The original Austrian version of Michael Haneke’s *Funny Games* was released in 1997 and was then remade by Haneke almost shot-for-shot as *Funny Games U.S.* in 2007. I shall focus on the 1997 film. Both films feature a central character we shall call ‘Paul’ (played by Arno Frisch in the original), whose aggressively presentational stance involves direct appeals to our involvement in the fiction. Despite my previous assertions of the presence of direct address in many guises throughout cinema history, in the context of so oppositional a film as *Funny Games* the device can nevertheless be seen as a clear declaration of intent to flout certain ‘rules’. To understand this, we must examine some of the manifold ways in which the film defines itself in opposition to mainstream filmmaking, and particularly its representation of violence. It does this thematically, structurally and formally. No clear separation of these elements is possible, for the film possesses a unity of purpose and form that is nothing if not direct: ‘For such a simple tale of unmotivated torture, [*Funny Games*] is extraordinarily complex in its mode of audience address. It is extremely successful in its aim of producing a near intolerable complicity in the process of inexorable victimisation’ (Falcon 1998: 11). Before we turn to the complexities of audience address in *Funny Games*, let us say a little about the ‘simple tale’ itself, for it is revealing of the film’s oppositional status.

The narrative begins with a bourgeois family’s arrival at their lakeside holiday home. They greet their neighbours, who are accompanied by two polite young men, both dressed in white polo-shirts, shorts and gloves. The youths then enter the family’s home, on the pretext of borrowing some eggs. There begins the ‘process of inexorable victimisation’. The father’s (Ulrich Mühe) leg is broken so he cannot resist. The son (uncredited) briefly escapes but is recaptured and shot. The intruders leave, only to return about half an hour (of screen time) later. After some more sadistic games, the young men shoot the father and drown the mother (Susanne Lothar) in the lake. The film ends with Paul having entered the home of the dead family’s friends. Even this sketch of a story indicates its distance from most film narratives. No three-act structure is evident; the film does not set up a series of obstacles to be overcome; it moves ‘inexorably’ towards a horrific conclusion. The film maintains throughout a very flat, realist style, with significant long takes and minimal camera movement. Subsequently, the temporary disappearance of the torturers does not mark a shift in tone or style or narrative progression. The family’s attempts to escape thus feel futile and the youths’ return inevitable. What is more, about one-third of the killers’ period of absence is taken up by a single shot of the aftermath of the son’s murder – here, not only does their disappearance offer no relief, it actually intensifies the viewer’s discomfort. Perhaps most
‘radically’, the ending gives no resolution. In the film’s final shot, the image freezes on Paul as, for the last time, he looks at us. The final image is indicative of the function of direct address in *Funny Games* strategies of ‘opening out’ its textual boundaries. Though I will suggest that the viewer activity this presumes is circumscribed to the point of not being very ‘open’ at all, it does ask the audience to imagine further narrative progression and, as part of a wider schema, encourages us to reconsider our consumption of violent narratives. Any simple synopsis, like that above, which does not account for the direct address would belie the rhetorical function of the events. It is primarily in the manner of the filming, conjoined with Paul’s straight-to-camera address, that the film’s message presents itself.

In total, there are four instances where Paul addresses the camera. The first (a frame of which features on the cover of this book) sees Paul briefly turn his head and wink at us. It comes just as the mother is about to discover the body of the family dog and seeks to make us complicit in the villain’s ‘funny games’. This acknowledgement of the audience, in fact, merely makes explicit what the narration’s rhetoric makes implicit through other means – the careful build-up to this moment has left us, in contrast to the as-yet oblivious family, in little doubt that Paul has killed the dog. In the next two instances of direct address, Paul makes explicit reference to our investment in the narrative progression and in the characters’ fates. As Paul bets the family that in twelve hours they will all be dead, he turns his head to the side to face us and asks, ‘What do you think? Do you think they have a chance of winning? You are on their side, aren’t you? So, who will you bet with?’ The next moment (fifty minutes later and after the murder of the son) also sees Paul’s speech shift almost seamlessly from intra-diegetic to extra-diegetic. In fact, the crossing of the boundary is performed with even greater ease because, rather than turn his head through 90 degrees to look at us, as previously, Paul merely has to angle his head a few degrees. Throughout the exchange, the camera does not leave its fixed position on Paul and the surrounding dialogue is worth quoting:

