

Michael Haneke's *La Pianiste*:
An Adaptation of Elfriede Jelinek's
The Piano Teacher
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*Frozen drops are falling
Down from my cheeks.
How could I have not noticed
That I have been weeping?
Die Winterreise*

When, in Michael Haneke's film "La Pianiste" (2001), the main character walks into a shopping arcade, Schubert's piano trio in E-flat major accompanies her. Erika Kohut, played by a stern looking Isabelle Huppert in a beige trenchcoat, her briefcase full of musical scores clutched tightly under her arm, walks into a porn shop, changes notes into coins at the counter with practised efficiency and, after a short wait during which she is watched curiously by the men leafing through porn magazines, enters one of the video booths. The piano trio continues while she scans the four porn movies before making her choice. As soon as Erika presses the button to select the video, the music stops to be replaced instead by the sounds of lovemaking. Erika Kohut watches the scene she paid for, a woman clad in a black bodysuit lying on her back on a table, performing fellatio on a man standing in front of her. Erika's face, shown in a close-up, remains frozen with no trace of emotion. The only movement during the long take is her gloved hand reaching out to grab a used tissue from the disposal bin. She takes the tissue with her leather-gloved hand and presses it onto her nose, inhaling deeply the smell of the unknown man who had been in this cell before. Erika Kohut's utter loneliness and her complete disengagement with her own body become apparent here. At this

point the music sets in again. We hear one of Schubert's songs from the cycle *Die Winterreise* (1827), called "Im Dorfe" (In the Village). The lines are from the third stanza:

*Bark me away, you waking dogs!
Let me not find rest in the hours of slumber!
I am finished with all dreaming
Why should I linger among sleepers?*

The cycle, especially the 17th song, written by Wilhelm Müller (1794-1827), can be seen as a leitmotif of the film. The journey of the lonely wanderer in a frozen wasteland can be read as an analogy to Erika's solitary night trips and her hopeless attempts to connect with others. During these moments before the cut to a scene where the source of the music is revealed, a young singer in a room at the conservatorium in Vienna, Erika in her cell-like booth is literally caught between the world of the sublime and the world of sexual exploitation and emotional depravity. The unsettling incongruity of sound and image in this scene is repeated throughout the film, intensifying the shocking effect of the often almost unbearable self-degradation the piano teacher routinely inflicts on herself.

The film by the Austrian/French director, Michael Haneke, is an adaptation of a novel by the Austrian writer and Nobel prize winner (2004) Elfriede Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher* (1983).¹ His film, starring Isabelle Huppert as Erika Kohut and Benoît Magimel as her love interest Walter Klemmer, won the Grand Jury Prize at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival. Huppert and Magimel were awarded the prizes for best actress and best actor. While the film continued to be nominated for and to win international film prizes, the critics were extremely divided, some celebrating the successful adaptation of the

¹ Jelinek, Elfriede, (1989) *The Piano Teacher*. Trans. Joachim Neugroschel. London: Serpant's Tale. The translation of the German title "Die Klavierspielerin" (The Piano Player) into "The Piano Teacher" is a rather unfortunate choice as it does not keep the ambiguity of the original title. A piano player can be someone who just likes to play the piano as well as someone who is a pianist. Although Erika Kohut fails to become the artist her mother wants her to be, she by no means gives up her pretensions to be more than a teacher.

novel, others expressing their irritation with what they considered to be obscene and degrading images.²

Haneke's films, situated within the European tradition of avantgarde filmmaking represented by directors like Pasolini, Antonioni, Resnais and above all Robert Bresson, defy mainstream cinema by rejecting standard conventions of timing, the building up of suspense, logical plotting and usage of film music.³ His devastatingly critical filmic comments on the connections between the media and violence are reflected in his cinematography of detachment. This is particularly clear in his trilogy *The Seventh Continent* (1989), *Benny's Video* (1992) and *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994), in which Haneke claims to show the "emotional glaciation of our society". In these films the viewer is challenged not only by the cold-blooded and detached acts of violence the protagonists inflict on themselves and others, but also by the cold realism of a cinematography which refuses to gloss over the bleakness of such scenes.

Moreover, through the deployment of stylistic techniques such as long takes and close-ups of the victim's and perpetrator's faces, Haneke confronts the viewer with the characters' every emotion, or lack thereof. The viewers – simply by watching – become accomplices in this voyeuristic gaze of the camera.

