Article

Death Images in Michael Haneke's Films

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Abstract: Although meditating on death has long been a central philosophical practice and is gaining prominence in modern European public discourse, certain misconceptions still persist. The Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke does not shy away from confronting real and performed images of death, combining a denouncing cinematic approach with no less polemic aesthetic and ethical theories. Certainly, visually shocking and disturbing films can, in their own way, challenge the boundaries of what is thinkable, at times even touching upon the unthinkable. Images of death and death-related themes are particularly pervasive in Haneke's films. His films raise significant philosophical and ethical questions about mortality, violence, death, and ageing. This analysis is a tentative attempt to map how Haneke explores representations of death and dying in *Benny's Video* (1992) and *Funny Games* (1997), with particular reference to the rewind gesture depicted in both films. In doing so, it aims to examine the conversation such films prompt between moving images and the audience.

Keywords: Michael Haneke; film philosophy; death image; violence; rewind

1. Introduction: A Handful of Violence and Death

Violence permeates cinema from the very moment the director utters "Action!". According to Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke (born in 1952), cinema has always been associated with violence: "The Western, crime, war, adventure, and horror genres define themselves in no small part through violence, and the word ACTION, which precedes the filming of every take, has fused with the word FILM—at least in the minds of the consumers—as a synonym for violent spectacle" [1] (p. 575).

An existentialist director who takes a phenomenological approach to bodily suffering, Haneke creates films that are shocking, discomforting, and disturbing. He excels at making viewers feel uneasy, presenting them with sudden, unexpected events that take place in unfamiliar and unsettling situations. Beyond his disturbing and violent imagery and various ethical and psychoanalytic interpretations, Haneke offers a new conception of thought, suggesting that film itself is a form of thinking.

Michael Haneke has a unique intellectual status in European cinema. He is known for his unsettling, violent filmic imagery and for dealing with unpopular themes in rational and realistic ways, merging film practice and apparatus theory as few filmmakers can. Opening the frontiers of what is conventionally termed "new French extremism", a term coined by James Quandt to refer to a collection of films by directors including Catherine Breillat, Claire Denis, Gaspar Noé, and Leos Carax, among others—although "the recent provocateurs are too disparate in purpose and vision to be classified as a movement" [2]—Haneke's work transcends mere reflection on the body, sex, and violence, all of which are central to this (almost) "movement".

This brief characterisation may explain why his films are often hastily classified as gratuitously violent and as fostering a sadistic relationship with the spectator. Beyond their undeniably disturbing images, however, and beyond the various ethical, political, and psychoanalytic interpretations of his work on offer, Haneke points to new ways of thinking about the cinematic image within contemporary Western mediatic culture,

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revealing profound insights that challenge and expand our understanding of depictions of death and their inner relation to a philosophy of time.

This link is perhaps better explained as a moral one. In her book on Michael Haneke's films, Catherine Wheatley introduces the concept of "moral spectatorship" [3] to describe the kinds of films and scenes that challenge the viewer's usual comfort and neutrality. Indeed, Haneke complicates our act of watching or gazing, distinguishing it from mere scopophilia, emotional manipulation, and exploitation. When treating topics such as suicide, euthanasia, colonialism, cruelty, alienation, and violence, Haneke makes sure to overturn the dominant, conventional perspective and to provide the audience with an alternative, unexpected version. Commenting on Haneke's film *Amour* (2012), for example, which concerns the theme of geriatric euthanasia, Roy Grundmann observes that "[b]y killing his wife, Georges not only ends her suffering (as would be the conventional justification for euthanasia), but he also brings her fully into his personal realm, turning her into an idealized image" [4]. It is this kind of nuance that Haneke's original perspective adds to these more common moral and ethical topics.

Haneke's reputation as a ruthless moral and social critic may stem largely from this inversion—in the sense that his work is able to turn an already difficult topic into something *even more* unpleasant, as if springing from a sadistic desire to punish the audience. However, his reputation as an intellectual is somewhat undermined by his voluntary silence whenever questioned about his artistic choices. Haneke has consistently avoided interpreting his own work or providing explanations. The profound impact of his films, which stems from his aesthetic and ethical decisions, serves as a jolt to the intellect. This can be viewed as a form of violence against conventional thought, a way of pushing the boundaries of what is typically considered thinkable and of challenging the unthinkable.

