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The “Business” of Violence in Yasmina Reza’s *God of Carnage*

HELENE JACCOMARD

In *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory* Beatrice Hanssen claims that “violence now includes such phenomenologically elusive categories as psychological, symbolic, structural, epistemic, hermeneutical, and aesthetic violence” (8). This translates in two opposite approaches: either we detect violence where it is not, or conversely, violence is everywhere. In this latter approach, violence is an all-embracing concept, and defines almost every human act. It thus loses its specificity and efficacy in elucidating human behaviours, and consequently the multifarious representations of violence in literature serve no purpose.

If we turn to French literature this conundrum is all the more troubling, since violence is the “most significant [theme] characterizing modern French literature” of the last one hundred years, according to influential American critic Wallace Fowlie (Fowlie, vii). Florence Fix, editor of a collection of essays on violence in drama, further writes: “Illogique et inintelligible, la violence est ce qui résiste à l’analyse et à la distance critique car elle se veut une fin en soi” (Fix 22). If an inflated concept of violence combines with the impossibility of understanding it, then interpretation is stopped in its track. This would be an unacceptable end to interpretation.

Yasmina Reza’s play tackles this very paradox. By representing the many ways violence manifests itself in our so-called civilized society, *God of Carnage*¹ seeks to investigate the root cause of violence and whether society is able to control our innate violence. The play however debunks its own grand theories by ridiculing their proponents as well as their opponents in such a way that there are no winners nor losers in the play’s manifold conflicts. *God of Carnage* accomplishes what Roland Barthes called a “*théâtre du malaise*” with “les cris, les gestes, les bruits et les actes, dont le mélange doit produire sur la scène un carnage général” (Barthes 98). This

might explain the appeal of the play, and why in its 2009 West End production *God of Carnage* was awarded an *Olivier Award for best new comedy* (Reza's second *Olivier Award*, the only playwright to ever receive the Award twice), and in its Broadway staging earned stage director Matthew Warchus a *Tony Award for best play and best direction*.

Whatever the directors' interpretation there is no denying that violent conflicts pervade the play. As one character says "violence: that's our business" (15).² We propose to explore all the facets of the 'business' of violence: can guilt for committing acts of violence be mitigated; is violence *never* justified; is it legitimate to respond to violence with violence, be it physical violence or symbolic violence; and lastly, if legitimate, what is the amount of violence appropriate when responding to violence? These issues are the staple plots of most tragedies, but rarely do comedies tackle such grim material. Turning the *malaise* into a farce *God of Carnage* contains a whole gamut of comical devices. The main thrust of this article though is a thorough examination of the serious issues connected to violence touched upon by the comedy.

The play's *raison d'être* is a fight between two 11 year-old boys in which one child has had two teeth broken. The boys' parents decide to meet at the victim's home, and settle the matter in a civilized way. Soon however tempers flare, art books, handbags, flowers and cell phones are destroyed, someone hits someone else, people get drunk, verbal violence becomes rife, someone is even accused of murder . . .

And yet, ostensibly, nothing much is at stake—the insurance will cover the cost of fixing Henry's broken teeth. It's just a matter of writing the insurance report. This seems a simple case of one boy hitting the other with a stick at a playground. In such situations parents have to punish, or at the very least give a good talking to, the guilty party and get him to apologise to the victim. Keenly aware of their duty to promote non-violence and the common good, the four characters however experience a tension between protecting their family's interest, and upholding society's interests. That tension expresses itself in the guise of violence.

The children are never seen and the fight between the boys is not staged. In this instance there is no "active representation of violence" at least not of the physical kind exhibited in the two plays analysed by Ketu Katrack.³ The story of the fight is narrated and mediated by the parents. Born from a real life situation the playwright observed first-hand, the play focuses on third parties, and how their competing interpretations are central to conflict resolutions (see Ury, 2002).