In the porn-booth scene, the object of the viewer's voyeurism is not the sexual act that Erika Kohut watches, rather it is her face the camera focuses on. In a long take, the camera lingers on Huppert's almost stony expression and forces the viewer to be the uneasy observer of the way Erika behaves at this moment. (Sharret, 2003: 31). The crudeness of this scenario is even more pronounced in the

² See, for the U.S.A., for example: http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/piano_teacher
For the U.K.: http://www.kamera.co.uk/reviews_extra/pianiste.php;
http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Critic_Review/Observer_Film_of_the_week/0,,591311,00.html#article_continue;
http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Critic_Review/Guardian_Film_of_the_week/0,,590194,00.html#article_continue;
For Australia: http://sunday.ninemsn.com.au/sunday/film_reviews/article_1106.asp (all accessed November 2006).

³ Metelmann, Jörg, (2003: 33) Zur Kritik der Kino-Gewalt. Die Filme von Michael Haneke. München: Fink.

context of the preceding scene, which is also the source of the music playing during the porn-booth scene. Erika, a professor in piano at the Conservatorium in Vienna, sits in a middle-class living room and practises Schubert's piano trio together with two earnest-looking musicians. Here, Erika is shown in the world she inhabits in her role as a piano player and teacher, in which she displays a strong sense of implicit discipline and authority, which she inflicts on her students.

Such visual and sonic disruptions and contrasts define Haneke's adaptation of the novel. Imagery and sound, while they are used in a sparse and realistic way, play an equally significant role in the complex cinematographic text that is the *Pianiste*. The score Haneke chose for his film – apart from Schubert we can hear excerpts from Bach, Brahms, Haydn, Beethoven, Chopin and Schönberg – is played by Erika and her students, above all by Walter Klemmer and a highly-strung but talented girl who struggles to accomplish perfection in her performance of Schubert's *Winterreise* for a forthcoming concert at the Conservatorium. As in the porn shop, the music often spills into the following scene, thus creating semantic conflicts that illustrate Erika Kohut's double life between the "high" art and the "ugly" desire to degrade and soil herself.⁴

Seemingly balancing these juxtapositions and disruptions is Erika Kohut herself, who – at least until she falls apart during her disturbing relationship with Walter Klemmer – seems to glide effortlessly from one world into the other without any apparent realisation of the perversity and utter sadness of her existence. Throughout scenes of self-mutilation, in which Huppert's character locks herself into the bathroom away from her overbearing mother and inflicts cuts to her vagina, scenes of disastrous attempts to physically connect with Walter Klemmer, and even in the morning after Klemmer has raped her, the actress' face barely betrays any feelings. Huppert plays Erika Kohut with great coolness and

⁴ Grissemann, Stefan, (2001: 16) "In zwei, drei feinen Linien die Badewannenwand entlang. Kunst, Utopie und Selbstbeschmutzung: zu Michael Hanekes Jelinek-Adaption." In S. Grissemann (ed) *Haneke/Jelinek: Die Klavierspielerin. Drehbuch. Gespräche. Essays*, Wien: Sonderzahl: 11-31.

detachment, her watchful eyes staring at the world in front of her as if she had no part in it. Huppert's Erika seems to look at things without really seeing them; she has an air of being locked into her own isolated world, albeit one that is never revealed to the viewer. According to Grissemann, Huppert's facial expressions form such a prominent feature of the film that *La Pianiste* becomes a work by three authors, a writer, a director-auteur (Haneke wrote the screenplay himself) and an actress.⁵ As Jelinek herself comments, the actors in this film manage to transform their faces into a script.⁶ Comparing the Erika of the film to her protagonist, Jelinek states: "this film gives this character Erika Kohut, who really is undignified and ridiculous, her dignity back".⁷ In the novel, Erika seems to be a caricature of a woman and her life a case-study of someone who is trapped in a neurotic mother-daughter relationship. I wouldn't entirely subscribe to Wyatt's view that "it is [...] Erika's subjectivity that is central to the narrative, so it is her position that the film offers to spectator identification".⁸ However, it is true that the Erika of the film gains an individuality that the character in the novel completely lacks.

Haneke's and Huppert's translation of the novel into film, I would argue, does resurrect some beliefs, such as that of the purity of music and the dignity of individual suffering, that are crucial within a bourgeois society and that are completely deconstructed in Jelinek's novel. Haneke himself points to the role the musical score plays in his movie: "Great music transcends suffering and specific causes. *Die Winterreise* transcends misery even in the detailed description of misery".⁹ In the film "the question as to whether music represents the healthy side of Erika's psyche or simply assists

⁵ Grissemann, *op. cit.* 2001: 26.

⁶ Grissemann, Stefan, and Zintzen, Christiane, (2001: 123) "... daß dieser Film eine Rettung meiner Person ist." Christiane Zintzen und Stefan Grissemann im Gespräch mit Elfriede Jelinek", *ibid.*: 119-136.

