Cringing and Other Desacralizing Affects in Post-Millennial Aesthetics

Marina Ludwigs

This reflection on sacrality and desacralization in several recent films arises from my attempt to isolate a particular aesthetic feature of postmillennial art, one that I see as typical but by no means universal. I group these effects under the rubric of *cringing*, although one example that I will give fits the description of "extreme discomfort" better than that of cringing. But before I elaborate further on these post-postmodern affects/effects, I will situate this discussion in the context of several other conceptualizations of post-postmodern art, notably Eric Gans's ideas of post-millennialism, together with Raoul Eshelman's theory of performatism and Timotheus Vermeulen's and Robin van den Akker's discussion of metamodernism. I will also discuss the nature of cringing, as I understand it, and explain how it differs from awkwardness, another, but related, affect of the postmillennial aesthetic, which has been the subject of some interest. Next I will ground my discussion in the narrative theory of communication frames and connect these narrative questions to theories of the cinematic narrator. Only then will I segue into the discussion of four filmic episodes and analyze specific ways in which they evoke cringing from the audience. And in the final part of my paper, I will bring these findings to bear on my conclusion of how these desacralizing strategies work and whether they are of a piece with performatist and/or metamodernist aesthetic developments.

In some of his older *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, written at the dawn of the new millennium, Gans projects some post-millennial artistic trends predicting a deepening crisis in the production of high art. Reiterating his previous analysis of high art, originating in tragedy, he stresses the point that it aims to reconcile us with resentment and help us transcend it by exposing the sacrificial nature of deferral that underlies aesthetic forms. In tragedy, for example, we resolve the paradoxical desire of "[identifying] with the centrality we resent and [being alienated] from the centrality we desire" (*Originary Thinking* 137) by finally renouncing our desire for centrality in an aesthetic experience of catharsis and thus ultimately helping us to defer violence. Thus throughout history, high art has been an agent for social tranquility by playing important ethical and therapeutic roles in helping people navigate the conflict between the outward evidence of economic inequality and inward egalitarian convictions. But according to Gans, the post-millennial age is going to bring the end of high art, which has been engaged in the project of deconstructing the sacred center. And that is because recently (his post-millennial chronicles are written between 1999 and 2001), Gans writes, high art has been losing its effectiveness as a diffuser of dangerous mimetic desire because "we have reached the point in the historical unfolding of [the

critique of sacrifice] at which there is no longer any ethical value, which is to say, any further deferral of violence, to be derived from it" (Chronicle #184). This has been the consequence of the blurring of the distinction between the sacrificial and anti-sacrificial by postmodernism, which exploits the aesthetics of victimary resentment while remaining "blind to the sacrificial structure of [its] own story" (Chronicle #184). One type of example Gans provides is of extreme desecration of religion, such as the painting of *The Holy Virgin Mary* by Chris Ofili displayed at the Brooklyn Museum, a Madonna painting with a deposit of elephant dung on top of one of her breasts. To this we can add *Piss Christ* by Andres Serrano, another controversial example of late postmodernism, a photograph of a crucifix submerged in urine.

In thus mingling the sacred and abject, these provocative works of high culture position themselves as sacrilegious acts by taking aim at important cultural symbols. Could this be the final deconstructive gesture aimed at the aesthetic object (for where can one go from here?), coming on the heels of the earlier, less radical, in a sense, deconstructive strategies targeting the dismantling of Western aesthetic conventions, seen as phallogocentric? In literature, for example, these postmodernist attitudes would see the destruction of the author as the governing consciousness, the fragmentation of the formerly coherent and knowable self as the basis of characterization, and the disintegration of the narrative arc subtended by the dynamics of rise and closure. In other words, these postmodern developments start by deconstructing the aesthetic form and go on to deconstruct the Western "sacred" as the underlying structure of hegemonic oppression. But in attacking traditional values, the postmodern critic's intention to be subversive and *épater la bourgeoisie* is carried out in the sacred name of excluding vulgarians and philistines from the fellowship of those who "get art," thus excluding (scapegoating) a large segment of the mainstream audience. As a result of this recent failure of high art to remain an effective critical *agency of mimetic desire, popular art is gaining legitimacy even among the literati.* No doubt popular culture remains cheerfully sacrificial, satisfying its audiences' lust for revenge with plot lines where the antagonists get their well-deserved comeuppance. But there is an important difference: contemporary sacrificial plots are no longer completely serious, but often tongue-in-cheek, because we know too much, we have become too self-conscious about sacrifice. As Gans explains it:

> Esthetic form remains sacrificial, but sacrifice is no longer understood as a necessary feature of social organization; it is merely a "psychological" element of the human condition. Just as we retain physiological drives, such as the appetite for sugar, that have become counterproductive in modern society, so we retain the cultural drive toward sacrifice that determines the structure of the esthetic work. And just as we feel no compunction about substituting saccharine or aspartame for sugar, so we need feel no compunction about replacing the naively sacrificial forms of the past by ironic versions of these forms that we no longer consider as models of ethical relations. The wisecracking superheroes of the comics and their movie adaptations typify this attitude.

We no longer really believe in good guys and bad guys, but we need the dichotomy in order to enjoy the narration and the catharsis it effects. Like the molecules of aspartame that fool our tastebuds into thinking they are sugar, the staged contrast between good and evil fools our cultural instincts, not "us." (Chronicle #184)

I want to pick up on the important point Gans is making about the playful provisionality or self-conscious ostensibility of these new aesthetic conventions because it seems to me that he isolates the same or very similar feature of post-millennianism that both Eshelman and the Vermeulen /van den Akker duo put their fingers on. The latter three also comment on the contingent character of the post-millennial "as if" or "let's pretend" attitude to its aesthetic object.

Raoul Eshelman explains performatism as a new aesthetic movement that came into being as a turn away from the postmodernist mindset with its valorization of infinite regress: "in postmodernism . . . the formal closure of the art work is continually being undermined by narrative or visual devices that create an immanent, inescapable state of undecidability regarding the truth status of some part of that work" (Performatism, 1). As he shows, this undecidability has to do with the postmodernist paradigm's inability of explaining, stabilizing, and defining context. This is because the meaning of a work of art can be derived from its encounter with the outside, but the outside (context) can be construed in multiple ways depending on how we frame or draw the boundary around it.

But this conundrum (or aesthetic effect, to put it in more neutral terms) is eliminated by the performatist device of double-framing, which creates a determinate context and stops the sliding of signifiers. Eshelman refers to Generative Anthropology's scenic paradigm of language and representation to construct his performatist double-frame model. What the internal frame is drawn around is the originary scene of Generative Anthropology, where the first sign is issued and accepted as valid by the newly-formed community of people. In other words, the center of the construction, its inner frame, contains an anchoring of the sign, perceived as perfectly beautiful, good, and true to its referent. It is a sign in its ostensive, monist meaning: it is not yet embedded into a network of other signs but "[refers] first and foremost to its first successful performance" (Performatism, 6). In thus invoking the originary effect of a well-formed ostensive sign, the inner frame effects a "performative tautology," according to him, that "works in spite of the obvious conflicts and contradictions contained within it" (Performatism, 6). The outer frame, then—which surrounds the work itself—needs to *lock* on to the stable inner frame in order to assert its meaning confidently if forcefully and artificially. The viewer's/reader's response is conditioned in such a way that he feels compelled to accept the interpretation that the work of art highlights as the most attractive. Even if it is not the most plausible one from a logical perspective, we are drawn to it through its sheer rhetorical force. The persuading of the double framing device works dogmatically, through coercion, and this is why Eshelman calls this type of aesthetics *performatist*: it "performs" our acquiescence. He gives many examples from films, books,

and even architecture. For example, Lester, the cinematic narrator of *American Beauty*, a 1999 film by Sam Mendes, is supposed to be dead when we hear his "voice over" commentary, but the plot and visual sequence are constructed in such a way as to encourage us to accept his narrative authority. At the same time, as the audience is well aware that this configuration is contingent on us agreeing to play by the rules of the game—and we agree to them in order to make sense of this aesthetic object and derive pleasure—but what is presented to us is not "really" true.

Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker make a point that is reminiscent of Eshelman's observations when they define metamodernism, their name for the prevailing post-millennial sensibility. "The postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis are over," they say (2). So is the postmodern "in-betweenness." Metamodernism, that has come to replace it, is a more positive, more affirmative attitude, although it can sometimes share postmodern ironies and instabilities. But it does so in a more provisional manner because what characterizes the metamodern approach is the dynamics of oscillation between the modern and postmodern sensibility. Its mood oscillates between postmodern apathy, deconstruction, and distrust in grand narratives, on the one hand, and modern enthusiasm and utopianism, on the other, between pessimism and optimism, "between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (6). The only way to reconcile these positions is to adopt the attitude of "as if," which Vermeulen and van den Akker trace to Kant's negative idealism, an attitude of living as if you had a purpose or as if life had meaning or as if grand narratives were true.

> Metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find . . . The metamodern . . . willfully adopts a kind of donkey-and-carrot double-bind. Like a donkey it chases a carrot that it never manages to eat because the carrot is always just beyond its reach. But precisely because it never manages to eat the carrot, it never ends its chase, setting foot in moral realms the modern donkey (having eaten its carrot elsewhere) will never encounter, entering political domains the postmodern donkey (having abandoned the chase) will never come across. (5)

Another historical parallel that the Vermeulen and van den Akker find is that of Romanticism because the Romantic attitude also lends itself to being characterized as the oscillation of opposing binaries, described variously, by the authors they quote, as unity and multiplicity, beauty and ugliness, individualism and collectivism, revolution and reaction, attempt and failure, or enthusiasm and irony. This is why they also use the label *neoromanticism* to refer to metamodernist sensibilities. They cite various examples of this neoromantic aesthetics that relies on oscillation, from David Lynch's films that "alternate from comic to tragic, from romantic to horrific and back" (10) to some recent neoromantic buildings that combine aspects of artifice and natural phenomena, "a formal structure and a

formalist unstructuring (as opposed to deconstruction)" (11).

Vermeulen and van den Akker's diagnosis of the metamodernist trend differs from Eshelman's model of performatism, but there is a salient feature they have in common: it involves an understanding and acceptance of the conventional, even contingent, character of representation. For Eshelman, it is the provisional mode of affirmation by the double frame; for Vermeulen and van den Akker, it is an oscillation between detachment and commitment, but with an emphasis on a dogged determination to go on "as if" history had meaning and a final goal. Gans also sees post-millennialism as affirmative, writing that to the deconstruction of the center, "the post-millennial era opposes its 'performatist' affirmation of the scene, warts and all, as the instrument of human historicity" (Chronicle #253). What this self-aware positivity and make-believe quality imply to me is that post-millennial aesthetics has become conscious of the constructed nature of representation that takes place on a scene. And while Eshelman, whose work is informed by Gans's theories, mentions the scenic nature of his model, there is no explicit scene or its analogue in Vermeulen and van den Akker analysis; however, something like a scene underlies the "let's pretend" character of the new sensibility. Post-millennial works of art tend to thematize their fictionality, and not in a postmodernist metafictional sense, but in a way that reveals a profound understanding of the scene's role in establishing context.

