
Jouissance and Desire in Michael Haneke's "The Piano Teacher"

Author(s): JEAN WYATT

Source: *American Imago*, Winter 2005, Vol. 62, No. 4, Scars of History (Winter 2005), pp. 453-482

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26305485>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Imago*

JSTOR

Jouissance and Desire in Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher*

Where, psychologically, can we locate Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* (France/Austria 2001)? Despite moments in which it appears that we are following traces of feminine desire, I suggest that the film plunges us into a space of maternal jouissance. Since my interpretation of the film hinges on the distinction between desire and jouissance, I begin with a brief exposition of these Lacanian concepts—one that is necessarily provisional and that the essay as a whole will fill out. In the Lacanian lexicon, desire is created by the lack that founds the subject as a member of the social/symbolic order. Once called into existence, desire propels the subject toward the social world, in a never-ending search for a person or object to fill that foundational gap in being. Desire exists within the parameters of social law: as a product of the instinctual renunciation demanded by the social contract, desire finds its origin and its limits in the social order. The hallmark of jouissance, on the contrary, is excess: it is an expression of drive energy—erotic and/or aggressive—that exceeds the limits of social rule and restraint, that goes beyond a rational calculus of the subject's interests, beyond pleasure, even beyond self-preservation. I contend that Erika (Isabelle Huppert), the piano teacher in Haneke's film, lives in a world of maternal jouissance: her mother (Annie Girardot) operates as if there were no law or limit regulating a mother's possession of her child and her rights to that child's body and will. Although Erika is in her late thirties, her mother continues to

I am fortunate to have had readers who enriched this article by contributing their own ideas to it. I am grateful to Hilary Neroni, who gave me a key structuring idea; to Bettina Soestwohner, who helped me evolve an interpretation of the film's early scenes; to Todd McGowan for pointing out various features of the film's form; and to Victor Wolfenstein for suggesting ways to energize the style and clarify the content of my argument.

American Imago, Vol. 62, No. 4, 453–482. © 2006 by The Johns Hopkins University Press

invade every corner of Erika's space and controls (or tries to control) her every move.

In the rare moments when she is not supervised by her mother or giving piano lessons at the Vienna Conservatory, Erika engages in a series of masochistic, sadistic, even incestuous actions. While at first blush these self-destructive expressions of jouissance seem to have nothing to do with her mother, I maintain that they constitute strategies for breaking the maternal bond. The unrelenting proximity of her mother blocks Erika's access to the symbolic order and thus to the ordinary escapes from maternal closeness described by psychoanalysis. So Erika resorts to strategies located in the real in order to separate.¹ Arguably, her erotic transgressions are self-defeating, since, employing as they do the modalities of jouissance, they return her to the territory of jouissance she inhabits with her mother rather than opening a path into a different world. Nonetheless, her violent acts on (or against) her own body seem calculated to introduce a minimum of distinction and difference between herself and a mother experienced as so close as to be within the confines of Erika's own body.

For the film represents not only Erika's relation to a mother unbearably close in the external reality of her daily life, but also Erika's relation to an inner maternal object. And it is Erika's repeated attempts to eject that uncomfortable object within that is most unsettling to viewers, I will argue. What we see represented, in the amorphous, indeterminate bodily substances produced by Erika's various self-piercings and expulsions, is what usually escapes representation: the phantom remnant of the other at the heart of the self, the internal alterity that constitutes the core of the subject.

If watching the film is so "disturbing"—and that is the word that viewers use, with surprising uniformity, to describe it—then why would someone continue to watch it, let alone identify with Erika's position? The answer lies in part in the allure of a familiar fantasy structure: at odds with Erika's private moments of jouissance is a love plot driven by desire. Erika, who is a piano instructor at the Vienna Conservatory, meets Walter, an athletic yet sensitive young man who shares

her musical tastes and declares his ardent love for her. The plot elements of a romantic love fantasy are then in place—a familiar narrative structure given an extra fillip by the interesting prospect of a romance between an older woman and a younger man. As the plot unfolds, the spectator again and again rides a familiar wave of desire for romantic fulfillment only to be dropped unexpectedly into one of Erika's moments of *jouissance*. Anticipating the consummations promised by the narrative of desire, we encounter instead the real of the body in action, as Erika indulges in the solitary excitements of *jouissance*. *Jouissance* arrests the narrative momentum of desire because *jouissance* is static, curving in upon itself in a closed circuit: it takes place not between the two of the romantic couple, but between the self and the self, between the subject and the kernel of otherness central to the subject. Despite its continually renewed promise of romance, the plot after all follows a logic of *jouissance* rather than the logic of desire that we rely on, as subjects living within the symbolic order and as movie-goers accustomed to Hollywood narratives propelled by desire.

Indeed, every dimension of the film unsettles the viewer by undoing the discourses that sustain the social/symbolic order: within the diegesis, Erika's and her mother's acts defy symbolic restraints on aggressivity and sexuality; at the level of narrative structure, the plot of desire is repeatedly arrested by outbreaks of *jouissance*; stylistically, the ironic juxtaposition of sound and image, of sublime music and images of pornographic or perverse sexuality, deconstructs the discourse of high culture. As the narrative and cultural discourses that usually protect us from the real fall away, we are exposed to the shocks of *jouissance*. It is difficult for the spectator to remain detached from these forced encounters with the real because of the structural oscillation between the scenario of romantic desire, which compels identification, and the surprises of *jouissance*. The film is deeply disturbing because it shakes the ground of the spectator's symbolically situated identity.

Maternal Jouissance

The opening sequence of *The Piano Teacher* presents a thumbnail sketch of the mother-daughter structure. Erika arrives home late and attempts to enter without disturbing her mother; the mother accosts her, angrily demanding where she has been. She grabs Erika's purse, turns it inside out, and tears up the new dress she finds in it. In response Erika slaps her and pulls her hair. The mother declares that Erika has made a hole in her head and Erika tearfully apologizes, touching her mother's hair tenderly in quest of the supposed wound. The scene concludes on an image of mother-daughter unity, with Erika embracing her mother and declaring her great love for her as they sit together on a single overstuffed chair.