The following brief analysis traces some of the ways in which death is explored in Haneke's films. In particular, *Benny's Video* (1992) and *Funny Games* (1997) highlight the contrast between the reversibility of fictional human suffering and death and the irreversible nature of real, documented, non-human animal death, confronting the audience with one of our greatest fears: fear of death. In order to map the complex ways in which Haneke's films intertwine film, death, and time, I will explore the *rewind* gesture performed by two of their characters (not by chance played by the same actor, Arno Frisch): Benny in *Benny's Video* and Paul in *Funny Games*.

In a central scene in *Funny Games*, Peter, one of the two psychopaths, is killed, and Paul uses the TV remote control to rewind the film and thus annul Peter's death. Paul plays an obvious game with the audience's expectations and emotional relief regarding Peter's death. A similar gesture is depicted at the very beginning of *Benny's Video*, when Benny repeatedly rewinds, pauses, and slows down footage of a pig's slaughter, taken during a family trip to the countryside. Yet there are no "magic" powers for Benny, and no matter how hard he tries, the pig will not come back to life. Killing the pig belongs to the realm of the Real and thus cannot be undone. Benny rewinds the nonfiction film to a moment when the pig is still alive; instead of altering the sequence of events, however, he merely slows it down, extending the temporal frame of the footage.

This essay aims to analyse the *rewind* gesture performed in these two films and, more specifically, to analyse how it relates to death and time in a very specific form: through the off-screen technique.

2. Ethics and the Aesthetics of Death

Film philosophy and film studies have recently witnessed a noticeable ethical turn [5] (p. 1), either understanding films as a perfect medium for meditating on different ethical concerns or exploring the hypothesis of films *as* ethics [3,6,7].

Indeed, to borrow Robert Sinnerbrink's intuitive idea, the relationship between ethics and film runs deeper than one might initially assume [8] (p. 9). Whether in fiction or the documentary form, film serves as a gateway to the world, to different perspectives, but also to understanding others. Consequently, it not only potentiates the audience's moral

corruption but also potentially challenges the audience's preconceptions, broadens their understanding, and fosters informal discussions on everyday issues centred on questions of agency, responsibility, free will, and ethics. It thereby enhances our own capacity for imagination, empathy, and the forging of social relationships. Stanley Cavell based his theory of "moral perfectionism" in classical Hollywood cinema rather than philosophy in the strict sense alone [9] (p. 11), and Gilles Deleuze advocated for the development of "major pedagogical lines" specifically within moving images [10] (p. 71).

The philosophical relevance of the relationship between aesthetic and ethical evaluations becomes especially obvious when we encounter provocative and violent imagery in films. This experience is likely familiar to many viewers: watching disturbing scenes of this sort often sparks informal debate concerning the film's ethical and moral narrative implications. Through these discussions, we examine the limits of aesthetics and refine our own aesthetic judgments. Importantly, the violence depicted is not confined to the graphic content typically found in horror or war films; it can also include psychological, gender-based, or racial elements. Crucially, these images go beyond mere aesthetic horror, representing, for viewers, the threshold of acceptability and societal norms. After all, filmic depictions of death, dying, and grieving, no matter how stressful, are less stress-inducing than the realities they represent [11].

The shift between aesthetic and ethical perspectives seems to depend on the relationship between the images and their audience (and on their reactions and interpretations). How can extreme violence depicted in cinema both corrupt and refine its audience? This paradox is exemplified in Stanley Kubrick's 1971 film *A Clockwork Orange*. The protagonist, Alex (played by Malcolm McDowell), undergoes experimental psychological conditioning while serving a prison sentence for heinous crimes. By exposing him to extremely violent imagery, the goal of this experimental treatment is to instil an aversion to violent and aggressive thoughts. Here, the use of "ultraviolence" serves a clinical purpose while also catering to the voyeuristic tendencies of the viewer, who finds entertainment in horror and various forms of violence, both physical and psychological.

