, as the site for generative potential, and as an opening up of forces that bring forth the truth of force. Violence is not a mute, brute subject or reified object of mediatic contemplation.
for either Benny's video(s) or Benny's Video, but is revealed as a problematic of the image just as the condition of the image is aligned with violence. Far from critiquing a world in which the real and the mediate are confused and blurred – and far from figuring Benny as a monstrous symptom of this condition - Benny's Video, as I will argue below, opens up "the image to violence and violence to the image."

I take the above phrase from Jean-Luc Nancy's essay "Image and Violence," first published in Le Portique in 2000 and reprinted in his 2005 collection on the arts, The Ground of the Image. Because Nancy treats the problematics of image and violence outside of the overly limiting language of postmodern media analysis, his work offers theorists a way out of the impasses of the logic of the same and the binary of mediation versus the real. To move past this impasse, Nancy first deconstructs the legacy of the Situationists. The critical tendency to regard Benny's immersive media environment as either the symptom or cause of his loss of affect and attendant loss of ethical responsibility represents the insistent pressure of a version of Situationism in visual studies; we might call this the Debordification of Hanke criticism. For it is Guy Debord's 1967 The Society of the Spectacle that leaves its sticky theoretical fingerprints all over the claims that Benny is at a remove, that his experiences with reality are mediated and therefore flattened, that he experiences reality through the images he takes in on the singular screen in his darkened bedroom. On the surface, Debord seems to anticipate Benny's impersonal alienation from family and culture; his homelessness and rootlessness; his movement between the institutional registers of family, school, law (touring Foucault's disciplinary sites); and how he mirrors back the world of images in place of acting. And so Debord's legacy has been employed: Frey reads Benny's Video through the lenses of "Baudrillard, Virilio, Augé, Foucault, and Deleuze," positioning Benny in late capitalism's wandering "supermodernity" of non-places, encountering everywhere a simulacrum in which images stand in for objects, feeling the weight of the virtual over the actual. In a later essay, Frey claims that the film creates "a flat line of reality or unreality, a total conflation of the actual and the virtual. Benny experiences news, commercials, feature films, the pig video, and finally his own slaying of his classmate as all equally unreal" (2006: 32). As in the earlier critical antinomies, note the theoretical dominance of the Situationist assumption that postmodernity involves a trade in images and a subsumption of the real into the spectacle.

The critique I am mobilizing against this critical urge first appears in the title essay of Nancy's Being Singular Plural. As Nancy writes, "The denunciation of mere appearance effortlessly moves within mere appearance, because it has no other way of designating what is proper - that is, nonappearance – except as the obscure opposite of the spectacle" (2006: 51). The ground of Situationism's "version of Marxist critique" is that some real, true reality has been replaced with a spectacle or economy of appearances that disrupts, hides, or distorts that real. Nancy takes this critique to task for the understanding of appearance as only ever "mere" or "false" appearance ("surface, secondary exteriority, inessential shadow
. . . semblance, deceptive imitation"). Critical work remains obedient to metaphysics in its refusal to regard “an order of appearances,” preferring, instead, authentic reality (deep, living, originary – and always on the order of the Other)” (52). Against the recuperation of some origin or authenticity (as in all appeals to distantiation through reflexivity), Nancy insists that we must figure the relation of appearance to truth in an entirely different way, not as a replacement of the latter by the former but as a “co-appearance” in which beings appear only as their appearing to others. Thus, “there is no society without spectacle; or more precisely there is no society without the spectacle of society”; in short, “society is the spectacle of itself” (67). Nancy’s reversal of metaphysical assumptions requires a new conceptual understanding of representation, image, spectacle, and appearance.

Film theory too is in thrall to Platonism, in part because of the comfortable alliance between Situationist critiques and their Marxist offspring (the stubborn residue of Althusser, Brecht, and all manner of ideology theorists in visual studies) and the assumptions of metaphysics from which we are not yet free. Any opposition between an originary or essential truth (call it art, consciousness, reality, violence, ethics) and appearance or spectacle rests on this classical divide. Benny’s Video, most of all among Haneke’s work, tempts criticism into making an argument based on an Other–Same relation that pits some form of reality against some form of appearance/spectacle – this is Haneke’s explicit auteurist aim, in his oft-stated call to shock the viewer into a recognition of their complicity in the contemporary media environment, and it is also the tease of Benny’s line that death is reducible to the “ketchup and plastic” of the movies. But this is the last lie, the final violence, of Benny’s Video. For if criticism succumbs to this lure and produces a reading that preserves (or even insists on) the proper, originary, or necessary distinction of appearance from the real, then the film theorist, even as she imagines producing a reading that calls for ethical responsibility in the face of mediation’s numbing, obfuscates the force that subsumes representation. In essence, metaphysical criticism lets Benny and Benny’s Video off the hook for the force of images, participates in a writing-over and forgetting of the violence of all images as such.