This has been a very long preamble to make just one, albeit important, point: we are now in the new era of self-consciousness about the scenic nature of representation. Critical and cultural theorists might not have caught up with the discoveries of Generative Anthropology, but artists often have a more attuned and unerring sense of zeitgeist than intellectuals, and having thus "stumbled" and zeroed in on the scene, they are now expanding their understanding of art's aesthetic possibilities, and in doing so, creating fresh strategies for the deferral of violence (or explicitly disavowing this possibility). In my own analysis that is to follow I want to build on this observation and take it further, arguing for a specific way in which scenicity is consciously exploited and undermined to create the effect of cringing, which fits in with the new awareness of the scene, in postmillennial films.

But before I talk about the films, I will discuss the idea of cringing itself. And before I do this, I want to remark that I am not the first person to have noticed the new aesthetic sensibility that explores and pushes far the mood of discomfort. I have seen this being referred to as awkwardness. For example, Kyle Karthauser in his "Popular Culture after Postmodernism," an article to which I will return, identifies awkwardness as one of the principal moods of post-postmodernism (together with earnestness). He connects it, in the case of *Borat*, 2006, a film to which I will also return, with "cultural dissonance (whether in the form of foreigners, or through the naïve, the culturally isolated); direct engagement with cultural taboos, mores, and folkways; the mockumentary mode . . . [in] short, encounters that are 'parasitic' on the normal, equalitarian exchange of signs; encounters that occur beyond the normative scripts of social interaction."

Adam Kotsko makes somewhat similar observations in *Awkwardness*, connecting it to the highlighting of aberrant social situations. He also focuses on popular culture, writing that we live in an awkward age, and that many recent TV shows and films, especially comedies, work by focusing on awkward situations, what he calls "cringe-inducing scenes of social discomfort" (1). His claim is that the "experience of awkwardness is fundamentally a social one" (9). Awkwardness foregrounds "the intrinsically social nature of humanity" (15) in that it arises in moments and historical periods when the social order breaks down, as it has, in important ways, in recent times. Furthermore, "Awkwardness moves through social network, it spreads. You can't observe an awkward situation without being drawn in: you are made to feel awkward, as well, even if it is probable to a lesser degree than the people directly involved" (8). Awkwardness is mimetic, in other words.

This last point about awkwardness causing the observer to feel drawn in is central to my own argument. But it also echoes Karthauser's similar account of how awkward situations are experienced. For example, in Borat, which is filmed as a mockumentary, where the participants do not know that they are the butt of a practical joke, "The fundamental layer of awkwardness arises from [an] asymmetry;" namely, "For *us* the cameras are a one-way mirror; we become a sort of voyeur, privy to a situation that necessarily excludes us. For those *within* the frame, for those being observed, the pervasive awkwardness is the novelty of the situation (i.e., Borat and the camera crew) and the cultural divide." While Kotsko talks about being drawn in and Karthauser about exclusion, and it sounds as if they are making opposite points, I do believe that their descriptions are tapping into the same effect, one of making conspicuous the position of the audience, bringing the audience into the frame, and thus into the scene, and thus thematising the scene.

But most importantly, awkwardness has been the subject of extensive study by Jason Middleton in his monograph *Documentary's Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship* where he, concurring with Kotsko, pronounces awkwardness the new affective regime emblematic of the post-millennial era, which "supersedes irony as a dominant cultural logic." (loc. 300). Middleton's overarching (and I believe very perceptive) point is that awkwardness is intimately connected to the documentary format: "awkward moments can be understood in a sense as *documentary moments*. They are moments when an encounter feels *too* real: unscripted, unplanned, and, above all, occurring in person" (loc. 198). These documentary configurations involve the subjects of the documentary, or "social actors," the filmmaker, and the audience. It is the "shifts and ruptures," "unstable configurations," and "misalignments in knowledge, affect, or desire" (loc. 170, 260) in this three-way dynamics that causes awkward moments, that is when "an established mode of representation or reception is unexpectedly challenged, stalled, [or] altered" (loc. 228). Even more specifically, it is not just the confusion of expected positions and disorientation it causes, but there is an affective link: "awkward moments are rooted in, or produce, responses of shame," and shame indicates "a breakdown of intersubjective relations" (loc. 345, 2401).

Traditionally, the viewer of documentaries is accorded a privileged voyeuristic position that is aligned with that of the filmmaker both in intent and ideological perspective. The filmmaker is the voice of authority, sometimes behind the scenes, and sometimes as a physical presence, who undertakes to impart knowledge, share an experience, or expose some undesirable social attitudes, such as prejudice. In sum, there is an unspoken shared agreement that the filmmaker will act as an expert and educate the viewer, while the viewer will welcome being instructed "in good faith." This implied trust is violated in some of these new awkward post-millennial scenarios. What is of interest to me especially is Middleton's discussion of deceptive and parodic mockumentaries, such as *Borat*, where the object of a practical joke is unstable, ambiguous, or multivalent, which makes the viewer very uncomfortable and erodes his or her trust in the filmmaker's authority. Two ways in which it is done are 1) seemingly making a joke at the expense of "socially approved" subjects, whose values the viewer is supposed to endorse, or 2) deceiving the viewer about some aspects of the mockumentary (for example, who is a plant and who is a real dupe) such that the viewer experiences the sense of betrayal and feels that the joke, ultimately, is on him or her.

As I will unfold my argument, it will become clear that my position is quite close to that of Middleton, but I also agree with Karthauser's and Kotsko's view of awkwardness as an effect of deliberately staged social disruption. I will, however, place awkward configurations on the scene of representation and draw anthropological conclusions about their significance. I will also frame my theory in terms of cringing, not awkwardness, as a more pointed and more specific emotion, in my opinion. It is perhaps not a crucial point to insist on cringing instead of awkwardness as the operative term, but I want to emphasize the *visceral* aspect of this reaction, the sense of recoil or physical pang it arouses, as captured in one of the definitions of *cringe*: "to wince in embarrassment or distaste" (Dictionary.com).

But this too needs to be specified, and I might as well start with an example. Suppose one does something embarrassing, say, performs a "victory dance" at some piece of good news, presumably in private, and then notices that he is being observed. Upon first becoming aware of this, one feels intense embarrassment, even shame. But when one recalls this episode later, it is no longer embarrassment one feels but a sense of cringing. And this is one particular point where my analysis differs from Middleton, for whom awkwardness is situated in shame. My take is that this particular emotion, which I call cringing, designates a derivative, retrospective moment, no longer drawing its main impact from shame or embarrassment. As far as awkwardness is concerned, the above example is one of an awkward situation the first time round as well as the second; but the second time, the reaction feels different. And it is this second reaction I want to designate with a new moniker. How is it different from the first? What particular quality does it have that awkwardness does not quite get at? I find that cringing arises in connection with a sense of "representedness": I am no longer *in* the situation; now I represent it to myself as a story, something that happened in the past—and then I react. The cringing reaction, as I see it, is

an act of misprision, of imperfect, transgressive identification: first I laugh at the fool—and then, in a stunning moment of recognition, I realize that *I* am the fool. There is an irreducible temporal aspect to it, a delay, during which I experience a "turn," a change of perspective. The eventful, jolting, real-time character of this aborted act of scapegoating is scenic: this is a performance taking place on the scene of representation, and so I am placing my analysis "on the scene," as it were. In this particular scenic experience something unexpected, interestingly, happens on the periphery, rather than the center; it happens to myself as the audience of the represented episode rather than to myself as a "character" within it.

In this minimalist solipsistic "drama" on the internal scene of representation, just described, I am the audience, the creator, and the character. But the structure is essentially the same as in "The joke's on me" mockumentary moments, which, as Middleton points out, undermine the unspoken understanding between the viewer and the filmmaker. While in the practical-joke-based scenes he discusses, the viewer thinks that he "is invited to share the filmmaker-performer's ideological perspective (knowledge through pleasure) and enjoy a privileged position in relation to the shamed and ignorant dupe," what happens in reality is that such scenes of reversal "dispossess the viewer of this mutually supportive relationship between pleasure and knowledge by challenging our understanding of their degrees of veracity or fabrication" (loc. 2496, 2503).

This concern with the truth of story-telling is very central to narrative theory and underlies various narrative communication models. Unlike the content-based view of narrative that defines it as a sequence of events, a communication view of narratives emphasizes the act of communication, making the fact that a story is told by one person to another or others an integral part of the definition. A further refinement of this view is a model of narrative communication levels, which makes a distinction between the narrator-narratee levels of communication (nested in the figure below because we could have a story within a story), and author-reader levels of narration. The distinction between the narrator-narratee level from one of the implied reader/implied author arises out of our investment in the truth value of the narrative. There is always the question of whether the story we are told should be believed, and this is where/why the notion of an unreliable narrator becomes of interest. Subsequently, the question of authority and reliability is deferred to the next level, that of the implied author. It is the latter who can intend for the narrator to be reliable or unreliable, but this implies that he himself must be trustworthy, because he now serves as the common ground for the truth shared between him and the reader.

Model of Narrative Communication Levels (after Wolf Schmid)
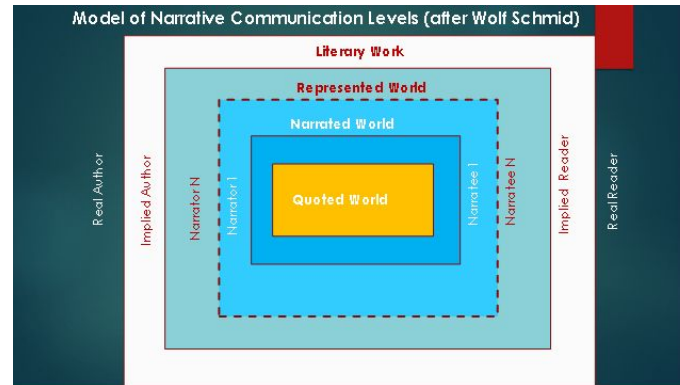
I will return to the important question of trust and author/reader alliance shortly, but since I will be discussing some film examples in this paper, I will firstly give a brief introduction to narrativity in film as a non-verbal medium. The above model was developed for literature, which is connected historically, or so we imagine, to oral storytelling, where the voice of the story-teller or bard is a very prominent part of the narrative experience. But a filmic story is not usually narrated explicitly, although occasionally we do get a voice-over commentary. This is why opinions of film critics are split over the question of the cinematic narrator. Recognizing the visual nature of this art form, some critics say that the notion of the cinematic narrator is simply not applicable: filmic narratives do not have the narrator/narratee layer.