Through his concept of the "theatre of cruelty", French dramatist and poet Antonin Artaud warned of the clinical potential of exposing individuals to negative emotions. Just as philosophy, especially in its Socratic origins, was once seen as a corrupting influence on the young and a challenge to established divine beliefs, cinema has the capacity to disrupt common sense and public opinion. Rather than dictating what to think about moral issues and ethical dilemmas within the confines of censorship, however, films have the ability to encourage viewers to think beyond established ethical frameworks, prompting them to consider alternative perspectives, often through *persuasive* aesthetic experiences [12].

In this context, the cinematic experience itself becomes an ethical critique, exemplified by how Haneke engages *directly* with the viewer, exposes the artifice of cinema, and breaks the fourth wall. The portrayal of physical and psychological violence acts as social and political commentary, carrying a moral responsibility to avoid gratuitous depiction.

Yet what remains after the initial shock prompted by these images? What lasting impact can this artistic approach have? Navigating the spectrum between Berys Gaut's distinction [13] between *aestheticism* (which posits that art's primary aim is to evoke beauty and sensory pleasure and champions the autonomy of artistic expression) and *ethicism* (which emphasises the moral dimension of art, viewing it as a platform for conveying values, critiquing societal norms, and fostering empathy) poses intriguing challenges and opportunities for reflection. These two philosophical paradigms, often intertwined yet distinct, shape our understanding of art's moral dimension.

Indeed, art can simultaneously provoke aesthetic pleasure and ethical contemplation. Should aesthetic experience be divorced from moral judgments, or should it have ethical constraints given its moral responsibility to engage with ethical dilemmas, provoke critical reflection, and inspire positive social change?

Given the ongoing debate on whether on-screen violence directly influences real-life violent behaviour, this analysis critically examines the ethics of such imagery, opting for

nuanced evaluation over censorship. It specifically explores the relationship between artistic expression and ethical considerations in works that depict elements that disrupt their aesthetic enjoyment, such as physical violence, pornography, cruelty, humiliation, incitement to hatred, and betrayal.

This inquiry centres on reconciling two opposing viewpoints: aestheticism, which advocates for the autonomy of artworks based solely on aesthetic values, and ethicism, which values works for the ethical messages they convey. In the realm of moving images, ethical concerns are significant, as viewers' reactions to depicted themes and their representation are crucial to understanding the impact of art on moral values and behaviour. A proponent of ethicism, Gaut contends that ethical values can, and should, inform artistic evaluation, emphasising the importance of morally uplifting narratives in cinema [13] (p. 182).

The relationship between ethical and aesthetic values is complex, however, as simply adhering to ethical principles does not guarantee artistic merit. It is essential to distinguish between the impact of the artwork itself and the depiction of morally ambiguous characters within it. As Gaut explains [13] (p. 188), while characters may display immoral traits, it is the artwork's representation of these traits that requires evaluative scrutiny. Therefore, the emphasis should be on assessing how the artwork portrays and critiques moral complexities, rather than merely condemning the characters depicted.

Thus, applying Berys Gaut's ethical framework to cinematic ethics reveals that this connection inherently involves a moral transformation of the viewer, grounded in the aesthetic experience itself (because the ethical character of an artwork is also relevant to its aesthetic evaluation). Film ethics transcends simple empathy, identification, and critique of characters' moral actions and decisions. Essentially, it is not about finding an ethical dimension within particular films, characters, genres, or even film directors but about acknowledging an ethic that is intrinsic to the medium of moving images as a whole.

In examining the paradox of whether films depict true violence or whether reality is becoming more violent due to the influence of violent films, Haneke focuses on the audience's perspective on the moving image. As Michael Lawrence [14] (p. 70) observes, "[v]iolence to animals is presented in Haneke's films in close-up, while violence to humans usually takes place offscreen." Another paradigmatic example might be Carlos Reygadas's *Japón* (2002), where, at the beginning of the film, the protagonist observes the (off-screen) killing of a pig. This claim not only provides new insight into the Western bourgeois audience, which Lawrence pursues, but also sheds light on one of Haneke's most debated "artistic" non-negotiable principles: a critique of mainstream films' strategies for convincing their audience of the reversibility of death—a technique that is particularly apparent in superhero films, for instance, which deny the finality of death by portraying their heroes as controlling their own (im)mortality.