The mother's handling of Erika's purse and her dress makes clear Erika's position in this relationship. If we take the purse to be a synecdoche for Erika's body (as in Freud's case history of Dora), the mother's turning the purse inside out and examining its contents implies that Erika is allowed no private internal space. After the mother tears up the dress, Erika says ruefully, "I would have been wearing that dress for years." She later repeats, "I could have worn it forever. It would have lasted an eternity." The dress, destined to be worn in the outside world, figures a possible future for Erika, perhaps even an open future beyond the maternal dyad. The mother's access to the purse and her destruction of the dress introduce Erika as a daughter with no independent position either in space or in time. Erika's body and Erika's time belong to her mother. In this domestic interior, no third figure, no representative of the social/symbolic order, no law exists that would afford protection against jouissance. It is a space of maternal jouissance, where there are no limits on the mother's love and violence, no obstacle to the maternal drive to make her offspring her own, to control her will, mind, and actions.

If the opening scene establishes symbolically Erika's lack of private internal space, its *mise-en-scène* graphically renders Erika's lack of external space. The heavy double doors of the apartment, double-locked, fill the opening frame. (The film subsequently picks up this image of entrapment, often

beginning or ending a scene with a shot of heavy closed doors.) Erika enters, stepping into a dimly lit living room. Large overstuffed furniture crowds the room; and the dingy yellows, ochres, and beiges of the wallpaper and furniture, together with the dim lighting, make the living space appear even more cramped. Mother and daughter are shot in close-up or medium shot, often against a wall, so that the camera never records any expanse of interior space. It is as if there is no depth in the apartment, no empty space between the figures any more than between the large pieces of furniture.

Erika does have a small room of her own, with a closet (which her mother invades at will to throw away her clothes). But Erika sleeps with her mother in a shared room, in a marital bed (twin beds pushed together, Austrian style). The only place that Erika can be alone seems to be the bathroom. Even here, as Erika brushes her teeth toward the end of the opening sequence, the mother's voice penetrates; we can hear her complaining about the expense of the new dress as clearly as if she too were in the bathroom. Thus diegetic sound conspires with *mise-en-scène* to convey the stifling lack of space in which Erika lives and breathes.

Maternal *jouissance* as it begins to emerge in Haneke's film combines two senses of the verb *jouir* (to enjoy): *jouir* in the usual Lacanian sense—that is, the unrestrained expression of drive energies; and *jouir* in the legal sense—having the right to the use, without restriction, of another's property (Žižek 2003, 61). As the mother enacts it, maternal *jouissance* combines the unconstrained expression of violent love and violent rage with a sense of entitlement to the use of the child's body and psyche, without limitation. There is no recognition of a boundary between self and other.

In my view, Erika's mother is frightening—more frightening than the nightmare witch-mother of horror movies—because her excesses represent not just a pathological individual's treatment of her daughter, but the pathogenic potential of a norm. The potential for maternal *jouissance* lies in the ordinary practices of mothering in the Western nuclear family: cultural practices have traditionally reinforced the biological links between mothers and the children they bear and nurse by designating mothers as the principal caretakers

of young children, with primary responsibility for their physical and emotional nurturing. To think of the child's body as an extension of one's own, and to try to exert control over it, is a temptation for many mothers. The mother's emotional investment in Erika, though extreme, forms part of a continuum with the attitudes of ordinary mothers in Western nuclear families—who can also become obsessively anxious when their children are late getting home at night, who also tend to confuse their own desires and ambitions with those of their children, who also overinvest in their children's lives. It is after all some universals of family life that Haneke seeks to illuminate, as he explains in an interview: "For me the family is the locus of the miniature war, the first site of all warfare, . . . the germinating cell for all conflicts" (Sharrett 2003, 32). As Haneke's generalizing commentary suggests, *The Piano Teacher* is more than an interesting case history of mother and daughter: although he portrays maternal intrusiveness at a pathological extreme, Haneke exposes a potential for maternal violation incipient in the structure of the Western family.²

In Lacan's model, maternal desire is the crucial factor that forces a child to separate from its early fused identification with the mother. In contrast to Freud's oedipal story, where the father is the agent who breaks up the closed circle of infant-mother fusion, the father in Lacanian theory functions more like a reference point for the mother's desire. The key factor is that "maternal desire goes *elsewhere*," forcing the child to confront the fact "that it is not her immediate and sole object" (Shepherdson 2000, 126). In pointing elsewhere, maternal desire opens up the field of others beyond the dyad and thus the possibility of other objects—for the child as well as the mother. The realization that maternal desire targets something beyond the child inaugurates the child's desire.

In Erika's situation there is no maternal desire, but only maternal jouissance. In one of the few scenes where mother and daughter are together outside the dyadic space of their home, at a soirée in a private home where Erika plays, a man about the mother's age tries to interest her in an antique cello in his collection: but the mother is incapable of talking to a third person, incapable of directing her attention to anything outside of Erika. Instead of attending to her interlocutor, she

focuses intently on Erika across the room talking to a young man. It is as if even the momentary diversion of her attention to a third party—or the diversion of Erika's attention to a third party—would signify a break, entail unbearable loss. It is not just that there is no father figure in the family and therefore, as in the Freudian scheme, no third party to interrupt the mother-child fusion. As in the broader Lacanian picture, the problem is that there is no maternal desire: there is no object that would engage the mother in pursuit and so move her, even for a moment, out of the closed mother-child dyad.

And what is then the position of the child? In Seminars X and XVII, Lacan describes the dilemma of a child in such a maternal structure in colorful images that seem appropriate to the extremity of Erika's situation:

The mother is a big crocodile, and you find yourself in her mouth. You never know what may set her off suddenly, making those jaws clamp down. . . . There is a roller, made of stone, which is potentially there at the level of the trap and which holds and jams it open. . . . It is a roller which protects you, should the jaws suddenly close. (Lacan 1969–1970, 129; qtd. in Fink 1995, 56–57)

The “roller” or pillar represents the signifying function that governs language and desire. It is the symbolic dimension, with its substitutions, mediations, and differentiations, that can fend off a devouring maternal identification and make some space between child and mother. But the child cannot establish itself as a subject of the symbolic, a subject of language and desire, “when the mother is always on his back.” It is not “the loss of the [maternal] object, but precisely the presence of the fact that objects are not lacking” that causes unbearable anxiety (Lacan 1962–1963; May 12, 1962)—for a child in this situation cannot become a subject of desire.