Guilt in the boys' apparently simple violent act quickly appears not at all straightforward. Benjamin did hit Henry with a stick, but Henry had just refused to let him join his "gang" under the pretext that Benjamin was a "snitch" (14). "An insult is a kind of assault," says his mother (23). So Benjamin was provoked into hitting Henry: who is guilty then? It is not inconceivable that Henry and his gang might be bullying Benjamin, and that Benjamin acted in self-defense. Or that Benjamin is a bully himself and Henry had to find allies to avoid being hurt . . . But Henry is hardly innocent, since—with some coaxing from his parents in the name of making sure the boy would stop "hitting people with impunity" (7)—he himself ratted on Benjamin. As Michael, Henry's father, admits: the fight "could easily have been the other way round" (11). Henry could have hit Benjamin. While these lines of reasoning are only implied rather than investigated openly in the play, they do suggest that the cycle of violence is self-perpetuating. The causes of violence are unknowable because violence is senseless, as Fix says. Yet in the words of Hannah Arendt, violence "is distinguished by its instrumental character: "[. . .] like all means, it always stands in the need for guidance and justification through the end it pursues" (Arendt n.p.). In the same way, the characters in *God of Carnage* are driven by the need to seek a justification for Benjamin's violence towards Henry.

Muddying the waters of guilt is done skilfully from the start by Alan, Benjamin's father, a corporate lawyer. He challenges the wording of the insurance report: Benjamin wasn't "armed" with a stick, he was simply "furnished with" (5) a stick. Thus starts the undercutting of Henry's parents' defence. Alan knows how to "disarm" his adversaries, who haven't yet realised that beneath this polite encounter there is war. Something bigger than money is at stake, a philosophy of life which denies noble motives to any humanistic endeavours: aren't boys naturally "savage" (Alan calls his son a "savage") (12); isn't it a "law of life" that "boys have always given each other a good beating during recess" (35) and then settle their conflicts "man to man?" (11). For Alan all behaviors, including good deeds, arise from self-interest. When he hears that Veronica, Henry's mother, has written a book on Darfur, he belittles her action as self-serving: "You're writing a book about Darfur, fine, I can understand you saying to yourself, OK, I'm going to choose a massacre, what else does history consist of, and I'm going to write about it. You do what you can to save yourself" (32).

With words and actions Alan debunks myths of mankind's intrinsic goodness in the tradition of a philosopher Reza has often referred to in her

plays, Arthur Schopenhauer.⁴ Schopenhauer is known for his fundamental pessimism: man's life "swings like a pendulum backwards and forwards between pain and ennui. [. . .] After man had transferred all pain and torments to hell, there then remained no thing left over for heaven but ennui" (Schopenhauer 402). Human beings delude themselves about the nobility of their motives: what motivates them is a directionless will, a will to dominate. The perfect Schopenhaurian mouthpiece Alan later on spells out his theory:

Veronica, are we ever interested in anything but ourselves. Of course we'd all like to believe in the possibility of improvement. (32)

You have to go through a kind of apprenticeship before violence gives way to what's right. Originally, let me remind you, might was right. [. . .] I believe in the god of carnage. He has ruled, uninterruptedly, since the dawn of time. (35)

Alan's theory is also reminiscent of Thomas Hobbes' for whom, in the state of nature, "there is . . . continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 585). This conception was revived and couched in more scientific terms in the 60s by anthropologist Robert Ardrey in the guise of the "killer ape" hypothesis. From prehistoric times humans fought other primates with an inborn aggressiveness that ensured their survival. This "gene" for aggression has been passed on from distant ancestors to modern humans. Added to his Schopenhauer nihilism Alan's "killer ape" views strike a chord in his wife and Michael: Veronica, Alan's antithesis, is left on her own to fight for her humanistic beliefs.

Veronica is Henry's well-meaning mother, a part-time sales assistant in a bookshop and author of coffee table books such as the one on Darfur. She strongly believes in culture as a way to appease the beast in all of us: "I'm standing up for civilization! And it's lucky there are people who are prepared to do that" (28). By writing beautiful books on tragedies, she uses the highest form of civilisation—art's "soothing powers" (14)—as a way to denounce violence. Her quip about Bacon's paintings: "Cruelty. Majesty. Chaos. Balance" (*ibid.*) makes the point that art remedies barbarity.

