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Funny Games - DVD

Side-splitting or side-slitting?

by Neil Queen published on 25 July 2008

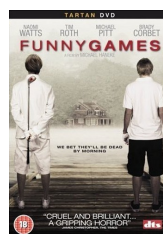
Cinema has been an accepted part of our lives for so long that it's easy to not question the affect that it can have on us. And when it comes to violence in films, that may actually be a momentous oversight - our over-consumption may have led to a certain desensitization, a blasÉ acceptance of what is socially unacceptable.

The recent spate of "torture porn" films - Saw, Hostel et al - have raised questions about screen violence, but ultimately, these are just a grotesque and extreme end of a massive wedge - from Star Wars, Westerns and Home Alone up to Rambo and Donkey Punch, violence in one form or other is Hollywood's bread and butter.

Michael Haneke's Funny Games, a shot-for-shot English-language remake of his 1997 Austrian shocker, is a brutal wake-up call on that state of affairs, one part ctrl-alt-delete reboot, one part icy bucket of water tipped over our heads.

It's quite hard to review this in the traditional sense, as it's more of an experience than a film. There's little to say about it in terms of plot - Ann (Naomi Watts) and George (Tim Roth) take their son to their holiday house in the Hamptons for a break. While there, two presentable preppy lads Paul (Michael Pitt) and Peter (Brady Corbet) genteelly invite themselves in before holding them hostage and slowly, coldly and systematically destroying them, both physically and emotionally, even betting them that they won't be alive in 12 hours' time. It's truly shocking stuff - the tension is unbearable, the horror palpable.

Like the "torture porn" films, the film's reliance on brutality could open it to accusations of exploitation, and it does share certain traits with such grindhouse exploitationers as I Spit On Your Grave, Fight For Your Life and Henry: Portrait Of A Serial Killer - the crude and sparse simplicity and the measured cruelty.



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But unlike them, here such tactics are used to make a point. By stripping away the niceties of modern cinema and focusing purely on the abusive acts, we are forced to question that which we have for so long passively consumed.

Make no mistake about it, we're given no place to hide from the horror. All throughout, there is an adopted blandness to the set and scenery that heightens the brutal moments. Traditionally, soundtrack has the ability to subconsciously guide you through a film or provide comfort, here there is none; likewise, characterisation can drag you by the nose - take the case of Dexter which portrays a serial killer in a sympathetic light - but all of the characters in Funny Games are models of neutrality.

You aren't encouraged to root for George and Ann, while the abusers are well-mannered middle-class kids who give no clue to their actions. All this leaves you with is your own, uninfluenced gut reaction to the torture - and that's the painful spot Haneke is trying to hit.

Actually, there is very little in the way of on-screen violence, but don't worry, that doesn't make it any easier, such is the psychological trauma, for both the characters and us.

Despite drawing strength from its vérité approach, Haneke frequently uses tricks to remind us that we're watching a film, damning us for contributing to the atrocity. We're guilty for choosing to watch it. It's our bloodlust that keeps the industry going. Sheesh.

The further the film progresses, the more you realise that you aren't in Kansas anymore and the traditional Hollywood payback payoff - the pat justification for violence - isn't on the cards. Really, it doesn't get any easier or prettier.

Let's not be under any illusion about this, Funny Games is a truly horrible, gut-wrenching, torturous film to watch - there is almost no context

At a glance

What is it?

Thriller horror

Good

Uncompromising, unforgiving, unforgettable cinema

Bad

Possibly the hardest, most harrowing and unpleasant 2 hours you'll ever spend watching a film

Verdict

It's painfully full-on and if you it's not something I feel happy to advise anyone to watch, but if you have an open mind there's a searing experience to be had

Price 19.99 DVD/£24.99 Blu-ray

Our score

7/10

Your score

?/10

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in which it is ideal viewing (don't follow this dumb schmuck's lead and watch it last thing at night, that's my tip).

But that's the whoooooole point. As our country struggles with knife crime, this challenges the way in which cinema has helped desensitize us to the brutality head-on.

We're so used to cinema being a medium for entertainment, that we've lost sight of the fact that it is still an art form and as such it is under no obligation to paint pretty pictures; art's responsibility is to challenge held views and shape our view of our world. Sorry if this is a bit pompous, but the closest thing I can compare it to is Picasso's Guernica, a sprawling, ugly work that sought to convey the horror of the Spanish civil war - Funny Games seeks to attempt the same thing with today's society.

Aaaaand relax.

Having seen it, I really badly need something fluffy, like Wall-E, just so I can feel human again. Seriously, Funny Games does that to you.

VERDICT

It's painfully full-on and if you it's not something I feel happy to advise anyone to watch, but if you have an open mind there's a searing experience to be had.

Rating: 18

Starring: Naomi Watts, Tim Roth, Michael Pitt, Brady Corbet

Directed by: Michael Haneke

Extras: Trailer, director interview, Q&A