Desire is engendered when the child recognizes the desire of the mother—and thus realizes that the mother lacks something. (Lack and desire are always coextensive in Lacan.) Through identification with the mother's lack, the child discovers her own fundamental lack (Lacan 1964, 215). Lack triggers desire, moving the child away in search of the elusive

object that might fill the gap. If, however, the mother is using the child as an extension of herself, as the object that completes her, then the mother feels no lack, nor desire either: there is no need for the mother to look further. The child need never confront lack, either in the mother or in herself; unable to establish herself as a symbolic subject based on lack, the child cannot emerge as a subject of desire; instead, she remains attached to the mother.³ That is Erika's situation.

And how does the courting lover, Walter (Benoît Magimel), fit into this configuration? My answer would be that he does not, that there is no place available for him—no lack, no gap in the united front of mother and daughter. Walter tries to insert himself into Erika's world as object of her desire. But to think in terms of her desire is to mistake the nature of her world—a world where there is no lack, no desire, and no room for a third.

Just as the film's opening sequence introduces Erika through a symbolic dramatization of the precise terms of her relation to her mother, so the action sequence that introduces Walter represents in full the structure of his subsequent relationship with the mother-daughter pair. As Erika and her mother, arm in arm, enter an apartment building on their way to a private piano recital hosted by Walter's aunt, Walter enters behind them. The two women step into the elevator, and as Walter arrives at the elevator door Erika emphatically pushes it shut. The elevator cage is open-worked wrought iron, so that as the elevator rises Erika and her mother can see Walter racing upstairs, passing the elevator at each floor, till he arrives at his aunt's door at the same time as the elevator, whereupon he introduces himself.

The camera is positioned inside the elevator, yielding a close-up of Erika's and her mother's heads seen from the back. The effect of the extreme close-up in the cramped space of the elevator is to put the spectator in the claustrophobic world of the mother-daughter pair, with the outside world reduced to a blur. The resemblance between them, which is usually minimal—since the actresses, Isabelle Huppert and Annie Girardot, do not have similar facial features—is emphasized by the shot from behind, which foregrounds the identical color of their hair and their identical height. The two figures have parallel

postures and are placed symmetrically, equidistant from the center and sides of the frame. The two heads hardly move, except for an initial brief exchange of glances after the doors close on Walter. The immobile symmetry of the two monolithic heads contrasts with the movement of Walter racing up the staircase that circles the elevator. And that opposition represents kinetically the contrast between *jouissance* and desire. The space of *jouissance* is full and therefore static; there is no lack to put desire into motion: inside the elevator, the rigid figures are locked in stony silence and immobility. Desire, on the other hand, is always in motion—"in its essence, a constant search for something else" (Fink 1995, 90): Walter's hypermobility enacts a parodic performance of desire.

In the following scene at the private recital, Walter attempts to beguile Erika through the usual means: flirtation, flattery, and suggestions that they are kindred spirits. But the trajectory of his courtship, its many stalemates and its eventual dead end, are prefigured in this kinetic sequence. Walter's frantic motion does not get him into the closed space of the elevator: the bars of the elevator, redoubled by the iron grill and wire mesh of the elevator shaft, form an impenetrable barrier around a domestic interior that is locked against him. Walter's various attempts to knock, ring, enter, and, finally, break into the locked apartment Erika shares with her mother are but extensions of this scene. In this film, the momentum of desire always falters and fails, blocked by the static fullness of *jouissance*.

Of course, the dyadic space represented by the elevator is prison as well as fortress: the bars of the cage prevent those inside from leaving. Erika inhabits a world where there is no lack and no desire—and also no escape. Now the question becomes: how does one represent someone who does not experience desire? Or to state the question differently, how does someone who is stuck in the real, who cannot enter fully into the symbolic, behave? Or, to close in on the specific logic of Erika's situation, how do her various perverse acts relate to maternal overattachment?

Erika makes fledgling efforts to ward off maternal *jouissance*; but since the continuous presence of the mother blocks her access to the symbolic, she cannot erect the

symbolic barrier against the mother that Lacan describes; her attempts to separate are mired in the real. First, it is the real of her own body that she employs in order to escape the real of maternal jouissance: she vomits, urinates, and bleeds, all apparently in the service of expelling a mother experienced as so close as to be inside her own body. Second, in her acts of perverse sexuality and violence Erika practices jouissance—but jouissance in *The Piano Teacher* lacks the emancipatory potential attributed to it by other transgressive works of literature.⁴ For Erika's violence toward her own and others' bodies returns her to the dimension of jouissance that she shares with her mother rather than providing an opening into the larger social world. Yet in the closing moments of the film we cannot be so sure: the ending suggests, however ambiguously, that Erika may indeed have opened a pathway out of the stifling maternal dyad—without following the symbolic route to separation mapped out by psychoanalysis, without departing from the tactics of jouissance practiced on the real of her own body.

Lacan's various definitions of jouissance throw light on Erika's bizarre acts. The hallmark of jouissance is excess. But excess in relation to what? First, excess beyond the limits imposed by law: the laws laid down by social institutions and the norms internalized by social members constitute a sociosymbolic order that defines limits on interpersonal sex and violence. The extremity of Erika's various erotic and aggressive acts reflects a maternal world where there is no Law-of-the-Father, no reference to a larger social order. The mother normalizes violence at every point: after the desperate struggle of the opening scene, the mother remarks, "We are a hot-blooded family"; after Erika tries to rape her, the mother advises her, as if nothing had happened, to get a good night's sleep so she can perform well on the morrow. There is no sense of transgression in Erika's psychic world because nothing is prohibited; there is no set of regulating principles to transgress. Erika victimizes her pupils through various degrees of verbal violence. But even when verbal abuse tips over into physical violence, when she mutilates her pupil Anna's hand, Erika gives no sign of the affects ordinarily connected with transgression: no hesitation before putting glass fragments in Anna's pocket, no fear of detection, no guilt or remorse

afterward. Erika's absorption in violent acts that flout social norms of behavior reflects not an indifference to social law, but an obliviousness that such a thing exists. "At the level of jouissance, the Other doesn't exist," as Jacques-Alain Miller has said (1997, 16).

Second, excess in relation to the pleasure principle: Lacan's argument for jouissance rests on the notion that there is something in human beings that exceeds the pleasure principle, which guides humans to seek pleasure and avoid pain. In the famous example he borrows (and subverts) from Kant, a man is offered a choice between sleeping with the woman he desires and then being executed, or abstaining from having sex with her: *contra* Kant, Lacan maintains that some would *not* make the rational calculation of pain against pleasure and choose to abstain; some would opt for the whole package, sex and death together (1959–1960, 189; see also Evans 1996, 6–7). Something in humans exceeds the pleasure principle and even the survival instinct. The human craving for a never-ending erotic intensity threatens the organization of the subject and thus its survival. At its extreme, sexuality joins hands with the death drive: its aim is ultimately a self-shattering. Jouissance is an enjoyment of psychic dissolution. And the whole problematic of ethics for Lacan lies here: how to construct an ethics that takes into account what psychoanalysis reveals—that humans are driven by something beyond the desire for the good, beyond the pleasure principle, beyond rational self-interest.