In addition, and as Siobhan Lyons rightly points out, "off-screen violence does not simply offer an escape from horrific imagery but provokes even greater discomfort than on-screen violence itself" [15] (p. 316). Indeed, although extreme violence often takes place on-screen (for example, in Martin Scorsese's 1976 *Taxi Driver*), mainly in a deliberate attempt to shock the audience, Lyons inverts the grading effects of violent images. Their off-screen invisibility makes the shock all the stronger because, as we find in some of Haneke's films, the lack of framed images is sometimes compensated for by off-screen sounds.

3. Michael Haneke: Mapping the Ways

Michael Haneke's films do not avoid depicting either real or performed images of death. By bringing together cinematic praxis and ethical theory, by questioning the morality of representing death and violence both on- and off-screen, they constitute a powerful medium for exploring the themes of death and violence and confronting the audience with the raw, realistic nature of human existence.

Films have the ability to self-reflect, not through discourse but through cinematic imagery. In Haneke's work, death is depicted in a distinctive way, often through screens within the frame, which means that depicted violence is always mediated, making precisely

its mediation a topic of discussion. The emphasis is not so much on reality itself but on *our access to reality* and the medium that conveys it. As Paul Fung claims of *Caché* (2005): "The film's ambiguity about whether the hidden camera is set up by the characters inside the story or 'someone' from the outside suggests that the desire to photograph death exists in the characters as well as the viewer themselves" [16] (p. 178).

Images of death and (direct) death images permeate most of Haneke's films, from *The Seventh Continent* (1989) to *Happy End* (2017). They include images of the act of killing (*71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994), *Funny Games*, *Time of the Wolf* (2003), etc.) and the representation of corpses (*The White Ribbon* (2009), *Amour*) and of suicide (*The Seventh Continent* (1989), *Time of the Wolf*, *Caché*, *Happy End*). Related to the importance of death and dying as a topic is the way in which these films also pose significant philosophical and ethical questions about love, death, and ageing. This line of inquiry is created by focusing on the film's capacity for self-reflection and, through cinematic means, presenting a stark conversation between moving images and the audience.

Michael Lawrence's observation [14] (p. 70)—that while (fictional) violence against humans occurs off-screen in Haneke's films, violence against (real) animals takes place on-screen—sheds light on one of Haneke's most debated rules: critiquing mainstream films' strategies for convincing their audience of film's power to reverse death, thus perpetuating a misleading, sensationalist, and heroic ideology of controlling and avoiding mortality by denying the final and definitive nature of death.

This conclusion is supported by the way in which the on-screen and off-screen domains are used. In other words, the reversibility of fictional human death is contrasted with the irreversible nature of real non-human animal death.

This shocking idea is perhaps the most significant revelation in Haneke's films, for reasons I will present by exploring the ways in which the invisible presence is encapsulated by a *death image* through the *off-screen* technique (when actions and/or sounds take place beyond the frame, thus calling for the audience's thoughts and imagination). That is to say, the death image concept is made explicit not through representations of death or through the film's image content but through the film's formal features, namely editing: following the Deleuzian taxonomic tradition, a "death image" is not an image *of* death but a dying image.

One of my further aims, however, is the rather challenging one of avoiding repeating commonplaces about Haneke's work as an explicit criticism of media representations of violence, of the gratuitous violence of Hollywood productions, or even the violence of the European bourgeois family. Instead, I would like to focus on the extent to which Haneke's films contribute to our thinking on ethics and time, which in turn may shed light on his important contribution to a film philosophy of death.

As Brigittte Peucker notes regarding the rewind gesture performed by Benny, not only does it betray an evident "necrophilic fascination", but it also suggests a will to have "control of narrative flow and time" [17]. This control, or at least its tentative achievement, lies at the basis of a reflection on film and death. This will to overcome the deterministic nature of fiction in *Funny Games* and to have full control over the other's finitude is contradicted by the impossibility of reversing death in *Benny's Video*. Thus, rather than an "ironic rewind" [18] (p. 57), what we find in these films is a thinking rewind, a self-reflexive cinematic thought.

It is quite interesting that Robert Bresson inspired Haneke to pursue filmmaking, as he explains in his essay "Terror and Utopia of Form: Robert Bresson's *Au hasard Balthazar*" [19] (p. 565). In this piece, Haneke recalls childhood experiences at the cinema, recalling the fear he felt in the dark, enclosed space of the theatre, as well as the terror and shock prompted by the gloomy images on the screen, including close-ups and editing techniques showing mutilated bodies. Back then, screens and televisions were not as ubiquitous as they are today, and thus the impact of these grotesque images was greater than it would be now.