Veronica's beliefs are drawn from an altogether different philosophical tradition, that of Norbert Elias. Elias explains the victory of civilization over barbarity by means of the civilizing process in train since the Middle Ages. The time period might not be very accurate, and Elias was also criti-

cized for being too Eurocentric; nonetheless there is an undeniable process of change that human beings themselves call "civilizing" without attaching any moral connotation to the term. This process culminates in a organised and policed society arising not only from external constraints, but also from internalized self-control (see Fletcher 2005). As states became more centralized and powerful, self-restraints increased. In other words, society moulds individuals' psyche for the greater good. Individuals willingly curtail their passions to sign the social contract. Therefore violence is *not* at the heart of civilisation: there is *no* god of carnage.

Ironically Veronica is the first character to fail to live up to her own ideals of humans' innate goodness, and instead behaves in a way that corroborates Alan's god of carnage theory. When Annette vomits all over her host's precious arts books Veronica looses her self-control. At that moment she only cares about how to salvage the books (23). She is mortified and later apologises to her guest for her selfish reaction. This moment of self-flagellation is evidence of Veronica's belief in sincerity and self-improvement (31), both essential tenets of the civilizing process. She insists for instance that Benjamin's apologies, if any, have to come from the heart. At eleven she trusts he is capable of making ethical judgments, whereas Benjamin's parents believe his immaturity shields him from any moral obligations: he will apologize because he is told to, not because he is sorry for his wrong doing (8). However it is unlikely to happen since his parents have no control over their son, and admit they have been incapable of imparting self-control in him.

Benjamin embodies the Hobbesian view of the individual in the state of nature as free of internal and external constraints. In Elias' terms too, Benjamin is a good representative of a possible social evolution: he has been subjected to a *decivilizing* process when states or their delegated authorities such as parents loose their grips over individuals.

As the play progresses, Veronica herself becomes unbridled. Her ideals are so threatened by the other three characters' cynicism that she starts doubting her own creed, and cries out: "Behaving well gets you nowhere. Courtesy is a waste of time, it weakens you and undermines you" (26). Veronica's civilized self-doubt contrasts with Alan's brutish self-confidence. As he stuffs himself with cake Alan freely admits that he himself "has no manners" (10). His continual answering his cell phone proves he has a warped approach to social congress and conflict resolution. To top it off even Veronica's husband Michael declares: "I am not a member of polite society. What I am and always have been, is a fucking Neander-

thal" (28).⁵ There exist irrepressible and unremitting *decivilizing* forces and even optimistic Elias had to accept that no morality could countenance the natural laws of egoism and self-preservation. If Veronica had read Steven Pinker's essay *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* she would have found the arguments she needed to counter Alan and his allies. Pinker shows that if you take the long view of history—5000 years—a pacification process has indeed occurred. Our inner demons of dominance and revenge are counterbalanced by our "better angels" of empathy, reason and self-control. This is a natural process: there are natural forces of violence that are counterbalanced by natural forces of restraint. Pinker is not the only thinker to hold that view:

There is a genetic component [. . .] in human aggressive behavior. But at the same time it is clear that we also have lots of natural mechanisms for cooperation, to keep conflict in check, to channel aggression, and to overcome conflict. These are just as natural to us as the aggressive tendencies. (Aureli and de Waal qtd. in Ury 25)

The key concept here is balance. And *God of Carnage* being a comedy none of the characters are capable of finding a happy medium between contradictory impulses. The play focuses more on Veronica's dramatic flaw—her strident righteousness—than on the other characters': Michael's spinelessness, Annette's retreat into psychosomatic illness, or Alan's cynicism. Veronica's inflexibility is one of the typical "errors" in dialogue William Isaac pinpoints in his *Dialogue Project* (2002) together with objectification, literalness or—interestingly—violence. Veronica's rigidity puts her at a disadvantage because she cannot play dirty like Alan who is portrayed as somewhat unscrupulous.