The Piano Teacher unfolds in this territory: again and again, Erika's sexuality and violence express themselves in forms well beyond the dictates of the pleasure principle and the limits imposed by the symbolic order. For example, her various autoerotic acts register the jouissance of a body that has rejected the discipline of the symbolic, which marks out socially permitted erogenous areas on the body, zones where a "phallic," measured-out portion of jouissance is allowed; she opts instead for jouissance, for an "overflow of libido that seeks an endless intensity" (Wright 1991, 188). In the novel from which the film is adapted, Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*, this excess is rendered graphically in a description of the joys of cutting. "The [razor] blade smiles like a bridegroom at a

bride. . . . Bright red blood trickles and trails from the wounds, sullyng everything as it flows. . . . It runs incessantly. It reddens everything. . . . And the blood keeps running. On and on. It runs and runs and runs" (Jelinek 1983, 43–44). As if to figure *jouissance*, the blood from the various cuts meets and merges, obliterating all boundaries, running on and on, on and on.

The film condenses the novel's cutting episodes into one graphic scene where Erika slices into her genitals with a razor-blade, releasing a stream of blood. This is not the cut of symbolic castration—not the cut that marks the entry into the symbolic order by instituting a subjectivity based on lack: Erika, unable to access the symbolic, literalizes the cut. She seems to be trying to establish a minimal degree of distinction from the mother in the real, at the level of the body. It is as if the mother's overproximity is experienced as a corporeal fusion that requires a separation between skin and skin, flesh and flesh.

To my contention that Erika remains mired in the real, one could object that she speaks, so she must by definition have entered into the symbolic order. We are used to thinking of words as the hallmark of the symbolic order. I would argue, however, that the symbolic is not just words, but "a linguistic structure by which to relate [the individual] to other human beings" (Felman 1987, 114). In Erika's case, words do not provide a bridge of communication to other human beings. The letter that Erika writes to Walter will serve as illustration. A letter is by definition a linguistic means of communication between two persons. But Erika's letter is an instrument of *jouissance*, in the service of her own body: it dictates in precise detail the degrading abuses that Walter must inflict on Erika's mouth, face, and stomach. In the scene where Erika orders Walter to read it aloud, the letter does not communicate. Walter cannot take in the script of abjection, cannot receive it; he expresses incomprehension in various ways. In response to his several requests for clarification—as in, "Will you deign to open your cultivated mouth and comment on this shit?"—Erika remains stubbornly mute. The letter fails to throw any arc of communication between Walter and Erika. In a later climactic scene, the language of the letter is shown to have no impact at all on the real as Walter, breaking down the door of

the maternal apartment habitually locked against him, rapes Erika savagely; he beats and brutalizes her according to his own whims rather than according to the precise letter of her masochistic script. Thus Erika is returned inexorably to the body, to the real of the organism.⁵

Erika is not a symbolic subject, I would argue, but is isolated in the real. When Haneke says that the seventeenth song from Schubert's *Winterreise* "holds a central place in the film and could be viewed as the motto of Erika and the film itself" (Sharrett 2003, 31), I think he refers to the parallel between Schubert's wanderer and Erika, and more specifically to the alienation of both from the world around them and from communication with other human beings. The maternal overproximity that prevents Erika's access to the symbolic leaves her in the absolute isolation of one who has failed to enter into the social contract.⁶

Desire, Jouissance, and Viewer Identification

The film's identificatory structure pressures us to experience Erika's acts of *jouissance* up close. But this is not a simple identification. There are as many lingering close-ups of Erika's impassive face as there are point-of-view shots from her perspective. Her face is closed to us, her motivations as opaque as her actions are unexpected. Still, it is Erika's movements that the camera consistently tracks and Erika's subjectivity that is central to the narrative, so it is her position that the film offers to spectator identification.

In more traditional structures such as film noir, *jouissance* is projected onto the *femme fatale*, and the narrative structure protects the viewer from direct exposure to her destructive excesses by inviting her or him to identify with the position of the male protagonist. If we respond with desire and anxiety to the woman's deadly sexuality, we do so second-hand, through empathy with the male lead's complicated feelings for her. We view her from a distance, from a position within the law. For while the noir hero is tempted, his immersion in the *jouissance* the *femme fatale* offers is never complete; in the end he returns to the symbolic network that sustains the social bond

and preserves his integral self from the dissolution inseparable from jouissance. (For example, in *Double Indemnity* Neff does not die with Phyllis in her deadly embrace; though fatally wounded, he returns to rebuild social alliances before he dies—first by ensuring that the “good daughter” ends up with the proper marriage partner, then by reasserting his bond with the law represented by Keyes.⁷)

In *The Piano Teacher*, the sexual dynamic is similar to that of film noir: with only a slight shift of perspective, Erika could be seen as the femme fatale who tries to seduce the representative of a solid masculine identity, Walter, into her world of destructive sexuality—a sexual immersion that would dissolve his masculinity by depriving him of the autonomy, mastery, and phallic control that constitute its core. The difference here is that we are not invited to identify with Walter. The camera captures the events from Erika’s point of view. We are riveted to her position, stuck in the uncomfortable place of the femme fatale.⁸

But as feminist film critics have pointed out, a viewer is not fixed once and for all in the identificatory position the film narrative constructs for her. The viewer has a measure of choice; and her own unconscious fantasies can influence her to disidentify with a protagonist’s perspective as well as to identify. Why, then, when Erika acts in ways likely to arouse disgust, as in the previous example of cutting into her labia, does not the viewer turn away from identification? I would say that each time one of Erika’s self-abusive sexual acts surprises or disgusts the viewer, it probably does impel her or him out of identification. However, a different identificatory dynamic is also at work. As Elizabeth Cowie points out, the spectator doesn’t identify only with the desires of a particular character, but also “identifies with the playing out of a desiring” (1990, 178), that is, with the fantasy driving the narration. The narrative of two lovers divided by obstacles but propelled by desire for each other promises the satisfactions of a Hollywood romance: so each time one of Erika’s bizarre actions impels the spectator to turn away from identification with her, the underlying fantasy of romantic love seduces her or him back into identification. Another way of saying this is that the narrative structure of romantic heterosexual desire imposes a

familiar coherence on events, a coherence that Erika's acts of sexual *jouissance* keep tearing apart. As a result, the viewer gets caught up in an oscillation between desire and the anxiety provoked by *jouissance*—an oscillation that mimes the tug-of-war in the *diegesis* between Walter (representative of desire) and Erika (site of *jouissance*). In *The Piano Teacher*, however, the trajectory of desire always dead-ends in *jouissance*—both the desire incarnated in Walter's perpetual motion and the desire of the viewer continually aroused by the prospect of an older woman finding love with a young man.

