

# The screen provokes a brechtian distancing effect

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



The World Health Organisation defines violence as “ the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation”. Violence is all around us, unavoidable and omnipresent.

We have all been a victim of violence in some point in our lives. Through television, the media, and the mass-production of film we are constantly exposed to forms of violence on camera, to the point of desensitisation. The barrier of the screen provokes a Brechtian distancing effect that renders us unable to empathise with what we see. The constant abundance of images makes the distinction between reality and fiction difficult, and children are particularly vulnerable to this.

Growing up with unrestricted and unlimited access to a television that glorifies and trivialises violence can have disastrous effects like being unable to fully grasp the implications and consequences of things like violence and death. Children who grow up knowing only the screen, with absent parents who focus on their careers, spend so much time in front of one that it becomes their reality. Violence, like anything in abundance, ceases to be special or important, and we are now living in a world where it is possible to be bored by it. The Austrian film director and screenwriter Michael Haneke deals with these issues in his works, particularly the feelings of estrangement that are common in our modern society. His film *Benny's Video* (1992), the second instalment in his “ glaciation trilogy”, tells of teenager Benny who, viewing much of his life as distilled through video

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images, and having a cold and distant relationship with his parents that only facilitates this further, kills a girl seemingly without reason because the line between fiction and reality has become blurred. The clip that will be examined in this commentary takes place shortly after Benny comes back from school following an expulsion from class.

He confesses to the murder to his parents in this clip, who then decide to get rid of the body and hide the crime while sending Benny to Egypt with his mother. He comes back to find any trace of the murder has disappeared but instead of starting over he takes the tape over to the police and confesses once again. In this commentary we will first examine this particular sequence of Benny's Video and interpret it within the broader context of the film, then we will reflect on how the clip and the film in general approach the topic of violence. The clip that is examined in this commentary can be separated into two parts: the first when Benny is alone in the apartment and attempts to escape the truth of what he has done, the second when Benny is watching television with his parents and confesses his crime to them.

The clip begins with a medium shot of Benny. There is little lighting and barely any colour in the scene. Benny's clothes appear a none-descript grey. There is little sound except the milk being poured into the glass, which is unsettling and unnaturally loud. Benny has recently had his hair completely shaved off, his face is utterly void of emotion.

He spills some of the milk, possibly an indication of his inner-state of mind. The camera cuts to a close-up of the puddle of milk on the table, an allusion to the blood spilled by Benny. In very much the same way he attempted to

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clean up after the murder, he mops the milk away. But there are still traces, he cannot clean it entirely, like the killing in the back of his mind, the table is dirty and so is his conscience. The whiteness of the milk stands out, a symbol of the purity that the teenager has now lost, and he wipes it away to briefly reveal his reflection. The scene changes to a wide shot of Benny at the family dining room table. He has his back turned to the camera and is reading something. Benny is entirely alone; his parents are of course as always absent.

The view of the empty table accompanied by the almost total silence reinforces the idea of Benny's complete and utter isolation, which is now, after the murder, worse than ever. The camera cuts to a close-up shot of a comic strip, the viewer is shown what the boy sees. Bright colours are present here for the first time in the clip.

This is all revelatory of Benny's state of mind. The comic he is reading, Donald Duck, is not for his age group and he is drinking milk, something very much associated with childhood and young age. Benny is trying to escape reality and the murder, he wants to return to his youth and retrieve the innocence he has lost. The whole scene has an eerie, dreamy quality to it, the comic strip standing out as a colourful and bright world far from the cold tern darkness of the room. Benny's actions mirror what the viewer has been shown throughout the film as his daily routine. In the sequences preceding this clip, Benny was kicked out of class and sent to the headmaster's office, but he has come home like any other day. He is effectively pretending the killing never took place and the day is like any other.

The comic is a distraction, an escape that allows him to avoid the horror of what he has done, which he is only beginning to understand. The viewer is also reminded in this moment that Benny is still a child, regardless of what he has done. However, the illusion does not last and the camera cuts instantly to stock footage of a news station reporting on the Croatian War of Independence. This almost brutal return to reality marks the beginning of the second half of the clip. We are shown 14 seconds of footage, in full screen, that is being watched at the same time by Benny and his unsuspecting parents. The director Michael Haneke is known for his indictment of the typical Austrian upper-middle class family and this is noticeable in this scene. The act of watching the news together is the closest this family, like many others, gets to relating to one another.

