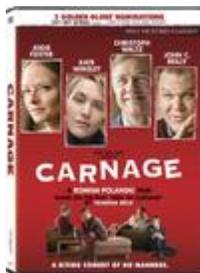


Narcissists Are Us?

A review of the film



Carnage

(2011)

Roman Polanski (Director)

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[I]t is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct, how much it presupposes precisely the non-satisfaction (by suppression, repression, or some other means?) of powerful instincts. (Freud, 1930/1961, pp. 51–52)

One of the most salient things about “maturing” is how one handles conflict. Toddlers instinctively hit, bite, scream, and throw tantrums—and are coached to “use words” instead. Older children often resort first to aggression even after years of such coaching; adults, having had the socially acceptable behaviors more ingrained, resort to the outwardly less objectionable passive aggression. And this is what we find in *Carnage*, a film based on the

play *God of Carnage* by Yasmina Reza (2009), who coauthored the screenplay with the director, Roman Polanski.

Presenting Problems

The social dilemma opening the film is familiar: One adolescent boy has hurt another—some teeth are knocked out in a schoolyard dustup—and the respective parents meet to figure out how to handle the situation. The Cowans, a married couple (both masters of the universe in their own way and parents of the accused bully), visit the apartment of the victim, where they meet the other couple, the Longstreets, who appear to be slightly more down-to-earth in spite of their expensive real estate. Courtesies and coffee follow as the couples try to decide “what to do” about the altercation and to ascribe guilt, innocence, and responsibility.

But those turn out to be fighting words, as each couple questions the language and intentions of the other. Things go south quickly as the two couples have their own indirect playground scrapes; the attempt at conflict resolution leads to conflict, accusation, and eventually alcohol. As they discuss the aggressive acts of their sons, the parents’ passive aggression occasionally verges on the histrionic. The Cowans repeatedly try to leave the apartment—and the situation—by heading to the elevator, but they are always drawn back, sometimes by apology and reason, other times by self-righteousness. (Viewers groan, but the drama must go on a little longer.)

The men act like boys, the women form and sunder alliances (oh, were we watching *Mean Girls* there for a bit?), and everyone has something nasty or rude to say to everyone else. The film’s message fits its title: Our veneer of culture and civility devolves quickly to butchery and blood sport when blame is in the air—and everyone is massacred. As the civility unravels, so does the premise of the movie and the pretense of the upper class having, and being able to handle, it all.

What Is Wrong With These People, Anyway?

Diagnosing pathology in a 90-minute movie is tough, but there are some clues. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud (1930/1961) claimed that cultured humans turn base and violent on a dime simply because their repressed, underlying natures are inherently aggressive. The desire to lash out at others is always on a slow boil under civilized exteriors, especially, perhaps, when desires are blocked or intentions are questioned. Both triggers are present here; however, the harm—even cruelty—lies in what the characters say, rather than do, to each other.

What is wrong with these outwardly successful, if inwardly volatile, adults? The possibly defining diagnosis here may well be *narcissism*, that contemporary social and psychological plague that especially afflicts the well-heeled. Narcissists regard themselves and their qualities in a self-important, even grandiose, manner (e.g., Twenge & Campbell, 2003, 2009). Each character has his or her own distracting background noise—both audible and internal.

We see a bit of narcissism in Alan Cowan, the corporate lawyer, who is wedded more to his cell phone than to his spouse. His constant murmuring into his phone is neither drowned out by nor drowns out the bickering in the room. The damage control he is doing for a client via his cell phone is much more important to him than the damage wrought by his son.

Other earmarks of narcissism include wanting to think well of oneself and being highly sensitive to criticism offered by others (e.g., Twenge & Campbell, 2009), two qualities that explain the behavior of Penelope Longstreet. Penelope (“Pen”) initially comes across as a passionate do-gooder, a sort of perfect mother with an artsy twist, but we and the Cowans quickly learn that she is unwilling to be wrong about much of anything. Is her whining or the whining of her hair dryer (there are some messy moments in the film) more distracting and annoying? It’s not clear if she is as narcissistic as the others; individuals like Pen whose self-views are threatened lash out in the same way as narcissists, but the source is their fragile, unstable self-esteem (Kernis, 2003).

Where does all the rage in the film come from? Research from social and personality psychology suggests that narcissists who experience threats to their egos are very likely to become aggressive, performing all kinds of antisocial behaviors including rape, hate crimes, terroristic acts, and even gang violence (Bushman, Bonacci, van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003). Is it any surprise that these upper middle-class couples whose lives are tightly orchestrated resort to verbal retorts so quickly?

One thing: In order for narcissists to aggress, there has to be some provocation—when none is present, they are no more likely to aggress than people who are not afflicted with this personality disorder (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000). But there are plenty of provocations here. As the misunderstandings, questions, raised eyebrows, and accusations mount, so do yelling, sanctimony, and other-directed blame.

Stage Problems

The acting in this movie is very good. Even in their rare moments of raw honesty, none of the four characters is at all likeable. The film succeeds on that level, but the fact that the action occurs largely in one space—an elegantly proportioned apartment’s living room somewhere in Manhattan—is rather claustrophobic.

On the stage, our focus would be on the characters in that little world, but what worked for Hitchcock (1948) in the film *Rope*—one long, suspenseful scene with no breaks—does not work here. We want them to leave that apartment to get some air and some perspective; we need a breather, too. Ultimately, then, *Carnage* is more theatrical than cinematic, unintentionally proving that not every wonderful play translates well into a film.

Teachable Moments?

Carnage may well have a place in the classroom or the counseling center. The characters' self-absorption and other-directed anger represent the dangers of narcissism in modern life all too well. In a way, there is probably a little of the four characters in all of us, the audience, no matter how cultivated we may think we are.

Oddly, the characters whom we would like to meet, the two sons, are only seen briefly and from a great distance. We see one boy (Ethan) whack the other (Zachary) with a stick in the opening credits and then spy both again during the closing frames, presumably after some sort of middle-school rapprochement has occurred; we have no idea whether the presenting problem was nothing more than a playground dustup gone awry or whether the two boys are miscreants as unpleasant as their awful parents.

Perhaps the violent incident was nothing. Or perhaps it was a maturing moment for the boys. We don't and won't know—we just know it's a little late for the moms and dads, who care only about themselves and their hollow, verbal victories that leave everyone feeling and looking bad.

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