Paul: What do you think, Anna? Have you had enough? Or do you want to play some more?
The father: Don’t reply any more. Let them do what they want – please! Then it’ll be over quicker.
Paul: Huh, that’s cowardly! We’re not up to feature film length yet.
Paul [turning to us]: Is that enough? But you want a real ending, with plausible plot development, don’t you?
Paul [turning back to the family]: The bet is still on. It can’t be withdrawn unilaterally.
The verbal exchange illustrates the way Paul’s speech has him occupying a position both inside and outside the fiction, a paradox that links him to the tradition of the counter-look as identified by Bonitzer. As a young man who has already frequently framed the situation and the family’s experience in terms of pop cultural references, ‘We’re not up to feature film length yet’ is a credible metaphor for such a character to deliver. However, especially with the next line, which is delivered as he breaks the fourth wall, Paul is clearly acting as a mouthpiece for a message Haneke wishes to deliver. Haneke seems to be asking us, through Paul, ‘What are you expecting from this film? The child has already been killed so you know this can’t end well. Why would you stay and consume more of what is to come?’ Haneke’s extra-textual discourse makes this intention clear. He has stated that he wished to ‘rape the viewer into autonomy’ (quoted in Wheatley 2009: 78) and the desire to walk out of the cinema is an active part of the film’s engagement with its audience: ‘Anyone who leaves doesn’t need the film; anyone who stays does. People who are already very sensitised to violence are not the people for whom the film was made’ (Haneke quoted in Romney 1998: 6). Paul’s to-camera discourse is thus a fairly clear provocation to the audience to leave or, more appositely, a demand that they consider why they have not already left – as Haneke’s comments above show, the film is not made for those who would readily walk out on it.

The film’s ending, which includes the freeze frame on Paul’s final look at the camera, brings the film full circle in more than one way. As already suggested, it extends the psychotic pair’s cycle of violence (near the start of the film, we also saw Peter and Paul with some neighbours and we later learn that this family – and perhaps others – have been murdered). It also superimposes the film’s title over Paul’s face and replays the ‘thrash punk’ music (Catherine Wheatley’s description – 2009: 79) by ‘John Zorn and the Naked City’ which is heard extra-diegetically at the film’s start. There, the film introduces the family as the young boy Georgi watches his parents play a game in which they must guess the composer and title of the piece of classical music their partner plays on the car stereo. Shots within the car are interspersed with shots, clearly taken from a helicopter, looking down on the car as it moves along roads towards their lakeside retreat. The parents’ game fills the soundtrack until Zorn’s screamed vocals, thrashy guitar and arrhythmic drums suddenly come in. The film’s title then appears in large red letters over a shot of the contented family. Extra-diegetic devices (the title, the Zorn music) combine with the bird’s-eye view of the car to foreshadow the victimisation of the family. The scene setting could hardly establish a more complacently bourgeois family (not only is there the classical music game but the family’s Range Rover pulls their yacht as they drive through the remote-controlled gates of their holiday home) and the opening message is avowedly authored in asserting that these charac-
ters will be subjected to punishment by the film. Indeed, the John Zorn music links the family’s intra-diegetic torture to the extra-diegetic discourse of the opening and closing images of the film – when Paul pursues Georgi through a neighbour’s home, he puts the same piece of music on a stereo. In each of the three major case studies (and in many other films touched upon elsewhere), the characters’ ability to address us directly is tied to their ambiguous ‘awareness’ of extra-diegetic music. However, in Funny Games, there is nothing of this rich ambiguity in the use of the music. The John Zorn score is, rather, an aggressive declaration of authorial intent.