This bourgeoisie that Haneke is criticising are generally very focused on their careers and maintain distant relationships with their children, they are often absent. This lack of a true and present parental figure greatly facilitates alienation like that of Benny's where the child has more rapport with a screen than with his family. Benny shows his parents the tape because it is the only way he can tell them, the only way of communicating he truly understands.

Furthermore, by showing us this footage Haneke is also reproaching the media for Benny's desensitisation. He is constantly watching stylised violence in action movies and scenes of death in Bosnia that are reported on by commentators in a neutral voice that excludes all emotion and normalises them. For Haneke, television reportage has made us numb to scenes of

suffering. Benny, who cannot distinguish reality from fiction, sees everything as “ nur Ketchup und Plastik”. Almost seamlessly, Benny changes the channel and plays the murder tape to his parents. The transition is so smooth it’s difficult to know it’s no longer the same program, and this is deliberate. To Haneke the news media of today are not different to Benny’s recording.

Both scenes show death after all. The camera then cuts back to a medium shot of Benny from behind, and then to his father and mother watching the television with him. We return to the murder with a close-up of the screen. In this scene, and throughout the film, Haneke denounces the trivialising effect the screen has on violence and death. The television conveys no emotion, strips all images of any possible empathetic effect and presents them in the same way.

With the close-up shot he reinforces this point and demonstrates it to the viewer. Showing the murder through a second screen acts as a sort of *Verfremdungseffekt*, the viewer finds himself less effected, and this gives us an insight into how Benny sees things. However, the teenager is no longer indifferent and what he shows his parents is reality, his reality, and this affects him. The camera switches to a close-up of Benny for the remaining 18 seconds of the clip and we are provided with only the audio of the murder tape superimposed over the boy’s face.

For the first time in the clip we are given a genuine indication that Benny regrets his act. After the first shot is heard his usually unreadable face begins to look uncomfortable, he gulps and then looks down in what looks

like true shame and regret. It is also poetic: what rendered him anaesthetised in the first place remains the only thing that can truly affect him.

As shown with his parents, and later at the police station, the television is the only thing he truly understands. Violence is a recurring theme in Michael Haneke's work, but he deals with it a very particular way. On the contrary to the American blockbuster model that tends to glorify violence and overuse it to the point of making it lose all meaning, Haneke offers his viewers an emotional and psychological violence.

In Benny's video, the murder is not shown, only heard and physical violence is very rarely present in Haneke's work. The Austrian director despises the brain-dead consumerism of Hollywood and what he considers to be the use of despicable violence as a comedic device, which results in making the abhorrent consumable. A pertinent example of this would be the films of Quentin Tarantino. Haneke explores the philosophy and psychology behind violence, its morality and transgressive nature.

It is not openly shown, it is always there, as an underlying presence. Benny is a victim of emotional violence from his parents because they show him no affection and are very absent. Haneke considers the forms of violence that are very often looked over, even accepted and part of our society.

He sees the upper-class Austrian familial model as heavily impregnated with structural violence. The suffocating perfection of the apartment, the frames arranged on the wall, are violent to the viewer. Nothing is out of place,

everything is still, silent, there is no room for a child's creativity, or the expression of his uniqueness. He was born into a preestablished system and forced to conform, which is in itself psychological violence. Michael Haneke's *Benny's Video* offers a troublingly accurate vision of a society that is so exposed to unfiltered images it has succeeded in turning violence into a something consumable. Violence is a horrific act but our media and film industries' glorification and normalisation of it has resulted in it becoming entertainment. The Austrian director presents a warning of the psychological repercussions this can have in the shape of Benny.

The clip examined in this commentary shows that although desensitised, the boy has retained a part of his humanity and regrets his act. In the first half of the extract he attempts to take refuge in childhood and avoid his responsibilities by drinking milk and reading Disney comics but he realises the guilt is unavoidable and confesses to his parents in the second half. Some aspects of *Benny's Video* remain a mystery to critics and viewers alike and Haneke himself has abstained from explaining them. Why does Benny kill the girl? Is it planned? Is it accidental? Some interpretations portray Benny as a psychopath, fascinated by death and incapable of remorse, who deliberately planned to kill someone.

Our clip would suggest the boy is more of a modern Raskolnikov who confesses to his parents in the hope they will turn him in and return things to their natural order. He looks away when showing the tape, he is aware of his actions and they are weighing down on him. This is why he turns himself in to the police.