Other critics embrace the idea that some kind of narrativity is central to the notion of fictionality or representedness, regardless of the medium; and representedness must imply an underlying act of communication because something is represented to someone. As Robert Burgoyne summarizes this view: "film communicates messages to a viewer, filmic discourse involves a sender, or addresser, and a receiver, or addressee, in a communicative situation" (4). And Robert Scholes writes that "narration is, first of all, a kind of human behavior. It is specifically a mimetic or representative behavior, through which human beings communicate certain kinds of messages" (283). This involves "a spectator or interpreter who is situated in a space/time reference different from that of the events narrated." (283). But the events do not need to be narrated by way of a literal voice-over narration. According to Seymour Chapman, "The cinematic narrator is the composite of a large and complex variety of communicating devices," such as the composition, lighting, angles, and types of shots, actors' faces, their voices, music, and other auditory devices, to name a few. (The Cinematic Narrator, 483). In other words, we do not need a human voice commenting on the action in order to detect narrativity; in fact, we cannot help but construct a narrative format out of the available communicative, semiotically interpretable materials because this is what mimetic representation invites us to do.

There is, however, a disagreement within the group of critics who defend the idea of the cinematic narrator regarding the meaningfulness of the implied author/implied audience frame of narrative communication. Thus Chatman contends that the function of the implied

author is a necessary abstraction because we need an agent to whom we ascribe not only the design and arrangement of the events but also "the decision to communicate it through one or more narrators" (The Cinematic Narrator 480). Thus the implied author should be talked about separately from the narrator because we need "to distinguish between a *presenter* of the story, the narrator (who is a component of the discourse), and the *inventor* of both the story and discourse (including the narrator)" (The Cinematic Narrator 481). But someone like Robert Burgoyne thinks that in the filmic medium, it is not necessary to have a separate entity called the implied author but that it is enough to distinguish between a personal and impersonal narrator. A personal narrator is an actual person (that is a fictional voice or character in the story) reporting on the events of the fictional world. But more often than not, there is no voice-over and no character-narrator that we can identify in a film, and yet we still recognize a narrative agency. In this, more common, case, Burgoyne explains, we have something called an impersonal narrator, a narratorial function with a "zero-degree individuation" that not only comments on the already existing fictional world but also, and more importantly, creates it (6). Thus the impersonal narrator in films, as Burgoyne conceives it, combines the functions of the narrator and implied author.

This might not be a representative overview of film theorists' positions, and my goal is not to contribute to film theory, but rather to explore narrativity in relation to the configuration of the scene. Because of this, I will not always be faithful to the distinction between the narrator and author in the argument that follows but sometimes collapse it. What interests me in those theoretical positions that recognize the importance of narrative agency is how they justify it. And the reason is essentially the same: the epistemological grounding of the story, which would enable the viewer to tell truth from lies. Chatman explains that "without the implied author, it is pointless to talk about 'knowledge' . . . Only the implied author can be said to 'know,' because the implied author has invented it all" (The Cinematic Narrator 478). For Burgoyne, it cannot be the author who guarantees the truth of the story because the author exists on a different plane from his fictional creation. Instead it is the impersonal narrator who has "invented it all," and therefore he is the one who "provides the fundamental component of the basic fictional contract that narrative film establishes with the spectator" (6). Consequently, "The importance of the [impersonal] narrator to the overall fictional contract resides in the fact that only the narrator can produce truth-functional discourse within what is manifestly a fictional construct" (6).

The assumptions so far have been that the author/filmmaker and the audience are or should be on the same page for the communication model to be meaningful. Firstly, the relationship between the author/filmmaker and the viewer must be that of a benign contract (Burgoyne and Chatman), and the two parties must also share the moral values and underlying epistemological assumptions (Middleton). Only under these tacit presuppositions would the project of educating the viewer or enlisting his support make sense, especially in the context of the documentary genre, which belongs traditionally to the knowledge discourse. Somewhat different is Robert Scholes's view of the relationship between the two agencies.

Instead of seeing it as an implied contract or agreement, he characterizes it in a way that the proponents of Generative Anthropology will recognize as mimetic: instead of being a communication of two rational and equal individuals, the relationship is such that the filmmaker/narrator controls the attention of the audience, while the audience is in the thrall of the narrative process. I would like to quote this passage in its entirety.

The spectator or reader of a narrative assumes that he is in the grip of a process controlled outside himself, designed to do things to him which he will be powerless to resist, and that all his struggles will only enmesh him further in the author's toils. Much of our impatience with inferior fiction comes from our loss of faith in the author's power. When he fails to anticipate our reactions and to lay traps for us into which we delightedly stumble, we begin to wonder if he is in control at all and to fear that we may have to move out of narrativity and into narration itself—or else simply return to entirely non-narrative behavior.

A feature of narrativity is our desire to abandon certain dimensions of existence, certain quotidian responsibilities, and place ourselves under the illusionary guidance of a maker of narratives, upon whom we rely because we respect his powers. There is something very undemocratic about all this, and uncritical as well. Criticism begins when narrativity ceases. Life resumes when narrativity ceases. Call it escape or call it transcendence, narrativity is a pleasurable state of consciousness which is as different from other states as the dreaming part of sleep is from the other parts. (289)

I think that both views are correct, but not at the same time. The interaction between the author and spectator oscillates between cooperative and mimetic. And this leads me to recognize the homologous structure of the scene where the participants on the periphery similarly oscillate between the collective configuration of deferral and mimetic one of conflict. But the narrative dynamic cannot be mapped directly on the originary scene because it contains the element of self-conscious reflection. The audience-author interaction is not taking place directly on the originary scene but secondarily, in an attitude of joint attention, around a *representation*. Like Eshelman's model of double-framing, this is a scene with a scene inside it. In reference to the model of the narrative communication levels, the internal represented scene corresponds to the quoted world. As for the outer frames, I collapse them together because I do not think it is essential to distinguish between the layers of presentation and invention. The key point is to keep in mind that it is the question of reliability that fuels the distinction between the two.

Once we place the author vs the audience on the periphery of the scene, it becomes immediately intuitive why the question of veracity is of paramount importance. Absolute trust in the author's account is the bedrock guarantee that the participants are sharing the same scene and holding the same center of significance as the locus of their attention in the name of the same sacred; it is the glue that holds the scene together. But, as has already been mentioned, this truth discourse is being conducted about fictional content, and this is

where the mimetic aspect of the relationship between the peripheral actors comes into play. It does so in the sense that the filmmaker/author and the spectator are not actually communicating about the scene they are "standing on," as it were, but about another one that is thematized as the object of representation and toward which the former directs the attention of the latter in a mimetic way.

The scene's oscillation between the cooperative and mimetic mode of existence can also clarify my earlier cringing example. As I said, cringing can only happen vis-à-vis the center of joint attention that contains a represented scene. When I first notice that I am being observed doing something private, I find myself on the originary, non-thematized, scene, where I can only experience the immediate emotions of embarrassment or shame, but not yet cringing. It is only when I represent the scene to myself as a story that I cringe. Cringing comes as I recall the experience, representing the original moment on my imaginary scene of representation. It is now easier to see why this later response involves a "turn" or double-take: at one (collective, "contractual") moment I am the audience laughing at a dupe, at the next (mimetic) moment I recognize myself as the dupe; in one oscillatory cycle, I have been yanked from my comfortable peripheral position and placed in the center of a shaming circle in the role of a scapegoat.

* * *

Now that I have established the preconditions and structure of the thematized narrative scene, I will finally come to my four filmic examples and try to pinpoint more closely what it is about these scenes that causes cringing or extreme discomfort. The first episode is from *Borat*, a 2006 mockumentary, a reality show in which the social actors do not know that they are the butt of an elaborate practical joke. The premise of the episodic plot is Sasha Baron Cohen's pretending to be a citizen and presumably a journalist from the post-Soviet state of Kazakhstan, who comes to the U.S. with the express purpose of studying the culture of the most advanced country in the world in order to apply some of its traditions in Kazakhstan. The movie's subtitle is: *Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (sic). To get social actors to participate willingly, Baron Cohen appeals to their cooperative side. This is one of the subtleties of the film creating a problem for the viewer in his search for identification. The "dupes" might often not be very good people, but they treat Borat with helpfulness and generosity. Those who get tricked into participating see only the Borat character and his camera man, the friendly visitors; they have no reason to suspect dishonesty. One of the sources of awkwardness, according to Karthauser, is the fact that encounters between Borat and his American hosts are "'parasitic' on the normal, equalitarian exchange of signs; encounters that occur beyond the normative scripts of social interaction." While the social actors, making allowances for Borat's exoticism and foreignness, act with civility and show a willingness to overlook his social blunders, Borat transgresses this unspoken contract in blatantly outrageous ways. He takes every opportunity to violate social taboos while raising the stakes by making his antics

more and more outrageous, "creating as much resentment as possible." In the end, this leads to a kind of eruption or confrontation or, in the very least, to participants' looking palpably distressed and scandalized. The awkward humor is thus based on undermining what the unsuspecting participants had thought was a shared scene.

But as Karthauser also notices (and as I quoted above), another aspect of awkwardness arises from the asymmetrical relationship between the social actors and the viewers, with the viewers being aware of the practical joke format of the film and experiencing discomfort from being cast in the voyeuristic role. Middleton also brings in the viewer's situation when he talks about awkwardness. One type of awkwardness he discusses is connected to the viewers' unsettling feeling that the joke is on them (which sounds similar to my own example but is not quite the same). A specific example he mentions is the scene when Borat decides to abduct the actress Pamela Anderson in order to marry her. The scene, filmed with a hand-held camera, depicts Baron Cohen's bringing his home-made embroidered bag with Borat's and Pamela's wedding date, throwing it over Anderson's head, and trying to escape with her. The whole sequence is so over the top that critics and viewers have speculated that Anderson was in on the stunt, and there were some indications that the two might have known each other earlier. On the other hand, one wouldn't put it past Baron Cohen to play an outrageous trick like this. As a result, the viewers are left with a feeling of uncertainty as to the reality of what they just witnessed. If Anderson plays the role of a stooge instead of a dupe then the viewers are deceived about the rules of the game and thus the nature of their experience. If the creators of the film have been dishonest with the viewer then the joke is indeed on the viewer. I agree with Middleton that there is an underlying deception going on, but I think it is of a more general kind and intrinsic to the "bad faith" conceptualization of the project.