The *rewind* gesture performed by Benny in *Benny's Video* and Paul in *Funny Games* is also illuminating to the extent that it relies on the double criteria with which we usually

evaluate the "manipulative" power of moving images. Some analyses of *Cinema Paradiso* (1988, by Giuseppe Tornatore), for example, view it as exemplary of a complicity with the viewer in the sense that at the end of the film there is a sense of nostalgia and mourning that the audience shares with the main character: a mourning of the death of the film projectionist Alfredo (Philippe Noiret) and the demolition of the old theatre where he was once a projectionist [8] (pp. 3–4). To contrast this, Sinnerbrink analyses films that depict extreme forms of violence, such as *A Clockwork Orange*, as exemplary of a different effect—that of ethical corruption.

Thus, even if we grant that *Cinema Paradiso* is an optimistic film that educates its audience and that *A Clockwork Orange* is a pessimistic film that corrupts its viewers, my point is that despite their different narrative strategies and purposes, both reveal their intense complicity with the audience, even if the latter rejects or criticises the characters' actions and decisions. Because of its gratuitous violence, Haneke's *Funny Games* is sometimes described as unidimensional. Even a film as optimistic as *Cinema Paradiso* contains its own "perverse" moments, however: when, in the end, in a film within the film, the audience finally views the deleted and censored scenes kept by Alfredo, they themselves face what are considered violent, corrupting images (in this case, according to the film censor). Is this reason enough to say that the film has the power to corrupt its audience? It is precisely on this point that the film is focused: in showing that violence and corruption exist not in the images themselves and in what they depict but in human, arbitrary criteria. In the end, the "forbidden" sequence of censored images is what bonds this small, nostalgic, cinephilic community together.

Haneke's idea is that the screen is something blank that must be filled in with the viewer's own thoughts and feelings and that it is the viewer's task "to draw conclusions from the sum of the arrangements": "What is omitted is the gesture of persuasion of models that invite emotional identification" [19] (p. 573). This is why he so admires Bresson's formal method. In Bresson's *Au hasard Balthazar*, it is striking that, being a donkey, Balthazar does not express his psychological state, or feelings, or even judgements regarding the events around him. And yet it is through the donkey's perspective that we make sense of the film. In addition, also following Bresson's method, Haneke would say that the link between content and form should leave no place for "consolation", for clear conclusions. A film made of "fleeting moments" and "fragments" does not search for totality; totality lies only in the viewer's mind and thoughts.

As Michael Haneke explains, "*Benny's Video* and *Funny Games* are different kinds of obscenity, in the sense that I intended a slap in the face and a provocation" [20] (p. 584). The remote control and the rewind gesture symbolise modern media's power to shape and redefine reality, including life and death.

In Haneke's work, however, the link between life and death can be found either in off-screen deaths or as mediatised relations with the dead body. In the first case, we find mainly fictionalised deaths of human characters, but in this case, off-frame and off-screen actions are expressed as revealing moments in the films. Like the *elliptical* violence in some of Bresson's films (for example, Marie and Gérard's abusive and humiliating relationship in *Au hasard Balthazar*), there are various examples of how Haneke plays with screens and mediation, as if reality were only accessed through the screen:

(1) *Happy End* depicts a multitude of cell phones and computer screens, and thus Haneke is updating the media: "*Happy End* is full of screens, but little is made of them" [21].
(2) In *The Seventh Continent* (1989), death is confronted as a normal event expressed as a journey: while methodically preparing their collective suicide, the parents announce that they are leaving and going to another place. The final moment is free of symbolism and dramatism, altogether banal.
(3) In *The White Ribbon*, the young Gustav (Thibault Sérié) asks his sister, Anna (Roxane Duran): "Will you die? Will papa die? Will I die?", thus touching on a plethora of feelings and discoveries about the personal and inevitable nature of death, from the other's death to one's own.