Paul is tied to extra- or cross-diegetic controlling forces at other moments too: for example, in the film’s one moment of on-screen violence. (The focus of the analysis here is liable to obscure how remarkably effective the film is in resensitising viewers to violence by not showing it.) While forced to repeat a prayer Paul has devised, the mother grabs a shotgun and shoots Peter. In an unrealistic fashion expected of a Hollywood action movie, Peter flies across the room in a bloody explosion. However, Paul wrestles the mother to the ground and desperately hunts for a remote control. Having found it, we see Paul’s gloved hand hitting the controls. The film’s image track then appears to rewind until we return to the prayer, only for Paul to prevent his partner’s killing. With the music, Paul is aligned with an extra-narrative authority. Here, his control is displayed, particularly directly, in the foregrounding of film and video technology. As Richard Falcon writes: ‘he [Haneke] thus foregrounds our satisfaction at the victims’ relief from the helplessness while at the same time victimising us as spectators. This alienation technique is typical of a film that is nothing if not lucid in its cruelty’ (1998: 11). Haneke offers the horrific satisfaction of bloodshed and cathartic violence (‘the villain gets his just deserts’) only to withdraw it cruelly. Paul’s gloved hands are particularly appropriate symbols of Haneke’s clinical approach. Their manipulation of technology (the CD version of the John Zorn music played during Georgi’s pursuit and the video remote control) demonstrate an authorial desire to turn the media back on the viewer and project anxieties of control on to us. The aggressiveness of Peter and Paul is matched by the aggressiveness of the text, the former being the authors of the family’s torture. The characters and text are especially inseparable when Paul addresses the audience directly.

In the passage cited above, Richard Falcon describes the rewinding of events as an ‘alienation technique’. This immediately brings to mind Brecht and his strategies of Verfremdung. The use of direct address in Funny Games makes the comparison with Brecht almost inevitable, yet I would suggest that there is little that is truly ‘Brechtian’ about Haneke’s recourse to the device. In a chapter entitled ‘The Narrative Sequence’ in his remarkable book, The Material Ghost, embedded alongside a discussion of Jean Renoir and André Bazin (one filmmaker and one theorist often placed crudely in
opposition to the kind of practice Brecht is taken to represent), Gilberto Perez offers the following account of Brecht’s techniques. Discussing a scene from Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, in which an actress plays the comforting of an abandoned baby in pantomime, while another actor presents a sung accompaniment, Perez explains:

The action, what happens in the scene, is not to be identified with either way of playing it on the stage, the song or the pantomime, two different versions calling each other into question, throwing open in our minds the possibility of other ways in which the action could have been played. We are, by an ‘alienation effect’, distanced from the played scene, as the played scene is distanced, made distinct, from what happens in the scene being played. We are prevented, in Brecht, from taking the enactment for the action: the action is not performed, no longer there on stage, but referred to by the performance. (1998: 81–2)

This passage builds upon a distinction between ‘narrative’ and ‘drama’ that the wider chapter develops carefully and at some length. In brief, for Perez, narrative is story as an accumulation of things that happen, while drama is enactment. Pointing to the way the words for ‘count’ (as in numbers) and ‘tell’ (as in stories) are the same or very similar in various languages (in English, of course we have ‘recount’ – Perez: 1998: 50), Perez defines narrative as an accumulation of elements that can be reordered – ‘a’ precedes ‘b’ in many stories but it is perfectly possible for the storyteller to give us ‘b’ before ‘a’. Drama, on the other hand, in the form of either a painting or a performance of an actor ‘being’ someone on stage, is more self-sufficient; it has inherent plenitude as enactment – in the theatre, ‘the self-sufficiency of the stage as a substitute reality’ (Perez 1998: 82). This makes sense of Perez’s formulation that ‘the played scene [the drama] is distanced, made distinct, from what happens in the scene being played [the narrative elements the drama enacts]’. In the Brecht example Perez cites, the two ways of recounting the action prevent the audience from taking the dramatisation for the actual events being dramatised – we are thus ‘distanced’ from the representation. Brecht is thus a narrative artist who makes use of various and sometimes conflicting dramatic means. Haneke’s use of the rewinding of the image does approach the Brechtian because it can be seen to present ‘two different versions [of events] calling each other into question’. However, Haneke’s is a ‘negative’ kind of Brechtianism because, I would suggest, the effect of rewinding and then removing the shooting of Peter is ultimately to condemn the spectator’s desire for an alternative that the film’s discourse presents as inappropriate – it is inappropriate because explosive and stylistically heightened film violence is morally inappropriate and narratively inappropriate because the family’s defeat feels inevitable. Crucially,
Haneke’s practice here differs from that of Brecht because the latter wished to make the viewer active in imagining alternatives (political and / or narrative), while Haneke seeks, rather, to victimise and condemn and use our passivity as removed spectators against us.