I will show this by analyzing a scene that was cut from the film, where Borat is buying cheese in a supermarket (it can be found on YouTube at the time of this writing).[1] The scene is over four minutes long, during which Borat, accompanied by a supermarket clerk or

manager, is shown to point to every successive cheese item on the supermarket shelves and ask, "And what is this?", to which the clerk patiently replies, "Cheese." The duration and repetitiveness of the scene is so outrageous that my reaction is an incredulous laughter, tinged by cringing. What is the cause of my cringing? I can identify three main points of discomfort. The first that comes to mind is my empathy for the sales clerk. I assume, as I watch the clip, that this is someone at the bottom pay grade who cannot afford to lose his job. His patient demeanor is astounding: his tone of voice never wavers, never goes up in pitch in a sign of irritation; it miraculously retains the same modulation as he keeps repeating in the same calm and composed manner, "cheese . . . cheese . . . cheese." This certainly intensifies the clip's humorous effect. I suspect that the sales person has to summon all of his will power to avoid being rude to an unreasonable customer, and I am thus reminded that the American service standards are very high, perhaps the most exacting in the world, and that the "customer is always right" slogan is taken literally (as an aside, it is difficult to imagine a clerk in a European supermarket being equally polite and patient). But perhaps he is beginning to guess that he is being set up? It is hard to tell. And the uncertainty also adds to the humorous effect. But most importantly, I also know what he does not know, namely, that he is an unwitting participant in a practical joke: the joke is on him. But what about me? Even though I am not on the internal scene together with the perfidious film crew members, who knowingly perpetuate this hoax, I still am, in some important sense, a witness. Because of its reality-show, documentary format, the film has a spontaneous "real-time" feel, which interpellates me as a member of an interactive audience, a real-life witness to this interaction. It is for my sake that this joke is played, and I am thus complicit in causing discomfort to a real person. The speech act that is being performed is clearly infelicitous in J.L. Austin's definition, meaning an utterance that is invalid or deceptive. And as a witness to the infelicitous act who knows of the deception but says nothing, I am guilty of transgressing the commandment to not bear false witness; and yet I am just a mute observer, powerless to change anything.

The sense of impotence I am feeling is connected to another source of cringing, that of frustrated anticipation. The experience of anticipation is inseparable from the act of communication, and it is specifically thematized in narrative communication as "suspense." The storyteller holds me in a suspenseful state as I anticipate an array of possible outcomes. But in this case, I know that something unpleasant is in store for the social actor, and this knowledge inhibits my anticipation. I do not know what exactly will be happening, but I know not to expect anything good or hopeful, and so I steel myself for the blow—a physical sensation attendant on cringing. My feeling of dissatisfaction is also connected to a vague suspicion that by violating the structure of expectation, the filmmaker is being unethical with respect to me as the viewer because he is not here to uphold the narrative contract of educating or entertaining me.

There is at least another reason this scene is transgressive and cringeworthy—its sheer insufferable duration. While on the level of the internal scene, Borat's unremitting

avalanche of repetitive questions is a thoughtless and rude imposition on the sales person's time, it is also an imposition on the viewer. Similarly to the previous point, it is a violation of communicative conventions: there is only so much time one has both to initiate a conversation and respond to being addressed. And in this case, the scene, by being scandalously protracted, repetitive, and tedious makes unreasonable demands on the viewer's attention span and so does not work on the performative level, although its audacity and excess are precisely what makes it so funny. Thus it could be said that even the act of storytelling is itself an infelicitous performative act that is unethical with respect to the viewer. As Generative Anthropology tells us, the act of delay or hesitation produced by the issuance of the sign has a capacity to defer violence. But what happens when the sign is itself deferred? Does it have the opposite effect of provoking violence? If uncomfortable laughter can be described as a violent reaction then perhaps yes, to some degree, at least. There is certainly something forceful and unsettling I experience when thrown between the oscillating extremes of communal laughter and mimetic resentment at being tricked or left out. The upshot for me is that cringing is not only a scenic phenomenon but one that belongs to the scene of the narrative communication scheme. If I were a witness on the internal scene observing the practical joke being played out live, I would probably feel embarrassment or guilt, but not cringing. Cringing arises from my interaction with the authorial/narrative agency in relation to the central object of representation.

The next scene I will discuss is from the 2017 Swedish film by Ruben Östlund *The Square*. This film, which won the main award of the 2017 Cannes festival, is commonly interpreted as a comedy of manners or a satirical treatment of the postmodern art world. There are many scenes that mock the vacuity and pretentiousness of art elites, such as when a journalist poses a question to a museum curator, the main character, about the meaning of a very obscure, jargony passage in the museum catalogue, and the curator seems completely stumped, resorting to some vague banality (Östlund says in an interview that he stole this passage from a real paper by an art theorist). Some critics, such as Michael Koresky, think that despite "fall[ing] in line with recent trends in art-film satire" and exposing "the intellectual flatulence of liberal cosmopolitanism," especially among the art world elite, the film's scope of investigation is broader than satire (32). It uses its off-the-wall humor to investigate the question of "how our daily behaviors and responses are ruled or inhibited by forms of psychological makeup and social conditioning (32)". I agree with Koresky that the film's larger focus is the make-up of the social scene, and I would add that from the GA perspective, it makes some inadvertently revealing observations about the uncertain status, and eventual evacuation, of the shared sacred center in the post-millennial West.

There are many awkward moments in *The Square*, whose director, in Ryan Gibley's words, "is never more comfortable than when he is making audiences squirm" (53). Before I will look at one such squirm- or cringe-inducing scenes in the film, I will briefly explain the context. The story revolves around a fictional museum of modern and contemporary art in Stockholm, housed in the former Royal Palace, whose high-profile Danish curator struggles to attract donations and public interest to his boundary-pushing art shows. The formal plot is shaped as a quest in which the protagonist attempts to retrieve personal items that were stolen early in the film. But in the very beginning of the film, the museum workers dismantle the equestrian statue of a king that was in the center of a large plaza in front of the palace and unveil a new installation in its place, a 4×4 meter square, cut into the cobblestones that pave the courtyard and set off by neon lighting. A metal plaque mounted next to it says: "The square is a sanctuary of trust and caring. Within its boundaries we all share equal rights and obligations." When the curator introduces this installation to the museum's patrons and VIPs during the opening night ceremony, he explains that the square is a public space designed to be used by anyone to request help or attention. By stepping into it, one automatically commands the consideration of the passerby, whether in donating money, offering shelter, or simply relieving supplicant's loneliness by stopping by to talk. This intention behind lofty slogan is undercut immediately in the very next scene, where the actual passerby in an actual Stockholm square are rushing indifferently past a sleeping homeless man and ignoring a woman who is exhorting them to stop and "save a life."

It is clear that the square installation is a replacement for a traditional sacred order since it symbolically deposes a king in order to appropriate his central position. But appropriate in the name of who or what? What will the new sacred stand for? Presumably, for a democratic, non-hierarchical social order, where everyone can become the center of attention, but only for a limited time. Because everyone has an equal claim on the center, the square models a basically sound moral paradigm based on the reciprocal exchange of a victimhood status. And yet there is something odd about this essentially empty symmetry of moral equality, which produces an undifferentiated, center-less center; the entire configuration feels like something is missing. Perhaps Gans puts his finger on the diagnosis when he associates the victimary sacred with a negative value. In his "Victimary Passions" chronicle he writes that "The victimary mindset is characterized by an exclusively negative

view of human difference. The model of moral reciprocity is interpreted as the sole ethical principle, so that the sufferings of the least successful member of the society become, as for Sartre and more subtly for John Rawls, the measure of the moral value of the society" (Chronicle #538). We recognize it as a social utopia based on reciprocity but in denial of firstness (Chronicle #451). And what we notice in this film is that a dynamics that perpetuates the empty circulation of reciprocity and denies the anthropological model of firstness, here represented by the literal removal of the king in order to supplant him with a vacant place holder, is incapable of creating a positively-charged center that holds its "planetary system" together. This is what I understand to be the main reason for the film's heterogeneous, eclectic, "patched-together" quality, its incoherent social commentary, and unstable humor. It is hard to know where the authors' sympathies are, with whom they invite us to align, and at whom we are supposed to laugh as we follow a progression of awkward but funny situations as the protagonist spectacularly bungles his mission to get his stolen wallet, cell phone, and cuff links back. Are we allowed, for example, to laugh at a Roma beggar's demanding a sandwich without onions of a Good Samaritan or at an intimidatingly intense and comically angry immigrant boy who ambushes the main character at unexpected moments, or should we instead empathize with them as victimary stock characters?

On the other hand, the empty square is an art piece: it is not literally the sacred center but a representation of one. Must art remain as a concealed, unacknowledged sacred in the post-religious, post-traditional world? Is the world without firstness impossible, after all? And if the real center is the artistic scene itself then the question of the genre becomes important. If the genre is satirical then perhaps the film's underlying agenda is to exonerate or rescue the artistic sacred by portraying the contemporary art elite as interlopers from whom it should be protected? But the film's unstable ethical and aesthetic systems of coordinates may suggest that we are not dealing with traditional satire or comedy of manners, which are intended as correctives of societal problems rooted in human misbehavior and work on an assumption that we share the author's values and his indignation at the state of the world; and it is also assumed that we are also willing to be instructed. In the case of *The Square*, these presuppositions are questionable, which makes it hard to make a definitive determination.

To give this question more consideration, I would like to look at the following, iconic, scene, reproduced in many film posters (at the time of this writing, it can be found on YouTube). In it a group of select upper-class guests, museum patrons, presumably, with at least one of their number a celebrated artist, are sitting around dinner tables in a large reception halls at a fund-raising function and waiting to be entertained by a one-man art performance. The performing artist, Oleg, plays the role of a man-ape. His upper torso is naked and very muscular, his face wears a feral, scowling expression, and he is using arm crutches with springs to imitate ape-like knuckle-walking and enable him to leap on tables, but also to use as weapons (the fact that the actor playing Oleg, Terry Notary, has been involved in motion-capture projects greatly enhances the illusion). The scene alludes to a memorable and controversial episode that occurred to a real-life performance artist, Oleg Kulik, at the Interpol art show in Stockholm in 1996. While giving a performance of an aggressive dog, Kulik attacked and bit visitors and destroyed art works by other artists, an event that caused a scandal at the time. In a similar fashion, the film scene that lasts *an* interminable and very uncomfortable eleven-and-a-half minutes depicts the ape-man Oleg wreaking havoc among the impeccably-groomed, tony audience members, who expect to be titillated and "provoked" in a predictably "edgy" postmodernist way but don't expect for a full-blown pandemonium to break out. As Oleg starts acting out, physically intimidating the patrons and chasing the other artist to the upstairs gallery, the knowing tittering on the part of these high-art sophisticates dies down and turns into looks of acute discomfort, and finally downward stares, as the guests appear anxious to be passed over as the ape-man is circulating around the room, looking for his next victim. At one point, the art curator gets up from his seat and tries to interrupt the performance, saying "let's give a round of applause to Oleg," but the latter has reached a point of no return by this time and thus ignores the request. The culmination comes when Oleg sexually assaults a young woman. He starts pulling her hair and trying to rip off her clothes. She whispers, "help me," but nobody responds. It is only when he knocks her off her chair to the floor and appears ready to rape her that some guests finally react and descend upon him. The episode resolves in a scene of collective violence, with Oleg in the middle, receiving heavy blows from a swarm of enraged attendees.