Two exemplary scenes will illustrate the dialectic between desire and *jouissance*. Erika emerges from the Vienna Conservatory at the end of a workday with a colleague—a member of the chamber music group with whom Erika often rehearses. Her companion assures Erika that she is only too happy to cover for Erika if Erika's mother should call her house—for, she says, "I adore lying in the name of love. I'm so happy for you." She speaks for our desire: with her, we anticipate that Erika is moving out from her domestic and professional enclosures to meet Walter. We are with Erika as she strides along the street and loiters in the café adjoining a drive-in movie. But she remains solitary, and we discover that what she is seeking is not a lover, but a car where a random couple is having sex: she squats down and urinates as she watches the pair copulate on the back seat. We expect heterosexual romance and we get instead the excretion of waste. Urinating is a form of *jouissance*—an expression of sexuality foreign to the normative erogenous zones, outside social bounds, and self-damaging (in the sense here of inviting discovery and humiliation). But what does it mean to Erika? Why is urinating sensual for Erika?

In the scene in the skating rink locker room, an even more promising enactment of desire inveigles the spectator into identification with the narrative of desire, only to devolve once more into excretory function. Erika, clad only in a trenchcoat over a silky flowered nightdress, goes to the skating rink where Walter practices ice hockey. She draws a resisting Walter into the locker-room, where she gives him fellatio to climax. The publicity pictures for the film—on the DVD and on the cover of the published screenplay, for example—

feature a still from this scene: Erika lying on the floor in her silky floral gown, stretching out her hand for Walter with parted lips and yearning eyes. The viewer of the film, like the presumptive buyer of the DVD or screenplay, follows the cues of desire: the woman is urgently seeking out the man who has been courting her—she’s dying for him, she’s inviting him to sexual consummation. But instead of the “regular sex” we’re expecting—the romantic kiss, the mutual avowal, the sexual consummation—what we get is Erika giving Walter fellatio and then vomiting. And what gives Erika joy appears to be the vomiting itself. She smiles radiantly and says, “I am clean . . . I am all clean. Like a baby. Inside as well as outside.”

Erika’s delight in vomit may baffle the viewer because it does not follow from the logic of desire; but it does have its own logic. It has to be read not as a stage in an unfolding heterosexual courtship, but as the counterpart to the preceding scene, in which Erika tries, apparently, to rape her mother. In that scene, as they lie side by side in bed at night, Erika suddenly throws herself on top of her mother, exclaiming, “I love you! I love you! [*Je t’aime! Je t’aime!*],” as she moves her body forward and backward on her mother while pinioning her arms to her side. Her actions seem to be a desperate attempt to give in finally and literally to the mother’s demand that she become a part of the mother, that she have no separate life of her own: she seems to be trying to reenter the womb. Sound confirms that aim: all the while that Erika writhes on top of her mother, she sobs and cries and wails loudly with all the single-focused unmitigated desperation of a baby. And after the attack is over, Erika returns, infant-like, to nestle her head in the crook of her mother’s neck. Erika’s out-of-bounds sexual assault combines with her attempt to abandon a separate existence to remind us that jouissance has little to do with pleasure and everything to do with the death drive, with self-dissolution. And Erika’s excesses here echo the specific nature of maternal jouissance: the mother has held Erika to a zero degree of separation and autonomy, has made her into an extension of the self. Erika works out the logic of annexation at the level of the body.

Vomiting is just another branch of the same logic—a logic Freud (1925) ascribes to infants: “Expressed in the language of

the oldest, that is, of the oral, instinctual impulses, the alternative runs thus: 'I should like to eat that, or I should like to spit it out'; or, 'I should like to take this into me and keep that out of me'" (237). Erika operates according to the primitive calculus of Freud's baby. She has tried incorporation, now she tries expulsion. Erika herself articulates her infantile status by exclaiming after throwing up that she is as "clean" as a "baby. Inside as well as outside." It is as if she is establishing the line between "inside" and "outside" for the first time, in a simulation of the way a baby creates the same division by "spitting out . . . what is alien to the ego" and thus transforming it into "what is external" (Freud 1925, 237).

Erika's joy in vomiting comes from achieving (apparently) what she has been trying to effect through excretions of one kind or another—bleeding, urinating, vomiting: an expulsion of the maternal object. Erotic fulfillment has little to do with Walter and everything to do with the mother, who is experienced as the "strange" thing "at the heart of me," the object that is at once the core of the individual and fundamentally other (Lacan 1959–1960, 71). Central to every subject is an alien object that recalls the first caretaker and bears witness to her (or his) constitutive impact on the child's subjectivity. But Erika's dilemma is that "the prehistoric Other that it is impossible to forget" (Lacan 1959–1960, 71) is not just a relic of an archaic maternal matrix, but the primal mother herself, who exists not as a phantom remnant of the past but as an insistent presence in Erika's contemporary reality. The extimate thing inside and the intimate thing outside are identical; and Erika is trapped with the primal other both in the internal world of the psyche and in the external world of everyday life.

Erika's fascination with vomiting is a form of *jouissance*. And *jouissance* always involves a relation with "the intimate core of one's being"; it is a self-enclosed transaction which is "independent of the desire of others" (Copjec 1995, 190, 196). *Jouissance*, with its "solitary status" (Miller 1997, 20), is then the antithesis of romantic love, which is of course based on the belief that only the beloved can complete the self. Walter's repudiation of Erika's invitation to rejoice with her in the cleansing vomit—"You know you stink terribly? Sorry, no one

will ever come close to you, you stink so much”—perhaps owes some of its vehemence to rage at his own superfluity.