⁷ *Ibid.* 2001: 129.

⁸ Wyatt, Jean, (2005: 465) *Jouissance and Desire in Michael Haneke's The Piano Teacher*. *American Imago* 62.4: 453-482. In my view, the camera's gaze is frequently directed at Erika in a way which objectivises her.

⁹ Sharrett, Christopher, (2003: 30) "The World that is Known: Interview with Michael Haneke." In: *Cineaste*, 28.3: 28-32.

her repression" is entirely legitimate, whereas in the novel the power of the classical music industry without doubt has a wholly destructive grip on Erika.¹⁰ In the novel, sublimation in a Freudian sense is not possible for Erika.

In what is her best-known novel to this day, *The Piano Teacher*, translated into English for the first time in 1988, Jelinek exposes the connection between discourses of sexuality and gender constructs with the discourses of 'high' culture. In her compelling reading of the novel, Elizabeth Wright shows how the cultural canon, especially music as the most idealised symbolic discourse, as well as the "noblest" cultural sanctuaries of Austria such as the classical music industry are criticised in Jelinek's text.¹¹ The protagonist of the novel makes a bare living teaching piano at the Vienna Conservatorium and spends her life striving hopelessly for the heights of musical excellence. Erika is driven and continually disciplined by her dominating mother who regards Erika, the potential "genius", as entirely her own – if failed – creation and exploits her as the provider of material goods generated by her unfortunate but necessary teaching job. Erika functions merely as an artistic labourer, caught between the extremes of desperate pretension and self-adulation and a total lack of confidence and self-awareness. Erika's artistic existence by no means reflects the cliché of the artist's freedom and the bourgeois myth of the 'artist as genius' generated by the industry propagating the city of music, Vienna. Rather, she leads a tortured existence based on force and disciplinary measures generated by a mother motivated by petty-bourgeois materialistic ambitions.

Caught in a highly neurotic family structure, where the weak husband and father had become obsolete after the daughter's birth and "promptly left, passing the torch to his daughter" (*The Piano Teacher* 3) by becoming insane and dying in an asylum, the now middle-aged Erika had been denied any freedom to develop an own

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 2003: 31.

¹¹ Wright, Elizabeth, (1993: 52) "Eine Ästhetik des Ekels. Elfriede Jelineks Roman 'Die Klavierspielerin'". *Text + Kritik* 117.1: 51-59.

sense of self, let alone a sexual identity.¹² Left to her mother, Erika is reduced to a mere motherly phallus, an appendage of her mother, and at the same time a substitute for a husband. This complex neurotic constellation depicts the classic psychoanalytic stereotypes of femininity in an ironical way, thus becoming a parody of Freud and Lacan.¹³ By being cut off from her own body, her sexuality and her self, Erika has – again in reference to Freud – no chance of sublimation through her art. She remains the property of her mother and her attempts to assert herself invariably end up in destructive acts. In order to ‘feel’ herself, she cuts her genitalia. Her attempt to enter into a sexual relationship with Klemmer, her student and admirer, by acting out her fantasies, a combination of masochistic and sadistic desires, fails miserably. It is precisely this complex set of desires for total control and subjugation that in the end make her the victim of Klemmer, whose more direct and unheralded sadism she triggers.¹⁴ Erika’s attempts to be recognised by him culminate in her writing down her masochistic fantasies in a letter in order to tell Klemmer what she wants him to do to her. This revelation of what she calls her deepest desires is met ultimately by his utter disregard of her, both as a woman and a teacher. While Erika is trying to use the hierarchical teacher-student relationship and her superior expertise as a pianist to regain some of the power and control she had given up by exposing her secret longings, Klemmer “asserts the ultimate *irrelevance* of Erika’s music making and her authority as a musician”.¹⁵

The fictional ‘I’ Jelinek sets out to demythologise in her texts is a product of the ideology of the mass media and the market, an ideology which is continuously generated and reproduced by popular myths. In *The Piano Teacher* the deconstruction of the ‘individual’ is achieved through the mixing of quotations from

¹² See also Fiddler, Allyson, (1994: 139-140) *Rewriting Reality. An Introduction to Elfriede Jelinek*. Oxford, Providence: Berg.

¹³ Janz, Marlies, (1995: 71) *Elfriede Jelinek*. Stuttgart: Metzler.

¹⁴ Berka, Sigrid, (1993: 141) “Ein Gespräch mit Elfriede Jelinek” in *Modern Austrian Literature* 26:2: 127-155.