The anthropological meaning of this denouement is ambiguous. Do the final assault and ensuing mayhem signify the death of high art as a cultural form that has lost its power of deferring violence? This interpretation is certainly given credence by a satirical take on this scene, picking up on the humorous depiction of the art guests' initial self-congratulatory preening and the curator's ineffectual scrambling in trying to stop the impending disaster. But it is also possible to read Oleg's complete identification with his role, his inability to stop the momentum and get out of character as a sign of sincerity and respect for his performance, an earnest attempt to re-imbue his art with dignity and sacred meaning. This is, for example, what The New York Times' art critic writes about Oleg's prototype, Oleg Kulik, whose performance in the U.S. was entitled "I Bite America and America Bites Me:"

Mr. Kulik has been a dog since he passed through customs at Kennedy Airport last Friday, entered a waiting van, stripped off his clothing, put on a dog coat, collar, leash and muzzle and began communicating only in canine-speak . . . [T]his is not a Conceptual exercise, the kind that you can "get" if someone simply describes it to you . . . Its efficiency is striking. There is nothing extra, superfluous or obscure about Mr. Kulik's performance. For all intents and purposes, he is a dog: he can be scary and unpredictable and territorial. After all, he's in his prime, about 5 dog years old; visitors who wish to enter his cage may do so one at a time and must put on the quilted overalls and arm-guards that hang near the chained and barred door to his cage. In his quieter moments, he can be disarmingly cute, mustering a doleful, hopeful, moist-eyed expression that can make one want to dispense a kind word, a rub behind the ears or a small snack . . . To watch a human impersonate a dog as thoroughly as Mr. Kulik is extremely disconcerting. (Roberta Smith, NYT).

In the same way, it is extremely disconcerting to watch Terry Notary's scene. Unlike *Borat*, this film is not a reality documentary, and yet our identification with the audience of the art show is very strong. Perhaps the reason for this strong empathy is our analogous position: they are the audience of the performance, while we are the audience of the film. In addition, the ape-man scene's excessive length gives it a real-time feel and heightens the effect of presence. Neither the audience in the film nor we know what is about to happen, but we suspect that the film-maker will play some dirty trick, while they are completely unsuspecting. As in the *Borat* episode, the asymmetry and infelicity of this arrangement makes us cringe and feel like we have been put in the position of a false witness. Our identification can certainly not be complete. We are the ones experiencing the cringing, while the represented audience presumably experiences uncertainty, embarrassment, mortification, extreme discomfort, even betrayal, but not cringing. The sense of betrayal comes from being egregiously violated in their role as audience because the performative act (in two senses of the word) they are watching is grossly infelicitous. What has been violated is precisely the scene's unacknowledged sacred center. In their desire to dispense with the sacrificial structure of the scene, these postmodern sophisticates of the art world are, as Gans says, "blind to the sacrificial structure of [their] own story" or blind to their own understanding of postmodern art, which is meant to provoke and challenge, as sacred. This is why when the edge of provocation is turned in their direction, they act scandalized and uncomprehending instead of cheering and celebrating. As for the real audience, what exacerbates the cringe effect is our uncertainty about the authors' intentions and moral stance; but also the fact that we do not know where the authors place us: we do not know whether we are their partners or the partners of the main character and the filmic audience; we cannot even be sure what the relationship between the two is supposed to be. Ultimately, it is we, the audience, who are betrayed, both as the recipients of the authorial message and as subjects of a deceptive invitation to identify with the characters.

The next example come from *Paradise: Love*, a 2012 Austrian film by Ulrich Seidl. Its

heroine, Theresa, is an average looking, overweight, lower middle class Austrian woman in her 50s, not glamorized or aestheticized, as film characters often are (such as Charlotte Rampling's character, for example, in a similarly-themed *Heading South*, 2005) but someone you meet in the street every day. Teresa goes on a package holiday to Kenya to meet men and have sex and to join up with a more experienced friend who has evidently done this before. On the plot level, the story follows her sexual encounters with five men, but on the level of character development, this is a story of a person's progressive desensitization to casual sex. We watch a gradual transformation of someone initially reserved and a seemingly decent beginning to manifest crude and hard aspects of her personality until she can be said to have lost her moral compass. It starts with Theresa's following the first man to a hotel to have sex but recoiling at the sordidness of the surroundings at the last moment and changing her mind; soon afterwards she meets and ends up falling in love with the second man, Munga, who tries to fleece her in multiple ways, then disappears, and later reappears with a wife and child. Theresa consoles herself by having casual sex with the third man. The fourth one is her "birthday" present from her friend and two fellow female tourists. In a long, excruciatingly uncomfortable and, indeed, cringe-inducing orgy scene, the four women try to make the man, whom they have brought to Theresa's hotel room, sexually aroused, but fail, concluding "We must be too old for him." The fifth man is invited by Theresa into her hotel room, but changes his mind, when she asks him to perform oral sex on her, and leaves. In the last scene of the film, we see Theresa walking alone along the beach looking sad and almost visibly chastened and deflated. Unlike the previous two films with ambiguous messages and undecidable authorial positions, there is neither anything controversial about the filmmaker's opinions nor any question about him inviting us to share his values and judgments. *Paradise: Love* is clearly a morality tale confirming the viewer's likely preexisting bias that sex for money is a degrading and shameful business, and the heroine's humiliation at the end serves as an important moral lesson both for her and us. I choose this example because cringing works differently here. Partly its effect has to do with exposing us to intimacies from which we should be protected, and partly with portraying its female protagonist in a very unsparing light.

Insofar as *Paradise: Love* imagines an encounter between "Europe and Africa, which is to say between rich and poor, white and black, user and used, powerful and powerless" (Willis, 62), it positions itself as an exemplary narrative for a postcolonial reading, but the fact that its protagonist is an older female and is only rich and powerful in relative terms would complicate this reading. The enterprise of female sex tourism has been described in mutually contradictory ways, both as exploitative and emancipatory: in the first case, women sex tourists, just like men, capitalize on the racial and economic inequalities and engage in predatory sexual behavior, but seen through the second lens, it can also be described as a masculinized behavior by a woman, who, by reversing traditional sexual dynamics, can "'celebrate' [her] freedom from the constraints of Western gender norms" and thus perform "gendered sexual empowerment" (Gross 514). In addition to its ostensible sexual goal, sex tourism caters to the same geographical and historical imaginations as

other types of tourism: a search for purity, spirituality, otherness, for exotic nature and cultural artifacts, as well as for an idealized post-colonial notion of the uncorrupted past. Conventional tourists have been described as lotus-eaters and pilgrims, that is to say, people on the quest of pleasure seeking and spiritual fulfillment, goals which can be seen as equally applicable to sex tourists. From an economic perspective, tourism has also been theorized by postcolonial critics as a symbolic act of consumption, representative of late capitalism and globalism. What is consumed is experience itself. Alternatively, the phenomenon of tourism has been metaphorically compared with an act of penetration, whereby the West forcibly penetrates the Third World—a comparison that acquires an additional resonance in the context of sex tourism. The last two figures, those of consumption and penetration, can also be seen as masculinist quest narratives that resolve in an act of closure.

According to Susan Frohlick and Jessica Jacobs, the researchers of female sex tourism, the subject of female sex tourism has been under-theorized. It is probably understandable, insofar as it elicits a complicated response and presents the researcher with a mass of contradictions, where various hierarchies reverse each other and opposing power gradients act at cross purposes. On the one hand, and, perhaps, in more significant ways, political and economic asymmetries between the First and the Third World inverts the power relations for the advantage of the women, who treat their sexual partners as "fetishized commodities to be bought, consumed, and discarded at will" (Gross, 513). Despite Theresa's humble and non-glamorous background as a caretaker in a mental institution, she is still significantly better-off than local men (called "beach boys" as they trawl for potential customers around the beaches). Importantly, her economic status is represented by her mobility, the fact that she can travel at will for leisure purposes, and so she is the one who visits Kenya, and not the other way around. Joan Phillips describes this encounter as "a racial and gendered quest, where the white emancipated Western female goes in search of the quintessential hypersexual black male in the center of the Other" (183).

On the other hand, local men, who engage in sexual relationships with female tourists, wield power of their own as men and possessors of younger bodies, which are desired by older women. As men, moreover, they possess the symbolic power of sexual rejection in a more pointed way than a woman would. Man number four simply cannot get aroused by the aging bodies of white Western women, and man number five is turned off by Theresa's sexual aggressiveness and chooses to interrupt their session and leave. Not only is the male body objectified by the women's fantasies of the hyper-sexualized, exoticized, and essentialized Other, but the men's sexual behavior and cultural practices are valorized as more masculine and, therefore, more attractive—a stereotype that is shared both by men and women and expresses, according to Jacobs, "a dualistic imagination of the economically powerful First World white man as hyposexual" (85). According to the informant testimony on both sides, women coming from the West enjoy greater differentiation in gendered codes of behavior, whereby men perform the dominant gendered identity as "real men" and they the

submissive identity of "real women."

What is especially important is that female sex tourism is often described as romance tourism and is seen, by women themselves, as a kind of search for romance rather than a crass exchange of sex for money. Indeed, in female sex tourism, money is rarely given as payment in direct exchange for sex but rather as gifts, monetary and otherwise. It has been argued that female sex tourists get more emotionally involved than male sex tourists, which accounts for their relationships taking on a character of courtship, where they play the role of "sugar mamas," rather than undisguised commercial exchange of money for services. As Zoe Gross writes, "Although female sex tourists may know that they are approached because they are understood to be willing targets who offer financial compensation, the fantasy of sexual desire may be more appealing if it is under the pretense of reciprocity or 'romance'" (515). Quoting Debora Pruitt and Suzanne LaFont, she adds that "often 'neither actor considers their interaction to be prostitution, even while others may label it so. The actors place an emphasis on courtship rather than the exchange of sex for money' (423). As female sex tourism employs unclear boundaries between sex and romance, throughout the film viewers observe Theresa struggling with feelings of frustration and guilt when it comes to the exchange of money for her lovers' services" (519).