And when we as spectators witness—again—the “solitary status” of Erika’s jouissance, the script of romantic love which has been leading us on collapses, and with it the fantasy support of desire. We are willing to put up with endless missed encounters and obstacles to love: they function to keep desire alive and to propel the romance plot forward. But the revelation that a woman would choose a self-enclosed jouissance that knows nothing of the other over romantic fulfillment stops cold the narrative driven by desire. Feminine jouissance marks the limit of the narrative of desire and exposes the gaps in the ideology of romantic love that sustains it. To the extent that the viewer’s symbolic identity is supported by such ideological narratives, these disruptions of the romance plot are discomposing: as Hilary Neroni says, feminine jouissance constitutes “a momentary break from those symbolic fictions that constitute identity” (2004, 213).⁹

The disturbing effects of jouissance are intensified by the viewer’s identification with Erika’s position. If he or she has been lured back into identification with Erika by the romantic scenario of desire—and this scene, initiated by Erika’s apparent desire for Walter and seeming to drive at last toward sexual fulfillment, is particularly inviting—then the viewer is in a position vulnerable to the exhibition of jouissance.

Erika experiences vomiting as relief, as the ejection from the self of an indigestible other. Not so the spectator: what the spectator sees puddling on the floor is a graphic representation of the object *a*. The object *a* is Lacan’s formulation for the foreign object at the heart of the subject. It is a remnant of the other which at the beginning seemed to be integral to the self (as, for example, the breast was initially perceived as an extension of the sucking mouth). The object *a*, created when the subject *becomes* a subject by entering the symbolic order, registers a constitutive lack. It is both a purely structural function indicating the lost object and a scrap of former jouissance—both loss and surplus. Though the object *a* exists, it exists non-objectally, so to speak—as a kind of formless phantom remnant of what is lost.

So the object, which has no objectivity as such, cannot be figured. Yet when Lacan attempts to evoke it, he does so precisely by describing it as something (such as the breast or the feces) once presumed to be part of the body, but then separated off from it: “The *objet a* is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off” (1964, 103). If anything can come close to representing the object *a*, it is vomit—something that was part of the subject, and even now is hardly separate, not yet quite an external object: appropriately semi-liquid, viscous, the vomited blob is an excess that resists definitive form, that does not resolve itself into the distinction of object/non-object or self/not-self.¹⁰ In its intermediate state of being, it makes a good stand-in for the indeterminate thing that is in me/not me.

Now we can begin to see why the film’s surprises are so disturbing. Again and again, the viewer follows the movement of desire toward erotic fulfillment only to be stopped short by an act of jouissance, which often occurs in relation not to the lover, but to some form of the object *a*—blood, urine, vomit: all are quasi-objects which are of Erika, yet not Erika. The fall from desire is not a superficially annoying plot device, but an attack on the foundation of the spectator’s symbolic position. For that symbolic position rests on desire—and the aspect of Lacan’s notion of the object most relevant to my analysis of viewer discomfort is the function of the object *a* in creating desire. The fantasy that founds the unconscious, Lacan says, is a fantasy of attraction to the lost object, which he renders as $\$ \diamond a$, with the $\$$ representing the subject depleted by entry into the symbolic order and the $\diamond$ representing a relation of attraction/repulsion to the lost object (*a*). The distance from the object figured by $\diamond$ generates desire—desire for the ever-elusive object *a*; desire in turn generates the subject’s movement toward the world, toward the person or object that appears for the moment to incarnate the lost object. To encounter a representation of the object *a* up close—even through the illusory closeness of cinematic identification—is to experience the collapse of distance from the object *a* and therefore the imminent collapse of desire and the symbolic identity based on it.¹¹ The disturbance of the viewer is deeper, then, than the surprises and disappointments of the romantic

plot would seem to warrant: the (represented) presence of the object threatens to disrupt the structure of desire that founds the subject's symbolic identity. The film's form mimics its content by generating in the viewer an anxiety parallel to, if not as intense as, the perpetual anxiety aroused in Erika by her exposure to the overproximity of the primal maternal object.

Sexual and Political Subversions of the Symbolic: The Discourse of High Culture

Haneke's use of female jouissance to break up the narrative of desire and expose the holes in the ideology of romantic love that subtends it is only one of the film's efforts to subvert the cultural discourses that sustain us. When Haneke says that he strives for the obscene, he is perhaps referring to this subversion of the symbolic: "I would like to be recognized for making in *The Piano Teacher* an obscenity, but not a pornographic film. In my definition anything that could be termed obscene departs from the bourgeois norm. . . . By contrast, pornography is the opposite, in that it makes into a commodity that which is obscene, makes the unusual consumable" (Sharrett 2003, 32). One could say that Haneke "breaks with the norm" (32) by exposing the obscene underside of every symbolic discourse.

Haneke's ironic juxtapositions of sound and image effectively target the discourse of high culture epitomized by the classical music tradition of Vienna. Vienna is the internationally recognized capital of classical music: in its glorious past, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and Schubert composed and performed there; and present-day music lovers make the pilgrimage to Vienna to hear classical music performed with the utmost sensibility, rigor, and precision. Vienna is also heir to the Romantic idealization of music as the highest spiritual expression of humankind. According to the German/Austrian idealist aesthetic, music lifts the spirit above the petty concerns of the ego and puts it in touch with universal truths: "Music's alliance with spiritual spheres can free one from the prison house of the self and bring one into communion with God and with other human beings similarly moved" (Youens

1991, 70). Or, as the narrator of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* sums up the idealist aesthetic:

[Great music] points beyond itself, is an expression and exponent of a more universal spirit and intellect. . . . Moreover, love for such an object . . . says something about the person who feels it, it defines his relationship to the universe, to the world represented by the created object and, whether consciously or unconsciously, loved along with it. (1924, 641)

Haneke comments ironically on this aesthetic by juxtaposing the glorious classical music played by members of the prestigious Vienna Conservatory with pornographic images. These juxtapositions use only source music—the film has no musical score apart from the music the characters themselves play. In one sequence, Erika is shown playing Schubert's Piano Trio in E Flat Major with two of her fellow instructors from the Conservatory; the music overlaps into the next scene, in which Erika walks into a pornography shop and enters a viewing booth. The lovely Schubert trio continues to sound while Erika watches images of grossly inflated sexual members doing various things to each other, all the while supplementing visual stimulation by sniffing, in a discarded tissue, the semen of the booth's previous occupant. Toward the end of her viewing, the piano trio is replaced by a tenor singing Schubert: here the sound prelaps the following scene, in which a Conservatory student rehearses a song from Schubert's *Winterreise*. These technical lapses in synchronization contribute to the disorientation of a viewer forced to watch Erika's alienated sexuality in action while listening to the soaring music of Schubert. The incongruity of sound and image debunks aesthetic idealism, with its claims that music can foster a higher, spiritual nature in human beings: for Erika, the sublime music of Schubert is neither a means of transcendence nor a way to communicate with others similarly elevated by the music.