¹⁵ Herrington, James, (2003: 65) “‘Etwas erklingt’: The meaning of Music in Elfriede Jelinek’s *Die Klavierspielerin*.” unpublished honours long essay, University of Sydney (italics in the original).

sources across a wide range of the cultural canon to everyday language and banal marketing slogans, which in turn reveal the commercialism of art. The montage and the transposition of quotations show that the myths of the artist as genius as well as the myths of femininity and masculinity occur in the realm of language itself. By presenting language as an ideological construct based on hypocrisy, stereotypes are affirmed and destroyed in the same breath. They are reiterated and thus unveiled in a way that corresponds with Barthes' critique of mythologies. Barthes's claim that the very principle of myth is that it transforms history into nature and thus essentialises ideology has clearly had repercussions on Jelinek's own work.¹⁶ The preoccupation with the fabric and techniques of the mass media and its ideological construction of 'human nature' and 'common sense' in Jelinek's work can, as Alison Fiddler writes, "be read as an attempt to penetrate the workings of an ideological tool and to expose the ways in which the language of the popular media works towards manipulating and controlling the consciousness of the receiver".¹⁷

Fiddler rightly sees "'reality' and its inscription in the ideology of our times" at the centre of Elfriede Jelinek's literary investigations and adds:

Jelinek's form of realism, then, is a concentrated or 'super-reality'. It is almost as if Jelinek were using a particular kind of lens when regarding the world about her, one which detects the ugliest, most cruel and brutal aspects and which blows these up to oversize proportions, thus distorting the picture, but attracting attention to things which are often deliberately concealed or reinterpreted by the ruling ideology in the interests of its own safety and continued power."¹⁸

In the novel, Erika's trip to a porn shop is described by means of an almost unbearable parody of psychoanalytical as well as market-oriented phrases that is typical for Jelinek:

¹⁶ Barthes, Roland, (2000: 129) *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. London: Vintage. (See for example Berka, *op. cit.* 1993: 139; Janz *op. cit.* 1995: 61, *et al.*).

¹⁷ Fiddler, *op. cit.* 1994: 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1994: 31.

Erika, thoroughly a professor, enters the premises. [...] She does not walk into the employee section, she steps into the section for paying guests – the more important section. This woman wants to look at something that she could see far more cheaply in her mirror at home. The men voice their amazement: They have to pinch every penny they secretly spend here hunting women. [...] All Erika wants to do is watch. Here, in this booth, she becomes nothing. Nothing fits into Erika, but she, she fits exactly into this cell. Erika is a compact tool in human form. Nature seems to have left no apertures in her. Erika feels solid wood in the place where the carpenter made a hole in any genuine female. Erika's wood is spongy, decaying, lonesome wood in the timber forest, and the rot is spreading. Still, Erika struts around like a queen. (*The Piano Teacher* 51)

Here, the scene in a peep show is clinically dissected with view to the sex market and the object status of woman as a sexual tool with a use-by date.

Haneke translates Jelinek's circular and claustrophobic "text of negation" into an imagery of closed spaces such as, for example, the tiny video booth. However, in his cinematography, through the close-up of Huppert's face, both the beauty and the sense of deep sadness of Schubert's song remain intact. In the novel, music is demystified to the point where it appears simply as an instrument of repression, through having become an object of consumption. In another part of the novel in which Erika watches a porn movie, the exhausting routine of a couple pretending sexual pleasure for the audience is even equalled to the hard work of practicing and performing music: "Erika is geared to watching people who work hard because they want results. In this respect, the normally large difference between music and sexual pleasure is quite tiny" (*The Piano Teacher*, 106).

The musical efforts and the suffocating discipline of the Erika of the novel are intrinsic to her relationship with her mother. The mother, as the person of absolute authority who pulls all the strings, is omni-present in Erika's thoughts. In the movie, neither the mother, played by Annie Girardot, nor the mother-daughter relationship are as central. Except for rare outings when the mother goes to see her daughter in concert, the former seems confined to the dark and stuffy apartment the two women share. Within this *mise-en-scène*, the mother's life revolves around her daughter, whom she shields from daily activities unworthy of an artist, like doing housework and spending money on new clothes, which she considers mundane. However, I do not agree with Wyatt's analysis of the film, when she states that Erika is entirely deprived of private internal space by her mother.¹⁹ It is true that there is an almost complete lack of private external space for Erika, who even shares the matrimonial bed with her mother. There are spheres, however, which cannot be accessed by the mother, and one of them is the realm of music. Again, Haneke uses sound – or lack thereof – to symbolise the mother's inability to entirely control her daughter's inner life: Not one scene shot in the apartment is accompanied by music of any kind. Rather, in these surroundings the diegetic sound is generated entirely by the TV, which holds the central position in the apartment and the mother's life while she is waiting for her daughter to return home. Though the living space is entirely occupied by the mother, who obviously does not have much understanding of music apart from the fact that it is the source of their social standing, she is also confined by her own fortress. When Erika leaves the flat, the secrets she is able to keep from her mother include her relationship with music.