If the business with the remote control is partly ‘Brechtian’ (perhaps in technique, if not in spirit), I would suggest that the direct address is not remotely so. If Brechtian techniques seek to make spectators active, Paul’s direct address is an explicit marker, rather, of our passivity. Other parts of the film demand the viewer’s ‘active’ involvement, though, admittedly, in a highly circumscribed way. For example, the rigorous maintenance of the violence off screen, especially in the son’s murder, denies us the ‘voyeuristic’ satisfaction of seeing violent events but forces us to imagine what is going on (we hear the shot and screams of the aftermath of the son’s death but we see nothing of the event itself). When we do see the scene of violence, the son’s dead body is merely a crumpled heap in the corner of the room by the bloody television set. This is the film’s longest take, lasting almost twelve minutes, and it only pans slightly to reframe the characters – it is literal temps-mort. The duration of the shot overdetermines the camera’s (and our) gaze, and is especially disconcerting when the father begins to wail uncontrollably. While our gaze is overdetermined and we search through the image for meaning, attention is called to our lack of control. First, our voyeuristic satisfaction is denied, then teasingly satisfied, but to the point where we are made to feel obtrusive observers. In Catherine Wheatley’s analysis of the film and this scene, she links the long take to ‘first-generation modernism’ (2009: 94) in its recourse to a duration and a fixed camera position that distances the viewer from the events and makes them reflect on their manner of representation. The direct address is linked to ‘second-generation modernism’, which is more aggressive in its confrontation of the viewer. However, I would suggest that, in comparison with the extraordinary feelings of dread and guilt produced by the son’s shooting, Paul’s asides to the viewer are moments of relative relief. Perez’s distinction between narrative and drama might be instructive here. The narrative techniques Haneke employs through the son’s death and at other moments encourage the viewer to reflect actively on their desires for violence and redemption that have been generated from watching the kind of genre cinema Funny Games satirises. The direct address is, in contrast, the dramatisation of an authorial rhetoric that distances us from this kind of active involvement. This returns us to the notion of instantiation tentatively introduced earlier on. Here, however, rather than the instantiation of a character’s individual subjectivity, we have an authorial position and message made vividly present to us. One might even question why Haneke used the device in the first place. I would suggest that it might have been felt necessary as a clear and explicit marker of the seriousness of the film’s ethical project. Certainly, Haneke’s comments (as quoted in Wheatley
2009: 110–111n38) suggest that his sense of the ability of direct address to make the audience complicit is a rather simplistic one.

Catherine Wheatley discusses the direct address of Funny Games relatively little. This is perhaps unsurprising because, I would suggest that its use of direct address is one of the least effective aspects of the film’s project. This may seem like a surprising conclusion for a book focused on direct address to come to; or, rather, it makes it surprising that I have discussed this individual film at relative length. However, analysis of the relationship of Funny Games’ project to Brecht’s radical practice clarifies the latter’s aims and aspirations. Moreover, Funny Games exemplifies the symbolic value of direct address for certain theoretical positions vis-à-vis the rules and conventions of mainstream cinema. It exemplifies a ‘counter-cinema’ use of direct address.

Godard and ‘Counter-Cinema’: Deux Ou Trois Choses Que Je Sais D’Elle (1967)

The direct address employed in the films of Jean-Luc Godard, particularly those he produced into the 1970s, have generally been ascribed to a ‘counter-cinema’ project. In Wheatley’s analysis of Funny Games, she suggests that Haneke’s film does not possess the purism of Godard and his contemporaries as a work in this vein (2009: 87). On one level, she is correct; Godard, during this period, was fully committed to questioning mainstream cinema’s traditional values and techniques. However, on another, and in terms specifically of the audience address encapsulated in its direct address, Funny Games has a didactic clarity that is more presumed than really present in much of Godard’s practice. Before reappraising Godard’s undoubtedly radical use of direct address, I wish to reflect upon another theoretical text that has been influential in associating direct address with counter-cinema and opposing it to the standard practices of classical Hollywood cinema.

Peter Wollen’s essay, ‘Godard and Counter Cinema: Vent d’est’, was another important text from amongst the body of radical film theory that did most to circumscribe critical understandings of direct address. Originally published in 1972, Wollen’s essay is best known for outlining in tabular form ‘seven cardinal sins’ associated with ‘Hollywood-Mosfilm’ and ‘seven cardinal virtues’, which are effectively the antonyms offered by Godard’s counter-cinema practice:

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