



[Carnage](#), Directed by Roman Polanski

Screened at [Cornerhouse, Manchester](#)

Reviewed by [Anne Ryan](#) February 2012

Sartre said that hell is other people, he must have had the four characters in this film in mind. Here are four people whose flaws are magnified by contact with each other.

Polanski's direction is an unashamedly theatrical adaptation of Yasmina Reza's stage play. This is a dark, black comedy and some critics have said that as a play it was more effective. The truth is that even a moderately successful film reaches a much larger audience – and we would never have the opportunity to see this calibre of cast. Foster, Reilly, Waltz, and Winslet take this script and run with it. And it is laugh out loud funny.

The film sets up a conflict between a traditional liberal way of thinking embodied in Jodie Foster's character - she is a writer working on a book on the genocide in Darfur and believes that the fight between their sons is part of a wider world. She feels that if people in the civilised

West cannot resolve conflicts there is no hope for the peoples of Africa. This brings her into bitter conflict with Waltz's character, a corporate lawyer, who sees himself as a man of the world. He believes that he really understands Africa and by extension the world - a world in which men must fight for what they want.



Two couples – the bohemian Reilly and Foster and the more high powered Waltz and Winslet – meet to discuss a squabble between their 11 year old sons. Their attempt to resolve the situation in a calm, grown-up manner degenerates throughout the next 80 minutes as arguments develop, alliances change and prejudices are revealed. Initially, the two protagonists, the liberal and the realist, seem to be supported by their partners. But as the argument develops new alliances form and the husbands are drawn together by a shared 'realist' view and an appreciation for the macho behaviour of their sons. And the wives find a common criticism of their husbands who see the domestic sphere as women's work.

The cast is on top form – Winslet has a particularly stand-out moment and Foster, as the passive-aggressive liberal heart is her usual class act. Reilly is also very effective as the blusteringly insensitive Michael who finds an unexpected ally in Alan. Christoph Waltz is also brilliant as the high-powered lawyer permanently attached to his mobile phone and he is totally believable as an American.

When Polanski films an American story we are conscious that he is an 'exile', and working with a French playwright this can seem like an outsider's view. One wonders if the casting decisions - two American actors play the liberals, two foreigners the realists - more representative of today's cut-throat materialist world - is revealing. Should we see Foster and Reilly as the last cry of a threatened American liberal tradition, which cannot cope with the modern world.

On the surface this is a drawing room comedy in which the couples are artificially imprisoned in an endless argument, but a deeper analysis shows that Reza is using this structure to portray a very current argument between the ideals of the liberal left and a right wing materialism which seemed triumphant after the fall of communism and the seeming triumph of the Washington model. Events in the financial world and the threat to all our certainties make this as relevant in the boardroom as in children's squabbles.

This is not Polanski's most important work, but it is a highly entertaining and enjoyable film.