It is the representation of the ambiguity of her situation that I identify as one of the sources of the cringing experience. Again, as in previous examples, I connect it to representational framing, while other critics, who also comment on how uncomfortable some scenes are, connect it to the content. Thus Holly Willis writes that "The film's power resides in its dogged pursuit of its topic, past the barriers of taste," (62) while Zoë Gross observes that the scene of sex between Theresa and Munga "is difficult to watch and its gritty and visceral intimacy is powerful on screen" (517). This is indeed an uncomfortable scene because of the way Theresa is instructing Munga how to touch her when he strokes her breasts and trying to explain the terms he doesn't know. When he still does not do it to her liking, she says: "I am not an animal. Do it like this, with feeling. You have to look to my eyes. Look into my heart." Gross thinks that in treating him like this, she displays "(neo)colonial paternalism (or rather, maternalism). In her search for 'love,' Theresa treats the men that she interacts with like her servants or untrustworthy children" (517). But I believe it is somewhat more complicated than this because during this dialog, she laughs uncomfortably and is clearly very embarrassed herself.

Other cringe-causing scenes capture her flirting conversations with men, when they try to stage a light, spontaneous banter that people would engage in as a prelude to romantic relationships, but in their case, it sounds uncomfortable, and contrived. Partly this is due to the language barrier (and this is why they have to keep repeating themselves), but the main reason is the artificiality of the fake romance situations. Here are some representative snippets (visualize both participants interspersing their comments with artificially playful bouts of laughter).

Theresa: "Do you come here with all the women?"
Munga: "No, only you."

- Do you bring all the women?
- No!
- What? Tell me.
- Only you.
- Tell me the truth. How many women have you brought here?
- No, only you, only you. . . . I am not married.
- But I am very old, and you are very young.
- Love has no end.
- Love has no end?
- Forever . . .
- Do you think that?
- Yes.
- I think that love isn't always forever.
- In Europe, maybe, in Africa, no.
- It's different in Africa?
- Yes.

. . .

Theresa: "Everything no problem?"
Munga: "For you?"

- If we walk like this.
- Yes?
- Everyone will think we're together.
- No problem.
- I can't believe it.
- People think that because I am with you, I have money.
- You have money?

- They think I have money from you.
- And you want money?
- Me? No, no money. Love. (Later it turns out that he wants, needs money for his various sick and indigent relatives, one of whom, as Theresa learns later, is his wife).

While the characters in these exchanges are clearly embarrassed and act unnaturally, it is the viewer's position that is ultimately compromised. The cringe-inducing mechanism that is mobilized in these scenes, as in the two previous examples, has to do with making the viewer complicit in an infelicitous speech act, but the exact reasons are a little bit different. The film has an unscripted feel (as I hope is clear from the dialog snippets), and the dialogs between Theresa and her men sound unrehearsed, thus creating a reality/documentary effect in this fictional story. We are in a false position of a voyeuristic witness of a very private moment, which we are not meant to witness because love-making is one of those intensely private activities that are desacralized by being put on the public scene of representation. But this private moment is itself compromised and made awkward by the characters' inauthentic imitation of real romantic intimacy while our social norms demand intimacy to "feel authentic." This inauthenticity thus feels sacrilegious in comparison to what is supposed to be an inspired, spontaneous, intimate, and passionate language of love between only two people vis-à-vis the sacred center that is also vouchsafed by this sacred center. But the flirting that we witness is merely a performance meant to mask an economic transaction, which it, however, disavows, hiding behind an illusion of romance. Moreover, we need to consider what the cinematographic aspects contribute to framing the viewers' responses. For example, Theresa is often shown from the back, both walking by herself, exploring her environment, but also together with her men, during which most of these awkward conversations take place (it is not so in the sex scenes, to which I will get shortly). Positioned straight behind her back, we can assume her to be the main focalizing gaze, and back shots are consistent with inviting the audience to experience her surroundings as she is experiencing it. I interpret this visual alignment as an invisible, fly-on-the-wall-cum-witness perspective. To summarize, we are interpellated as hidden, inappropriate witnesses to an act of prostitution that masquerades as a romantic encounter, an act, furthermore, that is made very realistic by the film's documentary technique (it is very possible that the actors improvise their lines). To a viewer, being placed as a voyeuristic false witness of a deceitful speech act feels like a betrayal, a violation of an implicit filmmaker/viewer pact that raises expectations of a partnership position on which informing and educating the latter by the former is predicated.

I think there is another thing that is done with the viewer's gaze that is the source of cringing that I will call, for the lack of a better term, "improper centering." In the sex scenes, the viewer is no longer behind her back but is positioned explicitly as a spectator, while Theresa is no longer a focalizer but a focalized element of the scene and the object of the male gaze, according to feminist criticism. But as a focalized female character, she is quite non-traditional-looking. The reception of the film confirms it, judging not only by the critics' reviews but also by the comments on sites like IMDB and an informal survey of my academic circle of acquaintances. Some people could not finish watching it. Almost every one said that the film is very disturbing, and it made them very uncomfortable. Words and phrases like "disturbing," "unwatchable," "causing a churning in your stomach" were commonly invoked. But what is even more striking is the vitriol directed at the main character's body in the articles of film critics. She was called "extremely obese," walking with a "rolling waddle," and someone with "spreading hindquarters, . . . sagging boobs and . . . back fat," to quote just a few descriptors. Clearly, she violates the viewer's expectations of what a focalized female should look like. But, on the other hand, she is not a heroine, in an expected sense. She plays a double role. Insofar as she still expects romance, she does retain some heroine-like features. But insofar as she acts in a sexually aggressive, objectifying manner toward her male lovers (such as taking a photograph of Munga's penis while he is sleeping), she violates the decorum of her gender role.

This behavior is certainly transgressive, being "outside the bounds of respectable white femininity and (hetero)sexuality," which may cause some viewer to flinch (Gross 510). But her looks play an even more important role, as I believe. Placing an older, decidedly not-glamorous-looking, overweight woman at the center of long, rather explicit sexual scenes featuring nudity is itself a controversial choice, legitimating the centering of what is basically an object of abjection. In "Ageing Abjection and Embodiment in the Fourth Age," Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs extend Kristeva's model of abjection to the aging body. According to Kristeva, the abject is that which escapes the symbolic economy of meaning and preexists the object-subject split. She associates abjection with the leaky female body which has trouble with managing its corporeal boundaries. The bodily fluids that escape are

a cause of impurity and contamination. But according to Gilleard and Higgs, we can also apply these ideas to the aging body, arguing that signs of ageing, such as "wrinkled skin and sagging muscles . . . provide the visible context within which the ageing body is transformed into the abject other, objectified old age"—a harbinger of the changes to come, when the body becomes transgressive (138). They also stress that it is not so much the signs of aging themselves that cause the sense of disgust that arises from a "re-alignment of abjection and agedness" but what it signifies in terms of an impending loss of agency and self-control, that is "the impotence to mount a transgression of agedness" (141).

All of this creates a multi-layered response of the viewer to centering Theresa and her Austrian female friends as the sexual objects of several very uncomfortable sex scenes. To begin with, it frustrates an anticipated prurient response, which is normally aroused by observing beautiful bodies in an act of love-making. It can be argued that in undercutting the viewer's expectations of focalizing on an aesthetically pleasing object (as is done in *Heading South*, mentioned above, where the bodies of aging female sex tourists are aestheticized) the filmmaker here betrays the unspoken agreement to entertain his viewer, as supported by the reviewers' comments, which display disgust and anger. At the same time, Theresa and her friends do not show humility in the face of their "impotence to mount a transgression of agedness" but instead, what many viewers may see as a tone-deaf, arrogant, and galling sense of entitlement. As Zoë Gross writes, "Even though Teresa appears to be unsure of herself and her role once she arrives in Mombasa, it is clear that she expects to be positioned as desirable simply because she is there and available" (514). Even though she shows some restraint in the beginning, her behavior becomes progressively more exploitative, demanding, and crude. Gross also adds that "The film painstakingly documents these women's inability to fulfill Western ideals of beauty, as well as their decision that they no longer want to—and, perhaps, no longer can—conform, and want to be accepted and desired as they are. Many female sex tourists may respond positively to increased attention from local men because it instills within them a heightened sense of self-esteem, particularly for those who do not have an idealized Western physique that fulfills the demanding standards of beauty for white women" (514). In addition to this, that the women seem to be very insecure about their attractiveness, making "negative references, ad nauseam, about their own bodies, bemoaning their wrinkles, 'fat ass[es]', and flabby bodies" (Gross, 514). Yet their simultaneous and contradictory impulse is to "continually insist that they must be desirable 'as is'. At one point Teresa asks her friend: 'They [black Kenyan men] accept you like you are, right?'" (Gross, 514).Thus on the one hand, the viewer can have a visceral reaction to an aging overweight woman at the center of the story who acts in a sexually aggressive manner. On the other, Theresa still identifies with being an ingénue who wants to be wooed, saying wistfully, "I want someone to look into my eyes and really see me. I want to be seen for myself, not for this aging body." The pathos of Theresa's situation in combination with her moral flaws creates a confusion about her position as the central romantic character. We need, at the very least, for her to be a victim as a compensation for being an improper object of desire in order to sympathize with

her, but she is not. As a result, it leaves us uncertain about her status as a central object, which complicates our reaction to the film (and explains some of the irritated comments above). The upshot is that once again the viewer is coerced as an illegitimate fly-on-the-wall witness or reluctant spectator in these uncomfortable scenes that no one should witness, and as a result, he may feel violated.

My final example comes from a 1997 film by Michael Haneke, *Funny Games*. At the time of this writing, a subtitled version of this film exists on YouTube. This is, strictly speaking, a pre-millennial film, but I judge it to be an early harbinger of this type of aesthetics. There was a later, American, remake by the same director and under the same name, but I am choosing to speak about the earlier, Austrian version, as more "atmospheric" and "authentic" (contested as these terms may be). What I identify as the main affect in *Funny Games* cannot be categorized as cringing or awkwardness; I would rather characterize it as painful discomfort or extreme unpleasantness. But I am including this film under the same rubric because it also desacralizes the scene by employing representational strategies that undermine the viewer's position within narrative framing. The reason I do not refer to the distressing scenes as cringe-inducing is because the "turn" or delayed effect of the reader realizing that "he's been had" is either missing or not as conspicuous (below I will present a case by some critics that the film intends to provoke a moment of introspection in the viewer). Instead the viewer experiences the constant pressure of a very irregular, terrorizing presence controlling the narrative.