(4) In *Caché*, just before Majid (Maurice Bénichou) kills himself, he says: “I wanted you to come here to witness, to see.” He cuts his own throat in front of George (Daniel Auteuil). Was George’s flashback of a younger Magid killing a chicken with an axe real or a nightmare? For farmers and those living in rural communities, a decapitated chicken, like the slaughtering of a pig, may not be all that shocking.
(5) *Benny’s Video* begins with footage from a digital home video, likely from a family trip or holiday, depicting a pig being killed. Following this, we see Benny manipulating the images, pausing, rewinding, and using slow motion. Later, when questioned by his father regarding his motive for killing a young girl, Benny simply says that he wanted to see what it was like (to kill or to see a corpse?).

4. Haneke’s “Death Images”

According to Laura Mulvey, there is a mechanical illusion in film, where “inanimate frames come back to life” [22] (p. 15). In other words, to manipulate nonlinear video is to engage with dead material. Benny’s room illustrates his obsession with images—from his home videos to TV news—where death and violence dominate his daily life. When he meets a young girl and invites her home, his goal is to experience reality through the lens of a camera. He shows her a video clip and then, without warning or explanation, reveals the weapon he will use to kill her. The murder is filmed, and we watch it both as Haneke’s film and as Benny’s video. In doing so, Haneke directly involves the viewers, exposing the artificiality of what is about to be seen.

Benny’s handling of the crime is particularly intriguing. The film begins with home videos and ends with impersonal footage from three security cameras in a police station. When Benny shows the girl’s death video to his parents, its off-screen presence is even more powerful. His parents become the viewers we once were; they, too, choose to forget and pretend it did not happen, moving on with their lives. While Benny can freeze, rewind, and replay the pig’s death, he cannot annul its dying. He lacks the power to reverse this condition. This contrasts with Paul, who possesses the “magical” diegetic power to reverse the narrative and undo a character’s death because his world is fictional, with fictional actions and consequences. The comparison between Benny’s manipulation of the pig’s and the girl’s off-screen death recordings shows that Haneke is not yet pushing the limits of what is truly ethically shocking. It is not that Benny views the images as similar and remains equally interested in both, treating human and non-human corpses alike. Rather, this manipulation remains a form of light entertainment, a spectacle shared with the audience.

Paul’s ability to reverse fictional death is even more obscene because it explores and critiques mainstream tendencies to portray death as fictional—as something unreal, always reversible, postponed, or resurrected, thereby violating the basic diegetic rules that convey a hero’s immortality or immunity to finitude.

Thus, the concept of a death image, which I defined as a direct image of passing over time—a dying image the rewinding of which annuls its end and finitude, altering the narrative—is closer to a Deleuzian chronosign [23] or a cinematic non-chronological time that challenges the chronological empirical time of everyday life, actions, and consequences. Innovations in film editing, particularly montage, challenge traditional representational models of art—those that depict what can be seen and perceived—by making time visible rather than merely reproducing it. This visibility allows death to be rendered as a “death image”, an immediate depiction of death that seems inherently at odds with conventional representation. In essence, editing techniques that manipulate time and temporal sequences offer a new perspective on anthropocentric definitions of death[1].

However, this game of rewinding the film and showing different media screens within the frame—different layers of depicted reality—is not enough to truly challenge the viewer’s gaze. In Haneke’s work, the true ethical significance lies in complementary formal choices, such as breaking the fourth wall, which are more ethical gestures than aesthetic or narrative decisions. The technique of facing the camera (from the perspective of shooting

the scene) or facing off-screen (from the perspective of screening) introduces a reverse shot of death that reveals meta-cinematic self-reflexivity.

In his book *Figure de l'absence*, Marc Vernet explores five figures of absence or invisibility, one of which is "facing the camera", which exposes the fictional, staged nature of the scene and highlights the actor over the character. This reveals the Brechtian triadic relationship between three types of space: the filming location, the diegetic space, and the viewer's experience [24] (p. 10). Contrary to the canonical theory that facing the camera is so intrusive that it is avoided in mainstream classical cinema and certain genres to preserve the viewer's connection with the film, Vernet explores its presence in diverse films, from Fred Astaire's musicals to horror films such as Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) and psychological thrillers such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). Vernet argues that facing the camera is an easy way to depict "bad encounters" and the deadly gaze—as occurs in duel scenes in adventure films or in scenes depicting victims in horror films. Consider Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), for example, where Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) lies dead in the shower, with a shot/reverse shot between her and her invisible, off-screen killer: "a deadly confrontation" [25] (p. 23).