Alan's dishonesty is linked to one of the notions discussed all along the play, guilt. The urgent cell phone calls he feels he must take despite his hosts' and own wife's growing irritation establish Alan's disregard for others. Alan is the legal counsel of a pharmaceutical company. One of their most popular and profitable drugs has been found to be responsible for provoking ataxia, a serious neuromuscular condition. Alan gives instructions to his associates to make no statement about the research findings, as this would imply admitting liability: "We'll think about the victims later . . . let's see what the shares do after the annual meeting" (16). As with the boys' fight Alan eventually turns the situation around: "go out all guns blazing, you insist that Verenz-Pharma is the *victim* of a destabilization attempt two weeks before its annual shareholders' meeting . . ." (17). And

finally: “We don’t want any victims’ [announcements]. I don’t want you being quoted alongside victims” (24). This series of statements about liability and victims echoes the discussion about the boys’ fight: victims don’t matter when the stakes are high; protecting the weak is itself a sign of weakness. Alan’s position in this subplot adds another realistic element to representations of violence in *God of Carnage*: the structural violence exerted by powerful corporations, heavily implicated in the business of violence.

Aside from his moral stance, the telephone calls also disclose Alan’s gift of the gab, a sign of his good education and high social status. Annette and Veronica also represent the upper class, revealing themselves to be literati and art buffs as they fawn over Veronica’s arts books. Michael however does not quite belong to the upper class: unlike his book-writing wife, unlike Alan, and Annette, a wealth manager, Michael is a mere salesman who waxes lyrical about doorknobs and toilet fittings. He expresses himself more crudely and graphically than the other three characters. Amanda Giguere in her 2010 monograph *The Plays of Yasmina Reza on the English and American Stage* explained that the Broadway production amplified the differences in social class by making Alan and Annette old-stock Americans, whereas Michael was more plebeian (Giguere 143). The class differential creates an understated undercurrent of symbolic violence that Michael covers up with his constant self-deprecation. Even though Veronica and Michael are well off, and can afford \$50 bunches of tulips and a cleaning lady, the subtle social domination over Michael is undeniably symbolically and psychologically violent.

There is another, more overt, layer of violence in the play, the battle of the sexes, and again Alan is the true baddie. He expounds a dichotomous worldview about gender roles. It is linked to the issue of violence as he considers the part women—“custodians of the world” (43)—play in the civilizing process. In this instance Pinker would endorse Alan’s notion that the modern feminization of society has had a pacifying effect: “Since violence is largely a male pastime, cultures that empower women tend to move away from the glorification of violence and are less likely to breed dangerous subcultures of rootless young men” (Pinker 5).

But instead of being an instrument of liberation, in Alan’s mouth, this theory reinforces women’s servitude and female essentialism:

ALAN: [to Veronica] You’re the same breed [as Jane Fonda]. You’re part of the same category of woman, committed, problem-

solving, that's not what we like about women, what we like about women is sensuality, wildness, hormones . . .

VERONICA: Who gives a flying fuck what you like about women? (43)

This is the end of the play and overwhelmed by Alan's dishonesty and cunning, Veronica resorts to verbal violence, which does not help her cause. Here again, her sense of certainty is the wrong approach when one wishes to master the art of dialogue and find truth. As psychologist Patricia Romney explains: "From a dialogue perspective, certainty is considered problematic and viewed as interfering with the possibility of dialogue" (Romley 11).

Alan's wife too is pushed to react to her husband's machismo. This is done by way of a powerful and farcical stage action. Annette is exasperated by his phone conversations, a symptom of his lack of involvement in his family: "According to my husband, everything to do with house, school or garden is my department" (19). Alan's feeble denial is what pushes Annette to the edge: she reacts by literally being sick, throwing up all over Veronica's arts books on display. Married to an articulate alpha male, Annette cannot win logical arguments, and is left to express her frustrations through her body's violent responses. It is a poor, ineffectual outlet to combat machismo.