Nancy’s recent work on visual arts and the cinema fully theorizes this nonmetaphysical reading of representation, requiring a radical reevaluation of the universe of both Benny and Haneke. Nancy argues that the image is sacred because it is “separate, what is set aside, removed, cut off”; his word for this separateness is “the distinct.” The distinct is at a distance, detached, “placed outside and before one’s eyes.” The image is irreducibly distinct because what it is to be the image is to be separate from the thing which is the invisible ground of the image by being invisible. The image effects a cut with continuity: “The image is a thing that is not the thing; it distinguishes itself from it, essentially” (“The Image – The Distinct,” 2). The image not only presents its distinctness from the thing, it also distinguishes itself by “the force – the energy, pressure, or intensity” of the image’s distinction from the thing. The image does not depict this pressure but rather is the intensity
of this distinction—“this intimate force is not 'represented' by the image, but the image is it, the image activates it, draws it and withdraws it, extracts it by withholding it, and it is with this force that the image touches us” (5). That touch brings spectators into the image, involves a mutual regard that is both a look and a recognition. Thus, the image is not an imitation (for mimeticism reinscribes the appearance/original binary) but the resemblance from which the thing is detached. The image is obvious, it offers evidence and is evident; the distinct is visible “because it does not belong to the domain of objects, their perception and their use, but to that of forces, their affections and transmissions. The image is the obviousness of the invisible” (12).

This abstraction of the image as the distinct is given its own theoretical force in Nancy’s writing on violence, which opens with a double move: First, “images are violent,” as they assault in their intensity or quantity; second, there is an omnipresence of “images of violence” that are “indecent, shocking, necessary, heartrending” (“Image and Violence,” 13). These founding principles are the self-same as those at play in Benny's Video: The latter is the premise of the narrative, while the former is Haneke's avowed aim in his own images to the spectator to a “Haneke film.” Nancy’s interrogation of what links “the image to violence and violence to the image” begins by defining violence as “the application of a force that remains foreign to the dynamic or energetic system into which it intervenes.” Violence “denatures, wrecks, and massacres that which it assaults,” and “takes away its form and meaning” while exhausting itself “in its raging” (16). Thus, violence is force, but a “pure, dense, stupid, impenetrable intensity,” and that which exercises itself “without guarantor and without being accountable.” Instead of serving truth, violence “wants instead to be itself the truth”; likewise, the history of philosophy suggests truth’s own violence (“already truth forces Plato’s prisoner to leave the cave, only to dazzle him with its sun”). Finally, violence is monstrous, but also monstravive: Violence demonstrates, it “exposes itself as figure without figure.” Here, the visual returns, for violence makes an image of itself. In all cases of violence’s imposition (divine violence, the torturer’s violence) violence must show, must leave a mark or a trace and make its wound visible: “it consists in imprinting its image by force in its effect and as its effect” (20). The worst form of violence involves a specifically visual desire:

Cruelty takes its name from bloodshed (citior, as distinct from sanguis, the blood that circulates in the body). He who is cruel and violent wants to see blood split. ... He who is cruel wants to appropriate death: not by gazing into the emptiness of the depths, but, on the contrary, by filling his eyes with red (by “seeing red”) and with the clots in which life suffers and dies. (24–5)

Because “the image disputes the presence of the thing,” each image is also monstros/per; like violence and truth “the image is of the order of the monster” (22). Cruelty hunts a “little puddle of matter,” and every image “borders on such a
puddle” (25). Thus all of Haneke’s films – but also all film, all images – are ever at a risk of giving in to this order and becoming, in the end, horror films.

Like Benjamin and Deleuze before him, Nancy ends with two violences (perhaps a trace of the metaphysical in his own work; its seductions are not entirely avoidable): the groundlessness of violence and the violence of blows that provides its own ground. The one associated with art is a “Violence without violence [that] consists in the revelation’s not taking place, its remaining immanent”; it is a revelation “that there is nothing to reveal.” By contrast, the other “violent and violating violence reveals and believes that it reveals absolutely” (26). The question for Benny’s Video is whether it attempts to reveal or suspend revelation, whether the revelation does not take place, or whether it imagines it reveals absolutely. I contend that Haneke has the knowledge Nancy values, that “there is nothing to reveal.” The *mise-en-abyme* of security cameras capturing Benny in his final exchange with (and brief, flat “Sorry” to) his parents does not make recourse to an exteriority – it does not, as much criticism suggests, figure the complicity of a network extended to the spectator and infinitely unattributed eyes of surveillance. Rather, that frame is not a last or final frame, but yet another frame, unarchivized above the other frames but “imminence infinitely suspended over itself” (26). Critique does not issue, then, from appeals to a degraded real now lost in the infinite proliferation of screens, frames, cameras, and ontologically promiscuous image types; critique involves the suspension of this revelation, the presencing of the groundlessness of any revelation. (In this sense, the sublimely open ending of *Caché* and the refusal to psychologize or ground the killers’ accountability in *Funny Games* are other instances of Haneke’s infinite suspension of revelation.)