In *Funny Games*, Paul breaks the fourth wall by blinking into the camera and directly asking the audience, "What would you bet that this family is dead by nine o'clock tomorrow?", speaking directly to the audience and making them not just partners in crime but interacting with them and the camera (from the perspective of the shooting location). This direct interaction treats the audience as a confidant, as if the viewers were closer to the speaker than to the other diegetic characters. It interrupts normal scopophilia. As Haneke would claim: "The audience completes the film by thinking about it; those who watch must not be just consumers ingesting spoon-fed images" [26].

Of course, the audience does not respond to Paul but stays to see what happens next. We know we are watching a thriller. This blink is one of many strategies, already present in *Benny's Video*, that reveal meta-cinematic self-reflexivity. As Catherine Wheatley observes, we initially derive pleasure from the expected tropes of the film's genre—the psychopath is killed, and we hope for a better outcome for the family. But we then experience the opposite reaction—the displeasure of the rewind gesture—which also makes us aware of the fictional construction that underpinned the initial pleasure. The assassin rewinds; he is the film, and the film is also the assassin. The difference here is that the initial satisfaction of seeing the psychopath killed is undone by the rewind, a cruel gesture that leaves us with pure disappointment.

5. Conclusions

This analysis is divided into two major sections: the first explores the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in film, while the second examines off-screen deaths and their connection to the mediatised dead body. Both sections are united by a central element that is crucial to analysing Michale Haneke's cinematic practice: the audience. This discussion also serves as a foundation for a deeper exploration of ethics and moral values in cinema, intertwining aesthetic and ethical considerations. It also prompts reflection on the autonomy of and possible overlap between these dimensions, referred to as aestheticism and ethicism, respectively.

I have been exploring the intersection of film and death, a vast and intricate subject that presents numerous challenges, and in my research, I have been working to distil this broad topic into key subtopics. I am particularly fascinated by our current paradoxical relationship with death: although imagery of death pervades our media, from films to daily news, we often avoid engaging deeply with its implications in our own lives. My research premise is that both film and philosophy are profoundly connected in their exploration of death—each is inspired and confronted by its presence, the relentless passage of time, and the melancholic reflection it provokes. Just as death has traditionally been considered the muse of philosophy (Plato, Cicero, Montaigne, and so on), I argue that it similarly serves as a muse for film philosophy [27].

How are Michael Haneke's films related to a meditation on death, dying, and temporality? To answer this question, I have analysed the role of three filmic signals: the off-screen technique, facing the camera, and the rewind gesture. Interrelating these three signals challenges more standard interpretations of Haneke's unsettling, violent, and cruel imagery insofar as Haneke's films provoke philosophical contemplation of death not by explicitly depicting it but by suggesting a *memento mori* through more complex, *elliptical* imagery.

To explore the complex interplay of film, death, and time in Haneke's work, I have focused my analysis on the different consequences of the rewind gestures performed by Benny in *Benny's Video* and Paul in *Funny Games*. Thus, to conclude, Michael Haneke's double moral criteria regarding depictions of off-screen violence toward fictional human characters and on-screen violence toward real non-human animals highlights one of his key critiques: mainstream films often create the illusion of our power to reverse death, promoting a sensationalist and heroic ideology that denies the finality of mortality. I have argued that the appeal of thinking through film lies in its ability to show rather than assert thoughts and that innovations in film editing, particularly in how time and its ephemerality are portrayed, challenge traditional artistic conventions by making time—and consequently death—visible as a "death image", something that is typically incompatible with representation[2].

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Notes

[1] André Bazin's essay *La Mort tous les après-midi* ("Death Every Afternoon"), first published in 1949, offers a pioneering reflection on the relationship between film and death. Bazin explores how humans engage with real death and violence by analysing the spectacle of mortality through ritualised forms, such as the bullfight. Film, according to Bazin, allows for the repetition of what is, in reality, unique—the "metaphysical obscenity" of the dance of death: "We do not die twice. In this respect, a photograph does not have the power of film; it can only represent someone dying or a corpse, not the elusive passage from one state to the other." [24] (p. 30)

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