And so is anger. In a fit of rage Veronica strikes, not Alan, but her husband. Michael is siding with Alan precisely for his ability to placate women and have the guts to be politically incorrect with his "John-Waynish idea of virility" (38). As a demonstration of his allegiance to Alan, Michael concedes his own son is as much a "little bastard" (25) as Benjamin. When Veronica loses it, Michael is sarcastic: "Beating up on your husband is one of [Western society's] principles, is it?" Alan rubs it in: "[*to Veronica*] I'm starting to like you! [. . .] [*to Michael*] She threw herself on you in such a frenzy. If I were you I'd be flattered" (36). This is a classic situation where women's legitimate anger at men's domination is derided as a show of animal passion. Coupled with her verbal violence, Veronica however confirms Alan's views both that civilization is powerless in containing our natural violence but also that the trigger to this violence, men putting women down, is something society should control.

"She's a supporter of peace and stability in the world" (38), Michael declares. This sardonic formulation is the key to the play: should one use violence to combat violence? Veronica enacts the very thing she fights against. It is a victory for Alan, and his supporter Michael. Both Alan's Schopenhaurian and sexist opinions are vindicated.

However his victory does not last long and he too is ridiculed so that his philosophy of violence proves to be as defective as Veronica's beliefs in the Enlightenment's innate goodness. His downfall is foisted by his own wife who attacks what is most dear to him, his cell phone which, in his eyes, represents "his whole life" (38).

Alan's sexual interest in Veronica has not escaped his wife's attention. This is probably the reason why Annette gathers up her courage and takes action. She seizes Alan's phone and drops it in a vase full of water. Her violence is not gratuitous, directly provoked as it is by Alan's lack of manners, sexual innuendos and boorish behavior. She claims his "appendage" is preposterous for a man comparing himself to John Wayne, whose Colt⁴⁵ was a far superior phallic substitute. This is an obvious satire of modern man's dependence on his toys and functions also as a comment on machismo: Annette's act is akin to castration—and this does not escape Michael who comes to Alan's rescue, and tries in vain to salvage the phone—or rather, the two men's virility. When Annette is confronted to the symbolic violence of male domination she resorts to indirect acts of violence, attacking objects rather than men. Annette's violence is misdirected, and her solidarity with Veronica against male oppression, only fleeting.

Annette had exasperated Veronica by exonerating Benjamin from any wrongdoing, and claiming: "There are wrongs on both sides" (40). Veronica believes that there should be no blurring between "victims and executioners" (41). Faced with Annette's bad faith Veronica's reaction is to throw Annette's handbag across the room. Far from being gentle female pacifiers both women in the play display their inner violence. Reason is no match for men's bad faith and humorous put-downs as demonstrated by their sexist witticisms and male bonding gestures, such as smoking cigars and guzzling rum without offering it to the women.

Veronica's beliefs in humankind's fundamental goodness and capacity for moral improvement are further threatened by her own husband. When the theme of children's education is broached Michael launches into a diatribe about children who "drag us towards disaster; it's unavoidable" (33).⁶ In other words, Michael thinks children have a *decivilizing* effect. With conceit Reza here resorts again to Schopenhauer's analyses: existence being a valley of tears, love and procreation are the root of all evil. Without quite concurring with Michael Alan adds another angle to children's implication in violence. He not only declares that their sons' fight is in men's nature, thus annihilating the distinction between perpetrators and victims,

but also claims that compared to other ills in the world, this is truly nothing. We hear that he is to plead at The Hague International Criminal Court in Rwanda's case of ethnic genocide. He has been to Rwanda and watched boy soldiers with Kalashnikov and grenade launchers. Compared to geopolitical events Henry and Benjamin's tiff looks truly trivial. Not in Veronica's eyes though and she counters this analysis by expounding that civilization starts precisely "in our own backyard" (37). The local reflects the global, vigilance dictates that morality be imparted anywhere. Her words however sound hollow when she undermines her own credibility by using physical violence (hitting her husband) against symbolic violence (male domination).