The story is about two young sadists who break into a house and terrorize a family, forcing them to play "funny games" (that are, needless to say, not funny), only to kill them all in the end. Watching the film is, in Vartan Messier's words, "a gut-wrenching experience," and not only because the film is very violent, but even more so because it does not show violence explicitly on the screen. Messier's analysis hits the nail on the head, in my opinion, by making an observation that what makes it so unbearable is that the film makes a point of "not providing the traditional structures of visual pleasure or catharsis" (60). In other words, its effect has to do with the deliberate design of the filmmaker to undermine or frustrate the viewing experience. Haneke himself said that you can make the watching of a film unbearable though psychological means, by choosing not to show certain situations. (*Cine-fils* magazine). This is what he does very effectively in *Funny Games*. It is impossible to pinpoint one particular uncomfortable scene. The entire film is extremely uncomfortable to watch, from the beginning to the end, especially since we know that there will be no happy ending. But there are several scenes that stand out for me. In a rather early, very tense sequence, the visitors force the mother to play the hot-cold game as she is walking outside the house in search of the family dog that has suddenly gone silent. When she comes to their parked car, and it becomes very "hot," she opens the front door and watches the dead dog fall out and hit the ground. But this is done as a long shot from a considerable distance, and we cannot see the wound, blood, or any other gory details. It is at this point that the family (and the viewer) can appreciate the seriousness of the situation. In another

hard-to-watch scene, one of the perpetrators tells the family's little son that they are going to play "a kitty in the bag" and then puts a pillow case over his head. He then orders the mother to take off her clothes, hurting her son and threatening further violence if she does not comply. Ostensibly, the bag over her son's face is to "preserve moral decency." The mother takes off her clothes, but her body is not shown; we only see the close-up of her distraught and tearful face. But one of the most difficult scenes is the one where the little boy is shot. We see one of the perpetrators in the kitchen making sandwiches. In the background, we hear the shot of a rifle followed by screams by the parents, but the character we follow does not break his stride. He finishes with his sandwiches and brings them to the living room, and only then do we see the wall splattered with blood.

As the previous film examples, this film also plays with the viewer's perceptions and anticipations, eventually "confronting viewers with their own sense of reality and social disorientation" (Koch, 86). Haneke wants to shock the viewers, but it does not mean that he wants to trick them or make a joke at their expense. In fact, as Haneke himself explains, this goes against his ethics as a filmmaker: one should not use images to lie to or manipulate the viewer. In his numerous interviews, he has been quite open about the instructive value of violence in *Funny Games*, contending that the main problem with violent Hollywood films is that they normalize violence by making it intelligible ("present the world that is explainable and whose contradictions are resolved") and entertaining (allowing the viewers "to have their cravings for pacification gratified") (qtd. Hart, 70). He has also talked about viewers "needing" to see *Funny Games*. Thus in a Guardian interview with Stuart Jeffries, where he discusses the American remake from 2007, he says that his film "is a reaction to a certain American cinema, its violence, its naivety, the way American cinema toys with human beings. In many American films, violence is made consumable. But because I *made Funny Games* in German with actors not familiar to US audiences, it didn't get through to the people who most needed to see it." In his essay entitled "Violence and the Media," he says that people have already been largely desensitized by the entertainment media, and this is precisely why "anyone who leaves the theater doesn't need this film; anyone who stays does." (qtd. Puddicombe). In other words, the film is meant as an explicit intervention in the audiences' desires, expectations, and emotional habits. But at the same time, as Arne Koch observes, Haneke uses his art "not to pontificate or lecture, but rather to leave audiences with enough ambiguity to generate its own conclusions" (96).

Instead, what the film does to address the above concerns is, firstly, as already mentioned, undercut the framework of expectations by frustrating the voyeuristic impulse to see gory images, and secondly, play with the viewer's desire to have violence explained by making the explanation overdetermined. Thus the two torturers banter about their ongoing rivalry, or one of them suggests to the family that it is the other one's traumatic and deprived childhood that involved, among other things, an incestuous relationship with his mother that is responsible for his cruelty. But he adds immediately, "What kind of answer would you like? What would satisfy you? Anyway, what I said isn't true." Then he offers another

explanation: he and his companion are drug addicts, and they kill and rob rich families to get money for drugs. Ultimately no explanation would suffice: when the father of the family asks one of the perpetrators why he is doing this, the latter's answer is "why not?" In Messier's words,

> On the one hand, [the film] brutally denies us any type of catharsis even after it teases us on numerous occasions through a series of carefully orchestrated shots and sequences. On the other, it perturbs the sanctity of our position as spectators by reminding us that we are the instruments of our own demise. The cinematic frame that traditionally serves as the vehicle through which we can project our introjected wishes and desires from a relatively safe distance become a mirror, wherein our wish to witness destruction and suffering on-screen is directly reflected on us (65).

Alexandra Biernacka arrives at a similar conclusion but goes even further, suggesting that the viewers are nudged in the direction of reflecting on their own responses that are complicit in the culture of violence: at "a meta-level of the film-viewer relation . . . the film conveys a message that a viewer, by finding satisfaction in aggressive and cruel acts present in popular fiction, stimulates the use of violence on screen and therefore bears true responsibility for the tragic lot of the Funny Games family" (3).

What these critics suggest is that even though Haneke wants to teach their viewers a moral lesson, he is not "on the same side" or "on the same level" as the viewers—not part of the same joint-attention scene, one might say. Even though he has their higher interests at heart, the story, as it is presented, intends to subvert their viewing experience. This in itself strikes me as a strategy that is not radically new but has been tried before. But what is new—and this is why I want to put this film in the postmillennial category—is not so much the trick of making the audiences feel ashamed of their fascination with violence, but the film's aesthetic and narrative means of conjuring up the atmosphere of absolutely demoralizing, debilitating, and desacralizing nihilism. What is unusual about *Funny Games* is that it is so uncompromising in its bleakness: there is no hope, relief, escape, or redemption for the victims. We can ask ourselves what makes this one so extraordinarily devastating compared to many other horror films that are made every year. It is especially surprising in light of the fact that the film is not only about game-playing but performs game-playing on a metanarrative level.

At important junctures, the narrative breaks the so-called 4th wall, the imaginary separation between the story being narrated and the viewer. The intention behind this is alluded to in the last scene, when the two perpetrators are sailing the family's boat toward the house of their next victims, having just killed the mother. At this point, they are calmly discussing a book one of them has read, which has a plot twist: at the end of the story, it turns out that there are two universes, one real and the other fictional, with the protagonist's family finding themselves in the real world, and the protagonist in fiction. "But the fiction is real," says his companion. "How so?" asks the first one. "Well, you see it in the film, right? So it's just as real as the reality you see likewise," is the answer. This deceptively naive comment encodes a metanarrative "wink" to the viewer about the pretend, play-acting nature of all story-telling, supporting Arne Koch's view that this and other Haneke's films explore the idea of game as performance: "the *game* is no longer played with or against others, but solely for its own *sake*" (95).

When we look at the instances where the 4th wall is broken, it becomes clear that we are not simply addressed directly but made part of the game. For example, as part of their game-playing, the sadists suggest a wager to the family as to whether they will be alive in twenty-four hours, after which one of them turns and looks directly in the camera, asking the viewer: "What do you think? Do you think they have a chance of winning?" Clearly, the family as the characters in the story depicted as helpless hostages (the father's leg is broken and he is not transportable), have no chance of winning. The question only makes sense on the level of the narrator-narratee communication: can we as viewers bet on the family's survival, something that film audiences and readers habitually do when consuming narratives?[2] In a later scene, after the little boy is already killed, the father is pleading with his torturers, "Get this over with. This is enough," and the response he gets is "But we are not at the feature film length yet," a metanarrative comment looking ahead to the final conversation about fiction and reality being interchangeable. Still, the most striking instance of this confusion between fiction and reality presents itself in the often discussed penultimate scene when the mother manages to grab a rifle that one of the intruders carelessly leaves on the table and shoot him dead. Upon this, the other one wrestles the rifle from her hands and reaches for the remote control, which he uses to literally rewind the scene backward so that his accomplice is alive again, the hope of escape is crushed, and the

bad ending is ensured.

One could reasonably ask whether foregrounding the game-like aspect of the story, in which a character is communicating with the viewer, will remind us that this is all invention, not reality, and thus make it *less* serious and heartbreaking? Yet paradoxically, it is precisely this staged, expressly make-believe character of the film that makes it so devastating. By communicating with the viewer directly, the sadist character (one of them) "usurps" all communicative channels. Whether we subscribe to the model that distinguishes between the narrator/narratee and implied author/implied reader model or to the impersonal vs. personal narrator model, we still need to identify the agent of a truth-functional discourse, on whose account we can fall back. And we need to trust this bearer of an authoritative discourse to be, if not a benign, at least neutral presence that anchors us together on the scene of representation in the configuration of joint attention. It is to this agency that we ascribe authorial intentions. When we, for example, read *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis, which is narrated in first person by a sadist, serial killer, and cannibal, or watch the film based on it, we do not for a second suspect the implied author or impersonal narrator of being a sadist, serial killer, and cannibal. We implicitly understand that this authorial agency is sharing a story from the perspective of a character-narrator which should not be trusted. But nothing like this subtends the point of view of the killer in *Funny Games* where nothing inserts itself between the consciousness of this evil character-narrator and the notion of the *real* author (Michael Haneke, the director, remains somewhere at the edges of our consciousness as we watch this gripping drama). On the contrary, the narrative strategy of *Funny Games* is constructed in such a way so as to blur the impersonal and personal narrators or dispense with the implied author. What is left then is only one dictatorial narrator who completely controls the narrative and our gaze, choosing not to show us the mother's nudity or the torture and execution of the son. One might think that turning away from violence is a more compassionate choice, but, surprisingly, this refusal has the opposite effect because it feels so unnatural in the given context. A natural voyeuristic impulse would compel us to look, and when the camera denies us this perverse satisfaction, we experience its dictate as coercive and arbitrary. By steering our gaze in such a flagrant and deliberate manner, the visual narration sustains a terrifying illusion that the world is completely controlled by evil, and that there is no hope and no escape. This chilling effect is strengthened by the final, which is for me the most powerful, scene where the mother, whose hands and feet are tied, is thrown overboard. What is especially arresting about the way this sequence unfolds is that there is absolutely no change of pacing, no special visual or auditory accentuation or warning preparing the viewer for what is about to happen. The event is completely unmarked: she is tipped overboard as effortlessly, casually, and nonchalantly as one would brush a crumb off a table. Afterwards the two laugh between themselves about finishing a full hour before the bet was to run out. Both the content of the scene, the fact that they have not kept their end of the bargain not only with the characters but also with the audience, and the form, the aesthetic decision to ignore the dramatic structure in framing the event, combine to underscore the horrifying power of the author-

narrator over the fictional world into which we have been lured. This communicational model goes beyond subverting the viewer's expectation of a reasonable explanation. Even a non-explanatory structure can be seen as a pseudo-explanation of sorts, with the author communicating to the viewer that there is evil in the world that we cannot understand. In a sense, it also goes beyond the previous three examples where the viewer is treated in an underhanded way and forced into a position of a false witness. *Funny Games* denies the viewer agency in the most radical and uncompromising way. Even though Haneke's ostensive purpose is to teach the audiences about the danger of becoming desensitized to violence, what he achieves instead is removing them from the collective scene altogether.