In a scene at a home concert held by a wealthy Polish/Viennese family where Erika meets Walter Klemmer for the first time, his brilliant performance of Schubert causes Erika to pull her lips to an, albeit reluctant, smile. This is the only moment when Erika seems to be able to open up to Klemmer's attempts to reach her. While she

¹⁹ Wyatt, *op. cit.* 2005: 455.

appears to be incapable of using words and physical intimacy to communicate with others – the scene where she has Klemmer read her letter is crucial there – for a short moment music is presented as a possible way to break through her isolation. As soon as Klemmer pursues his conquest by forcing himself into her world as her musical prodigy and threatening Erika's privacy when he attempts to cross the hierarchical boundaries of a student-teacher relationship, their love affair is doomed.

Erika's aim to become a pianist (a "creative genius"), not a teacher, is something which shapes her relationship with her professional surroundings and her discourse on the composers she loves. Klemmer tries to take this away from Erika by completely disregarding her aspirations in order to get to the woman behind what he apparently sees as her façade, thus depriving her of the essence and dignity of her existence. When she reveals her masochistic desires to him through the letter, its disturbing text becomes all he associates with her, rendering her music-making a completely insignificant part of her personality.

Reduced to her pathological fear of losing control of her life, Erika injures the hand of her alter ego, the female student who suffers Erika's destiny of being instrumentalised by her overly ambitious and cold mother. In the face of the power Klemmer holds over her, and of his complete disregard of her artistic aspirations, the potential success of this female student is life-threatening to Erika. However, at the concert in the Vienna Conservatorium where Erika herself is to replace the injured student, she directs her desperation towards herself again. When Klemmer nonchalantly walks past and greets her in a mock: "Good evening Frau Professor!" her face, bruised under her carefully applied make-up after Klemmer's rape the previous night, breaks into a grimace of self-contempt and hatred. Erika pulls the kitchen knife out of her evening clutch bag and, instead of using it on Klemmer, as seems likely when she takes it with her to the concert, Erika stabs herself in the shoulder. The Conservatorium's gate opens and Erika steps out, turns to the left and disappears offscreen. The last long take shows the now closed door of the festively lit façade of the Conservatorium.

The end can be read in different ways. In her analysis of the film Wyatt, for example, interprets Erika's last movements, including cutting herself into her shoulder and stepping into the streets, as a possible break with her mother.²⁰ It is true that the shoulder injury might free Erika of the entrapment her piano-playing regime represents. However, I would argue that in the film her self-injury, while clearly situated within a greater picture related to the pathology of the mother-daughter relationship, has a lot to do with Walter Klemmer. By the same token I do not regard her final actions as containing the potential for her to free herself from her mother's regime. In fact, my reading of this scene partly complies with the ending in the novel: "Erika knows the direction she has to take. She heads home, gradually quickening her step." (*The Piano Teacher*, 280)

There, the decisiveness of Erika's walk away from the Conservatorium does not represent the possibility of agency; rather, Erika's motion takes on a circular quality that sees her returning to her mother's realm. Going "home" is the only solution she can imagine. One argument that would support an identical reading of the film's closing scene is that after leaving the Conservatorium, Erika does not - as Wyatt suggests - walk away. She heads back in the same direction from which she had previously arrived with her mother. Furthermore, the self-injury Erika inflicts on herself can be read as a reminiscence of Kafka's "Love is that for me you are the knife with which I dig into myself". Given the fact that Haneke has shifted the love affair to the centre of the film, Klemmer becomes the reason for the catastrophe rather than merely the trigger as he is in the novel. Erika's auto-aggression seems to stem from her inability to take revenge on Klemmer, who ultimately caused her suffering, rather than from the desire to rebel against her mother.

During this last scene, there is no music. The concert has obviously not started, although it is clear that Klemmer, when he finally arrived at the Conservatorium and ran past Erika, was already late. While it is possible to surmise that Erika's absence has caused this delay, this is not necessarily so. In an earlier scene, we

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2005: 478.

have a glimpse of the poster advertising the event. There, Schubert's songs are not the first item on the program. Erika's absence – at least for the moment – is completely irrelevant.