Another ironic contrast between high and low occurs in the first sexual encounter between Erika and Walter, in the Conservatory's bathroom. Midway through the sex scene, a

Bach Brandenburg concerto begins in the recital hall only a few feet away. The images present a scene of sexual sadism while the glorious music plays. Erika uses her hand and her mouth to stimulate Walter to climax, then prevents his ejaculation. She forbids him speech or movement: when he tries to talk she hurts him; when he tries to come, she hurts him.¹² The sadistic imposition of total sexual control on Walter (who has become her piano student at the Conservatory) is but an extension into the physical of the authoritarian master-pupil relations she imposes on all her students, whom she humiliates and verbally abuses under the guise of strict discipline.

Is Haneke making a political comment here? In my view, the Nazi past of Vienna haunts the film without ever being explicitly incorporated into the diegesis. Fascist authoritarianism is displaced onto the mother's techniques for dominating her daughter and the daughter's techniques for dominating her students. With her pupils and then again on a different plane with Walter, Erika enjoys the total control over the other that was a hallmark of Nazi discipline (and the terse orders she gives Walter in the bathroom scene—"Face front!" "Stop!" "No talking!"—are reminiscent of military commands). She shames her students by means of their sexuality, as the Nazis shamed their prisoners, and humiliates them to the point of dehumanization. (At the end of one of Erika's extended verbal assaults on his piano techniques and his supposed sexual fantasies, one of her young male pupils loses the power of speech as well as the power to play; and here Walter is deprived of control over his own body and voice.)

In the mismatch of sound and image in the bathroom scene, Haneke may well be presenting a contemporary version of the double face of a Vienna that was at once the sacred center of sublime music and the site of the *Anschluss*, where the Austrians enthusiastically embraced a close alliance, a "joining together" with Nazi Germany. The ironic juxtaposition suggests, without ever articulating directly, a political-historical question: how could a culture that produced and revered the divine music of Bach and Schubert also have produced the atrocities of Nazi fascism?¹³

In moving the site of contrast between the musical sublime and the perversely sexual out of the porn shop and into the

sacred center of Viennese musical culture, the Vienna Conservatory, Haneke sharpens the critique both of Vienna's cultural pretensions and of the idealism of high culture itself. There is no direct attack on the traditional music itself: the Brandenburg Concerto in the bathroom scene, like the Schubert overlaid on the pornography scene, is beautifully rendered. But in direct contradiction to aesthetic idealism, this artistic expression of man's highest spiritual aspirations does not influence its human practitioner's baser appetites. Her daily immersion in music does nothing to soften Erika's habits of inflicting pain on her students or to modify her indulgence in sadistic jouissance. The contradictions reveal what Walter Benjamin calls "the documents of barbarism" that underwrite every "document of civilization"—in this case, the harsh political and material realities that are the other half of the "cultural treasures" of which Vienna is so proud (1950, 256).

In every dimension of *The Piano Teacher*, then, symbolic discourse fails to defend against the real: at the level of narrative, the plot of desire fails, ceding to jouissance; stylistically, the discontinuity between sound and image, the incongruous pairing of inspiring classical music with images of sexual sadism, debunks the discourse of high culture. It is only "the symbolic [that can] shield us from the terrifying real" (Copjec 1995, 120). But the film advances symbolic structures only to demonstrate their flimsiness, tear them down, and expose the real they ordinarily block from view. Viewing *The Piano Teacher* is disturbing in part because its form offers no respite, no exit from jouissance. The formal structure of the film thus replays the character's dilemma: Erika too has no symbolic protection, no way out of jouissance.

Erika Breaks Free—Or Does She?

The film's resolution remains true to its guiding principle of undermining symbolic constructions, but with a twist. As if to flout the Lacanian prescription for using the resources of the symbolic to build a rampart against the mother's intrusiveness, the film's ending suggests the possibility of a liberation achieved through recourse to the real of the body—

but only the possibility: the significance of Erika's final act remains ambiguous. On the day of the student recital in which she is supposed to play the Schubert song, Erika remains alone in the foyer after the audience files in to the auditorium and stabs herself in the upper left chest, then walks out of the concert hall onto the street and out of the film's frame.

Is this just another self-cutting? Or a suicide attempt? Will Erika die? Or is Erika disabling her arm? Where is she going? The viewer is left to speculate on several possible outcomes. We have seen no weak link, no gap in the mother-daughter bond through which Erika could work an escape, so psychological consistency would suggest that she is on her way home. But the sudden opening up of the spatial frame as the camera backs off from its usual close-up focus to take a distant shot of Erika emerging onto the street suggests a new freedom. And several elements of the diegesis come together with the cinematography here to support the idea of a break with the mother.

The mother's demand, throughout, has been that Erika be a world-class concert performer, and more precisely a world-class concert performer of Schubert. (Of course, this ambition is delusional: Erika's post as piano teacher already confirms her failure to achieve concert-performer status.) The mother voices this demand early in the film, in relation to Erika's student, Anna. When Erika says that Anna "has some talent . . . a surprising affinity for Schubert," the mother exclaims, "No! That is your domain [*Non! C'est ton domain*]. . . . Do you want your pupils to have a career in place of you [*dans ta place*]? . . . No one must surpass you, my daughter." According to the mother's primitive logic, there is only one place for a great concert performer of Schubert—and that is the place Erika is to occupy. If her student Anna excels, she will take that place and Erika will be dislodged. So Anna's career must be impeded.

Later, Erika mutilates Anna's hand by hiding shards of broken glass in her coat pocket; as a result, Anna's hand is so deeply lacerated that she may never be able to play again. Although the film implies several motives for the attack, on one level Erika is acting out her mother's script; for the occasion is Anna's rehearsal of Schubert's *Winterreise* in preparation for the student recital the following evening, and

Anna is playing Schubert better than she ever has before. After Anna is disabled, Erika is slated to replace her in the student recital of Schubert: she will literally take Anna's place. So the maternal scenario of primary identification plays out (almost) to the end: there is only one place for a great concert performer of Schubert; if you occupy that place, I destroy you so I can be in that place.