Everyone in the play overreacts and exposes their own contradictions; this is the mainstay of comedy. However all characters are confronted to the difficulty of meting out a punishment proportional to the crime. So rather than answering the question: "should one use violence to combat violence?" the play shifts the debate to "what is a proportionate reaction to violence?" Annette drowning Alan's cell phone, a symbol of virility; Veronica hitting Michael instead of Alan, two representatives of the violence of male domination, and later throwing Annette's handbag, a symbol of urbanity, across the room; Annette slapping the hosts' bunch of tulips, a symbol of beauty and civility: all this is excessive and misdirected, but can't be just dismissed as adolescent behaviours in immature adults, although Reza does insist on the characters' infantilism.

Disproportion between punishment and crime is illustrated in a hyperbolic and derisive way by yet another act of violence when Veronica tells the guests how Michael abandoned their daughter's hamster in the street. He could not stand the racket the rodent was making at night. He dresses up his neglect as compassion since the street is likely to be the hamster's natural habitat. Seeing the animal terrified on the sidewalk however he realises he should take it back to its cage. His repulsion prevents him from doing so. Nibbles probably died. Annette seizes upon this to strip Michael of any moral authority: "You've done your best to make us feel guilty, but your virtue went straight out the window once you decided to be a killer" (26).

And Alan uses this to attack Veronica as the accomplice of this heinous crime. She lets it happen and seems incapable of extricating herself from the accusation of guilt by association. Public shame and loss of credibility are the punishment meted out to both her and Michael. Attacking the parents' morality is an indirect means of casting aspersions at their son's

honesty. "Killing the hamster" seems to justify Alan's views on exonerating everyone from guilt, starting with his son breaking his classmate's teeth, through to defending a corrupt pharmaceutical corporation. The play demonstrates that "the gray zone of victims and perpetrators"⁷ found in extreme situations exist even in the bourgeois salons.

Again as a comedy, it is natural that the play shouldn't resolve any of the questions it raises: children's biological violence, white-collar crime (the dangerous drug), cruelty to animals (Nibbles the hamster abandoned in suburbia), male domination, or African genocides. Is Benjamin going to apologise to Henry? Will he be punished—or rather educated in self-control? With cynical parents like Annette and Alan, Michael is right in suggesting Benjamin has "mitigating circumstances" (26) and is therefore unlikely to be "re-educated." The issue of the harmful effects of the drug is also left unresolved: are the victims going to be informed, helped or compensated? Michael realises early on that his own mother takes the medicine in question. In an effort to confront Alan to his responsibilities he gets him to talk to his mother on the phone, but Alan worms his way out: "Don't listen to any of that. All the same, it'd probably be a good idea if you stopped taking it for the time being" (40). Involved in covering up a white-collar crime, who is Alan likely to defend in The Hague Court of Justice?

From the sublime to the ridiculous, near the end Veronica answers the phone. Realising it's her daughter calling, her anger subsides instantly. Camille is concerned about Nibbles. "She's like us, she's omnivorous" (44), Veronica lies, reassuringly. If Nibbles is like humans, the play demonstrates that she should feel very unsafe indeed. Yet perhaps a little conventionally the comedy has to end in a subdued atmosphere: Veronica's display of maternal love overcomes violence.

The play's last words are Michel's quip: "What do we know?" Indeed the spectator does not know much anymore since nobody was able to persuade the others about their philosophy of life. The play is far from Bakhtinian optimism in the power of dialogue to find "responsive understanding," or compromise.⁸ We know at least that social life is caught in a web of violence and trying to extricate oneself from it usually generates more forms of violence. A (lack of) balance between competing obligations and (self-)control are central to the ways that web is woven. There is a chain reaction—provocation, attack, revenge—, within bigger power games: the philosophical and educational debates, the battle of the sexes, local and global violence. *God of Carnage* denounces the destruction of the

social contract by selfish individuals who are caught in snares of loyalties and passions.

