

Carnage (Roman Polanski, 2011)

It is a fact universally acknowledged that if a storyteller puts a group of people together for an extended period of time in a circumscribed location, the characters will start revealing things about their own inner selves . . . and it won't turn out well. Joseph Conrad did this in his short story "An Outpost of Progress," and the trope pops up with frequency in movies, from Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* to Kubrick's *The Shining* to Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight* to Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse*. Roman Polanski does it with the four characters in his 2011 film *Carnage*. It's a fine film in the genre, but there's nothing spectacular about it. It's just an example of good quality workmanship in moviemaking—which is all it needs to be. The story itself, though, does present some worthwhile points to ponder (not being familiar with the 2006 stage play by Yazmina Reza from which it is adapted, I can't comment on what, in this film, comes from Polanski, and what was given to him by his source material).

The premise is simple: two kids were fighting and one of them whacked the other in the face with a stick, chipping his teeth. The parents get together to discuss the matter in a "civil" fashion, which of course doesn't happen. The setup is thin and at times it feels like things are taking too long—but that meshes with the truth of what we see onscreen; this little meeting is taking waaay too long. Watching this movie is a strange exercise in dissociation; what we are watching is excellently portrayed, but it's an absolute trainwreck of a situation. Am I to applaud or deplore what I see on the screen?

Immediately I note two themes: *Blame* and *Justice*. The movie could be read as an extended meditation of the human quest for justice: Penelope is consumed by a desire to see justice being done; she feels her son, and by implication her family, has been harmed, and justice demands that someone must pay. But the truth of the matter is that justice, quite often, will not be achieved this side of eternity—which is why the Christian conception of eternal justice must be kept in mind when thinking about the evil deeds done on this earth. Quite beyond Penelope's motherly concern for the welfare of her son, I can sympathize with her desire to see the evil

deed punished (although I would not go so far as her and say that Zachary is a “national security threat”). It is significant (and quite true to life) that, in Penelope’s mind, the concept of *Justice* is so closely tied with that of *Blame*. She seems to need someone to blame for her son’s injuries, but it’s not enough for her to say “Zachary Cowan did it”—that’s obvious, but who is to blame for *that*? Are Zachary Cowan’s parents to blame? In exactly what way? But when the Cowans dare to suggest that maybe Ethan Longstreet was to blame for calling Zachary a “snitch” . . . well, Penelope can’t handle that. Blame, yes . . . but personal and family pride also seem to come into play, as they do in the real world every day.

Our modern world’s concept of justice demands we *must* find who is at fault; we feel that if we can assign blame, we have achieved something. I’ve noticed this blame-mongering happens often in the aftermaths of terrible public tragedies: there is a huge desire to frame some sort of narrative around the awful events that happen every day. Someone shoots up a school or a mosque or a concert and . . . we start talking about guns or misogyny or racism or incels, but rarely do we talk about the evil in our hearts. Does it do any good to talk about those other things if we haven’t yet finished our root cause analysis? We are flailing about, trying desperately to control the situation by assigning blame, when we ought to be admitting the brokenness of the world and our powerlessness, as finite humans, to solve the fundamental problem, the problem of evil. By assigning blame we can worry more precisely but nothing in the human heart has changed.

Here’s an interesting symmetry: Every one of the adults in the film possesses an object which is threatened, in some way, by some other person in the film. Penelope’s Kokoschka book is vomited on by Nancy; Michael is very possessive of his bottle of whiskey, which Penelope wants to grab from him; there is of course Alan’s phone, which Nancy dunks in the water; and finally there is Nancy’s bag, which Penelope throws across the room. I don’t know if this has any specific meaning, but I thought it was a neat trick on the part of the screenwriters. Three of the characters are also in some way defined by something which is discussed but never seen—Penelope’s book about Darfur, Michael’s mother, and the pharmaceutical company that Alan is defending in court. This is probably just a coincidence, however, since Nancy isn’t defined or related to anything in such a way, unless you count how she is the only one who seems worried about the hamster Michael left out in the street.

Would it have been an interesting story to see the lead-up to this event? Part of me wants to see Nancy persuading Alan that he really needs to leave the office and come to these people's apartment, even if only just for form's sake . . . Penelope getting Michael to "dress like a liberal" and wrangle up the tulips . . . Imagine these two stories being told *without* the subsequent meeting at the Longstreet's apartment. Imagine Michael learning something about his wife in the process of accommodating her desires. Imagine Alan realizing he really does need to stop shoving all of the parental responsibilities onto his wife. Imagine them coming together and having a *really good time*. Why is *that* story not told?

It almost seems that our current cultural moment is fascinated with stories of dysfunctional relationships. A while ago I read some movie critic's thinkpiece about "all those A24 films" and what they say about us viewers. We love to see dysfunctional people, trainwreck relationships, and people that can't get their lives together or keep them that way. What does this say about us?

Do we want stories of broken people and dysfunctional relationships because we want to feel good about our own well-ordered lives? Or because we think a hopeless brokenness is the real truth about human relationships? It certainly seems that the whole concept of "relationships," in any and every sense of the word, is under severe strain in our culture. A week doesn't go by without some new essay crossing my path about either the male loneliness problem or the emptiness of online relationships or the gender divide or the fact that "kids these days" have difficulty talking to other people or any number of other manifestations of this apparently species-wide breakdown in human relations.

If that is so, though, then *Carnage* certainly won't help the situation. Here, for an hour and a half, we can watch grown adults blow small matters entirely out of proportion, argue in bad faith at each other, misconstrue each others' words, think the worst of each other, and behave like infants. Meanwhile the final scene of the film shows their kids patching up their differences on their own in a sort of reverse version of *Lord of the Flies*: while the adults are bickering, the kids actually behave decently to each other. I always thought that the best moment in *Lord of the Flies* happens after the book is done, when the ship captain (you know he will say it) exclaims "While you kids were marooned on the island you did *WHAT????!*" Post-*Carnage*, I can imagine the same thing happening with the Cowans and the Longstreets: the kids come back in from the park with the announcement that they are now friends, and all the parents can do is gasp in surprise.

Surprise, because the adults have given up on the possibility of real reconciliation and camaraderie between people. At one point Alan says that he “believes in the god of Carnage”—the spirit of might-makes-right, take-what-you-can unprincipled nihilism. Although the other three don’t come out and say it directly I can believe they all feel something similar: Michael’s conciliatory tone, Penelope’s jostling for the moral high ground, and even Nancy’s contempt of the Longstreets and her husband are all, in some form, manifestations of Alan’s unprincipled “look out for number one” philosophy.

If that is so, then all I can say about *Carnage* is: what a rotten, depressing story—but what a well-crafted telling of it!

N.B. The casting of John C. Reilly was a shock to me . . . because when he talks I can’t hear anyone except *Wreck-it Ralph!!* Really! I know, I know—this is my problem, not Polanski’s, and if I’ve spent too much time watching cartoons with my kids, that doesn’t mean anyone else needs to do anything about it. But I thought it was supremely distracting that Reilly’s Michael sounds *exactly* like the video game villain from Disney’s 2012 cartoon. He even plays opposite a character with almost exactly the same name! “Penelope”—“Vanellope”! The scene in which Penelope tries to get at the whiskey bottle and Michael holds it up out of her reach plays *exactly* like something Ralph and Vanellope would do. Reilly is about a foot taller than Jodie Foster, too—so they even *look* like Ralph and Vanellope. I kept wanting Michael to “solve” the interpersonal problems in this film—and by that, of course, I mean “make them worse”—with his fists.

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