* * *

Having presented these four examples of desacralizing strategies in recent films, achieved through narrative, visual, and temporal means, I would like, in conclusion, to summarize my main points and raise an open question to which I lack a satisfying answer. It seems to me that what these films are doing is something new, if not in kind, then, at least, in degree. It has become a conventional collocation to say that we "consume" a work of art. Insofar as we accept this metaphor as valid, it is so in the sense of collective dividing and consuming the hunting spoils on the originary hunting scene. Consumption of art is not solitary business. The author places the work of art on the scene and invites us to step up to it so that we could join him in regarding or attending to what is in front of all of us in the sacred center. The author is thus the controlling presence, serving as a mimetic model or a sign of firstness, and we defer to his authority. He might have his own intentions for summoning us to the scene—to entertain us, instruct us, change our opinions on an issue, or use us as silent interlocutors with whom one could to share one's fears or feelings—and we might not guess his agenda until we complete our viewing or reading experience. In doing so, an angry author might want to shock or scandalize his audience by defiling what they hold sacred, such as presenting them with an image of a crucifix in urine. But even this attempt to anger the audience is done in the spirit of a dialogue with his audiences, with the intention behind it being "to make them think," presumably so that they re-evaluate the "sacreds" that have served their purpose in deferring violence but have now lost their potency to do so. This not uncommon gesture of late postmodern art can be seen as desacralizing, but only in relation to content. This is certainly an antagonizing action, and some viewers might feel outraged and excluded from the scene of joint attention that radiates around the art work. But their exclusion is not forced on them; nothing prevents them from reconsidering their position, reinterpreting what they saw, and having an epiphanic experience of acceptance. In contrast to these, the works of art I have discussed function as desacralizing on the level of the scene itself instead of its content. By betraying or excluding the audience from the outset, by design, as it were, these postmillennial works of art erode the common ground that underlies the act of communication. It can be said that the scene invalidates itself, evacuating its sacred center, for the sake of which the author and his audiences come together to share an aesthetic experience. At the risk of putting this

in overdramatic terms, I would like to claim that by denying the scene, the desacralizing act of exclusion has far-reaching implications, ultimately denying the viewers their humanity.

I have identified something that, I believe, is symptomatic for a (small?) number contemporary works of art. The natural follow-up question in the light of my discussion of performatism and metamodernism is where these desacralizing works can be placed alongside of performatist and metamodernist works. What they all have in common, in my opinion, is their awareness of the scene. Postmillennial art is no longer oblivious to the existence of the scene and can therefore be playful and explicit in foregrounding the contingent ways in which the latter might be constituted. What the desacralizing aesthetics does not share with the other two is latter's affective attitude toward art—neither their optimism, nor their "affirmatism," nor their (neo)sincerity or (neo)romanticism. In the beginning, I asked whether the desecration of sacred cultural objects can be seen as the final stage of postmodernism. On consideration, I would hesitantly put my own examples on the same continuum as postmodernism, in terms of their goals and attitudes, insofar as they seem to continue the postmodernist project of deconstructing Western aesthetic forms and the cultural narratives that give rise to them. But we may note that they do it in such a radical and decisive manner as to make Gans's diagnosis of postmodernism no longer being successful in deferring violence even more meaningful and final. If I am correct in this assessment then we can place art works that negate the scene of representation at the tail end of the postmodernist movement in art.

Bibliography

Austin, J. L. *How to do Things with Words*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962. Print.

Badt, Karin Luisa. "The Need for Empathy at 2017 Cannes." *Film Criticism*, Vol. 41, Issue 3, 2017. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Biernacka, Aleksandra. "A Case of Auteur Cinema in a Changed Cultural Context: 'Funny Games' (1997) and 'Funny Games, US' (2007) by Michael Haneke." *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*. Vol. 3, No. 2 (2012): 1-15. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985. Print.

Burgoyne, Robert. "The Cinematic Narrator: The Logic and Pragmatics of Impersonal Narration." *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 42, no. 1, (Spring 1990), pp. 3-16. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Chatman, Seymour. "The Cinematic Narrator." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory*

Readings. Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 474-486. Print.

—. *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990. Print.
Cine-fils magazine. "MICHAEL HANEKE on VIOLENCE – cine-fils.com." Online video clip. YouTube, 1 Feb. 2010. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Eshelman, Raoul. "After Postmodernism: Performatism in Literature." *Anthropoetics* 11.2 (Winter 2006). <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1102/perform05/> . Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

—. *Performatism or the End of Postmodernism.* Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group Publishers, 2008. Print.

Flesch, William. "Narrative and Noncausal Bargaining." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*. Vol. 45, No. 1 (Spring 2012): 6-9. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

—. "Reading and Bargaining." *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*. Ed. Lisa Zunshine. Oxford University Press. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Frohlick, Susan. 2013. *Sexuality, Women, and Tourism: Cross-border Desires through Contemporary Travel*. New York: Routledge. Print.

Gans, Eric. "The Centre." *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*. No. 579, 17 Mar. 2018. <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw579/> . Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

—. *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985. Print.

—. *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993. Print.

—. "The Post-Millennial Age." *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*. No. 209, 3 Jun. 2000. <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw209/> . Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

—. "Post-Millennial Thoughts." *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*. No. 253, 22 Dec. 2001. <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw253/> . Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

—. "Reciprocity and Firstness." *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*. No. 451, 11 Jan. 2014. <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw451/> . Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

—. "Sacrificing Culture." *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*. No. 184, 9 Oct. 1999. <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw184/> . Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

—. *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997. Print.

—. "The Victimary Hypothesis." *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*. No. 460, 26 Apr. 2014. http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw460/ . Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

—. "Victimary Passion." *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*. No. 538, 4 Mar. 2017. http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw538/ . Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

—. "Victimocracy." *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*. No. 442, 25 May 2013. http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw442/ . Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Gilbey, Ryan. "Human Apes." *New Statesman*, 16-22 March, 2018. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Gilleard, Chris and Paul Higgs. "Ageing abjection and embodiment in the fourth age." *Journal of Aging Studies*, 25 (2011), pp. 135-142. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Gross, Zoë. "Unpacking the landscape of female sex tourism in Kenya: a film analysis of Paradise: Love." *Gender, Place & Culture*, 25:4, pp. 507-524. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Hart, Gail. "Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* and Schiller's Coercive Classicism." *Modern Austrian Literature*. Vol. 39, No. 2 (2006): 63-75. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

"In 'The Square,' A Scandinavian Satire of a Modern Art Museum." *All Things Considered*, 26 Oct. 2017. Literature Resource Center, http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A513068723/LitRC?u=stockuni&sid=LitRC&xid=b0966068 . Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Jacobs, Jessica. *Sex, Tourism, and the Postcolonial Encounter: Landscapes of Longing in Egypt*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016. Print.

Jeffries, Stuart. "Master Manipulator." *The Guardian*, 31 Mar. 2008. Web. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/mar/31/austria . Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Karthauser, Kyle. "Popular Culture after Postmodernism: *Borat*, *Family Guy*, *The Office*, and the Awkwardness of Being Earnest." *Anthropoetics* 15.2 (Spring 2010). http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1502/1502karthauser/ . Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Koch, Arne. "Reality Games: Michael Haneke as Auteur and Stalker." *Kultur Poetik*. Vol. 10, No. 1 (2010): 85-98. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Koresky, Michael. "Any Questions?" *Film Comment*, November-December 2017. pp. 30-35. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Kotsko, Adam. *Awkwardness*. Zero Books, 2010. Print.

Lorentzen, Christian. "Art Brute." *New Republic*, November, 2017. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Mars Jones, Adam. "Ritual of Dominance." *Times Literary Supplement*. 16, March, 2018. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Messier, Vartan. "Game Over? The (Re)Play of Horror in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* U.S." *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*. Vol. 1, No. 1&2 (2014): 59-77. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Middleton, Jason. *Documentary's Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship*. Kindle ed., Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies, 2014.

Phillips, Joan. "Tourist-Oriented Prostitution in Barbados: The Case of the Beach Boy and the White Female Tourist." *Sun, Sex, and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean*. Ed. Kamala Kempadoo. Langham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 1999. Print.

Puddicombe, Stephen. "Why *Funny Games* remains just as shocking 20 years on." *Little White Lies*. 18 May 27. https://lwlies.com/articles/funny-games-michael-haneke-satire-screen-violence/ . Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Romney, Jonathan. "Playing to the Gallery." *Sight & Sound*. April 2018. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Scholes, Robert. "Narration and Narrativity in Film." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 1:3, 1976. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Smith, Roberta. "On Becoming a Dog." *The New York Times*. 18 Apr. 1997. https://www.nytimes.com/1997/04/18/arts/on-becoming-a-dog-by-acting-like-one.html . Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Vermeulen, Timotheus and Robin van den Akker. "Notes on Metamodernism." *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*. Vol. 2, 2010. http://www.emerymartin.net/FE503/Week10/Notes%20on%20Metamodernism.pdf . Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Willis, Holly. "Hard Facts and Bitter Truths: Ulrich Seidl's Disturbing View of the Human Condition in the Globalization Era Gets a Full Workout in His Paradise Trilogy." *Film Comment*. Sept.-Oct. 2013. pp. 60-63. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Zacharek, Stephanie. "A Fraught Cannes, Inside Screening Rooms and Out." *Time*, 1 Jun. 2017. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

—. "From Sweden, a Dazzling Bit of Trickery That Goes off with a Bang." *Time*, 6 Nov. 2017. Web. Accessed 2 Sept. 2018.

Notes

[1] I am indebted to my student, Simon Andersson, for bringing this scene from *Borat* and *Funny Games*, discussed later, to my attention.

[2] See William Flesch's insightful argument on bargaining and narrative in the articles referenced in the bibliography.