In *God of Carnage* violence is built layer after layer in a fast-paced, thoroughly amusing comedy. Many scholars have analysed violence in drama, but always in plays that do not purport to be comedies, from Shakespearian tragedies to Sarah Kane's modernist works (see Thérond 2015).⁹ Reza's drama has always walked a tightrope between comedy and tragedy. Although this analysis focuses on text rather than on actual performances, it is worth mentioning that the production of the play in German was, in Yasmina Reza's words, "very sombre and despairing at the end [going] farther in violence" than on the French stage where the characters' sense of isolation and silences were emphasised, whereas the Broadway production was "entertainment" in the tradition of American comedy (qtd. in Ng). Earlier Reza had said to an interviewer that her plays are "funny tragedies, but they are tragedies" (qtd. in Poirier). Although she accepts that once staged her plays escape her control, she nonetheless prefers performances to highlight gravity rather than levity. She confided being often disconcerted by American and British audiences laughing too much (qtd. in Poirier).

Perhaps there is a trend in today's French drama whereby the fine line between comedy and tragedy blurs the purpose (if any) of violence. A critic reviewing a 2005 issue of *Registres*, a Sorbonne journal devoted to theatre studies, recognized that in today's drama:

Le Mal n'est pas ici compris comme une catégorie du jugement moral, mais comme le principe perturbateur du vivre-ensemble, comme ce qui a la puissance de dissoudre les liens entre les hommes. Partant, ce qui est avant tout interrogé, c'est sa manifestation sensible, théâtrale : la violence. . . . Il y aurait comme une impossibilité à figurer une violence utopique, émancipatrice, résolutive . . . (Hervé n.p.)

This analysis proposes a neat division between two types of representation: a destructive, and a potentially constructive violence. In line with the incapacity to show a utopian type of violence *God of Carnage* exemplifies the former type of violence rather than the latter. It does no more than hint at a liberating form of violence when the two women resist their husbands' machismo, but this is only a fleeting moment of emancipation.

Perhaps the different stage productions reflect *l'esprit du temps* in each countries where the play was performed, but this is probably granting too

much importance to a mere play, and maybe trying too hard to find meaning in it in terms of this shifting, complex topic: violence in all its guises. *God of Carnage*’s open ending suggests that even theatre critics need to find a balance between gravity and levity and recognize that *God of Carnage* navigates a narrow path. Characters are provoked to commit acts of violence but their seriousness is undercut by comic, almost farcical stratagems. “Don’t take me seriously,” Reza seems to say, “Yet this is no laughing matter.”

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Notes

1. Roman Polanski’s 2011 film, *God of Carnage* is the play’s faithful adaptation to the big screen.
2. The original French has a double meaning the translator was not able to render: “la violence nous regarde” [*violence is our concern/violence is looking at us.*], *Le Dieu du carnage*, 2007, 39. For an analysis of translation issues relating to Reza’s works, see Jacomard, “Text vs. Stage: the case of Yasmina Reza’s ‘Art.’”
3. Ketu H. Katra’s article examines *Ruined* by Pulitzer Prize-winning African-American Lynn Nottage, and *Encounter* by the Indian-American Navarasa Dance Theater Company.
4. One of Reza’s plays is called *Dans la luge de Schopenhauer*, analyzed in Jacomard, *Les Fruits de la passion: le théâtre de Yasmina Reza*.
5. This is a free and quite apt translation in the context of the barbarity/civilization debate in the play. The French original alludes rather to psychology: “la vérité est que je n’ai aucun self-control, je suis un caractériel pur” (*Le Dieu du carnage* 78).
6. “It’s unavoidable” misses perhaps the allusion to the discussion on natural laws in the French original (“c’est une loi,” *Le Dieu du carnage* 91).
7. I am referring here to Thomas Tammis analyzing Peter Weiss’s 1965 play, *The Investigation* (2010).
8. See Romney, 5.
9. A notable exception is Frances Rademacher’s psychoanalytical study of the “affinity between [Edward] Bond’s violence and the comic” (1980: 258).

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