This suspension involves the coming to presence of a number of generative terms: intensity, difference, distinctness, each aligned with a violence that multiplies (a “violence without violence”), whose forces proliferate the new instead of closing down into reductive completeness. In place of criticism that begemotizes the same, we should regard Benny’s Video as an endless opening up of an infinite number of non-forthcoming revelations. The postmodern landscape, littered with televusional, video, and cinematic images, is an explosion of differences, distinct images, and possibilities for an endless series of forays into the world. Instead of a retreat from some originary, non-appearing real, Haneke gives Benny a world of too many openings, a world in which the violence of every image is too forceful and present not in retreat from the possible but fully onslaughted forward into it. What Benny gives up, at the end of the film, is not an object to the courts nor his parents to the law – what he gives up, and what he gives up on, is the image. The ultimate problem with Benny’s Video is not that violent images are flattened together (the correlative problem is not that images flatten a reality) because both the image and violence produce generative differences and deploy the force of the distinct. The proliferation of images in modernity is not a problem of the same, but a fecundity of distinctnesses. The point is not that one should not look at images of violence – the point is to look, that one must look, that the image has a force
that one must contend with and regard. Giving up (on) the video does not suggest redemption or salvation. Benny is neither victim nor monster: He is a coward. He does not commit enough to the force of images and he fails to remain accountable to the implications of violence’s monstrance. Haneke is not Benny because he does not refuse this responsibility.

The title is a trap, as many titles are: The named video does not belong to Benny as an object or property, even less so is it an item of exchange or circulation, a product or pedagogical device. Benny’s Video should be read as Benny’s Video-a, Benny’s I-see, but also Benny’s “I look,” “I observe,” even “I understand.” Nancy plays again and again on the French regard et regard – to look, and to regard, each of which involves “watching and waiting, for observing, for tending attentively and overseeing,” and also respecting, observing, considering, being open to something’s power and accountability (2001: 38). The video images that Benny regards open up onto the real and evidence themselves; we can therefore now reread the images of the pig’s death as perfectly materializing Nancy’s argument that “Death is part of life, instead of making life part of (or parted from) something other than itself. Death is not the opposite of life nor the passage into another life: it is the blind spot that opens up the looking” (18).

This is why Nancy describes film as “an opening cut in the world onto this very world.” Rejecting the taking of metaphysics for the cinema, Nancy folds the metaphor inwards, arguing:

That is why the recurring attempt to compare cinema with Plato’s cave is inaccurate: precisely, the depths of the cave attest to an outside of the world, but as a negative, and this sets up the discrediting of images. . . . Film works the opposite way: it does not reflect an outside, it opens an inside onto itself. The image on the screen is itself the idea. (2001: 46)

To resolve the antinomy that Benny’s Video either perfectly replicates the postmodern mediascape (to critique it) or perfectly replicates the postmodern mediascape (falling prey to it), I argue that Benny’s Video does not attempt to discredit images, either to critique them or to collude with them. The film has been mistaken for a metaphysical tract in which representation must refer (or fail to refer) to some outside; Benny’s videos instead open up the inside of representation to itself, as does Haneke’s meta-film. In proliferating images, and in producing difference in place of homogeneity, Haneke’s texts bring forth the force of the violence of all images. The evidentiary force of images that open up onto the real, the aesthetic force of images that recruit spectators to their intensity, and the ethical-political force that fails to offer revelation in order to produce “violence without violence” is amplified, instead of mitigated, by the mise-en-abyme of representations and frames. It is more images, and not fewer, that the world presents and that presents the world. Thus, late modernity, with its explosion of images, is a bringing forth of the possibility for critique and not the clearing down or death of critique.
But could that be embraced – even at the cost of accounting fully for the force of images, especially the one with which the film opens, the obscene, horrible image of the instance of death? Perhaps thinking the new after Benny's Video involves a promise to Video-o. Haneke asks us to regard, without horror, without paralysis, with neither the guilt nor burden with which it was first offered, "This is this." Imagine affirming: There, ye wretches, take your fill of the fine spectacle.

Notes

1 Plato, Republic, IV 435–442 (Plato 1989: 682). The Greek used to describe the sight is kalon (fine or beautiful). The affects I invoke above – disgust, horror, desire – are only part of the spirited story; Socrates reads the event in relation to anger, and many commentators figure it principally in relation to self-disgust and shame (including sexual shame). Despite the fact that the event involves unburied corpses (with echoes of Antigone) and notably takes place outside the borders of the city, the appetitive and even aesthetic elements co-opt its political or civic dimensions; as a result, some critics point to Leontius’s apolitical demeanor in the scene as its most shocking element.

2 Jean-Louis Baudry (1975). This article, along with Baudry’s 1970 “Cinéma: effets idéologiques produits par l’appareil de base” (Cinéthique 7–8), comprised the foundation of apparatus theory. Together, they also insisted on the centrality of metaphysical and philosophical thought to film studies, invoking Husserl, Plato, and the entirety of the history of idealism to grapple with identification, spectatorship, representation, and ideology. Both articles are widely reprinted in translation; see Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

3 Peucker and Wood argue that the flight into Egypt suggests the possibilities for rehabilitation, if not redemption, though they formulate this shift and its limitations differently (Peucker 2007: 137; Wood 2007).

4 See André Bazin (2003).

5 See Mattias Frey (2002).

References and Further Reading.