But now, minutes before the recital begins, Erika wounds herself and walks out of the hall: she will not be playing Schubert after all. And the site of the injury suggests that there may be a long-term disappointment of her mother's wishes as well. By slicing into her pectoral muscles, Erika may well be dismantling her left arm's capacity to lift, extend, and rotate. Possibly, she will no longer be able to play the piano—or to aspire to the mother's grandiose dream that she will rule over “the Schubert domain” of concert performance. (And Erika's act constitutes a parody of her mother's unrestrained violence; for during the struggle over the new dress, Erika's mother had said, “You should have your hand cut off.” Erika enacts the equivalent mutilation here.) Thus to refuse the position demanded by the mother is to cut through the whole maternal knot of demand, submission, rebellion, and guilt.

Of course, it is only the mother's ostensible demand that she is refusing. As Lacan remarks in Seminar X, the demand is always a false demand. No matter what the verbalized demand is, the true demand is always for love—or, in the case of this overbearing mother, for a love indistinguishable from identification. “Be the best performer of Schubert” is the verbal cover for the true demand, “Be me, enact my will, enact my jouissance.” But I would argue that in breaking the surface pact with the mother, Erika is also freeing herself from the true command underneath, from the imperative that she be an extension of the mother.

This interpretation is supported by the *mise-en-scène* of the concluding shot, which follows Erika's stabbing. The Vienna Conservatory stands foursquare, massive, in the center of the frame as the slim distant figure of Erika emerges from it. Multiple internal frames encase the Conservatory's façade: the double set of doors is composed of many glass panes, and the façade has many windows. In addition, bars are everywhere—

cross-bars and perpendicular bars decorate all the doors and window frames. The multiple frames within the frame suggest an imprisoning structure—or, *tout court*, a prison. Erika walks out of the Institute, turns onto the street filled with moving traffic, and disappears offscreen. The camera dwells on her absence during a very long take of the Institute façade with the traffic moving past it. That is the end.

The sudden sense of open space as the camera moves to a long shot for the first time in this claustrophobically shot film, together with Erika's swift, flowing stride and her decisive turn away from the Institute and out of the frame, conveys the impression of free movement out of an entrapping structure. It seems possible that the cut in the real, severing the muscles that functioned at the mother's bidding, leads to Erika's emergence from the cramped and static space of the maternal dyad into the free flow of ordinary life in the streets. Thus Haneke is unswerving in his fidelity to the regime of the real where Erika finds herself: he refuses to domesticate jouissance through a symbolic resolution or to compromise, even at the moment of final resolution, with the violent excesses of jouissance.

*Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies
Occidental College
Los Angeles, CA 90041
jwyatt@oxy.edu*

Notes

1. In Lacan's schema of the three registers that make up human being, the symbolic is the dimension of linguistic and social structure. It is the categories and structures of the symbolic that organize our experience and our understanding of the world. The Lacanian real is not the material world, but rather that which is excluded from the symbolic order: it is there, in the external world, but it escapes symbolic categories and so cannot be explained, cannot be made to yield meaning. The imaginary is rooted in the subject's relation to images, in the first instance the image of his or her own body and the image of the other; imaginary relations with the other are governed by dual structures like identification and rivalry.
2. The maternal tendency toward boundary confusion is heavily influenced—either encouraged or restrained—by the ideology of mothering that prevails in the particular historical moment. According to the chronology of the mother given in Jelinek's novel (1983, 2), Erika's mother would have come of age in the late 1930s and early 1940s, when the fascist cult of motherhood was in ascendancy in Austria and Germany. Cultural fantasies glorified the pure mother figure as the ideal woman (Theweleit 1977, 1:95–108), while the Nazi

- state pushed childbearing as part of official policy (Thompson 1971; Wolfson 1965). One could perhaps make the argument that the mother's single-minded obsessional focus on her daughter owes something to the climate created by such an overheated promotion of motherhood. And Jelinek's work as a whole is concerned with reminding Austria of the Nazi past it has attempted to suppress.
3. In showing Erika's various bizarre acts of sexual perversion in conjunction with a life in thrall to her mother, *The Piano Teacher* appears to illustrate Lacan's thesis, cryptically stated in "On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis," that "the whole problem of the perversions consists in conceiving how the child, in his relation to the mother, . . . identifies himself with the imaginary object of [her] desire" (1957–58, 197–98). In the Lacanian structure of perversion, the subject takes the position of the *object a* in relation to an other's "will-to-jouissance" (see Evans 1996, 138–39). Harriet Wrye, working from a relational rather than Lacanian perspective, elaborates "the relationship between the early mother-child bond and sado-masochistic defenses" in *The Piano Teacher*: she understands Erika's ventures into sexual perversion as a "defensive identification with the male who has the power to possess and dominate the mother sexually" (2005, 1205).
 4. Cecilia Sjöholm says that in Jelinek's novel, *The Piano Teacher*, "enjoyment never becomes an emancipatory possibility, as in Sade-Wollstonecraft," because jouissance is always connected with submission to the mother, who is "the living superego in the psychic life of the daughter" (2004, 150).
 5. Lacanian critics Frances Restuccia, Slavoj Žižek, and John Champagne interpret the rape scene variously. Restuccia reads Walter's rape of Erika as positive. Whereas Erika's cutting was "a form of self-punishment sustaining the mother's control, abuse, and punishment of Erika," putting Walter in the place of the punishing mother is a "strategic" use of perversion "to effect a psychic transformation" (2004, 16, 21). She claims that Walter's beating and rape not only follow the masochistic script of the letter, but also are successful in "cutting Erika loose from her most precious object—her loved/hated mother" (2004, 21). Žižek understands Erika to be opening up her fundamental fantasy, the innermost "core of her being," in the letter to Walter. Far from honoring that fantasy, Walter's rape disregards it and so initiates a sexual intercourse that, "in its almost unbearable pain," exemplifies Lacan's dictum that "there is no sexual relation"; and the rape "pushes Erika toward suicide" (2002, 21). Similarly, Champagne claims that the film as a whole "forces us to confront what Lacan calls the necessary failure of the sexual relation"; it is "Lacanian in its insistence on the impossibility of desire in general and female sexuality in particular" (2002 10, 2).
 6. The songs of the *Winterreise* constitute a monodrama spoken by a wanderer compelled by some unnamed grief—or, more probably, driven by existential despair—to wander alone forever (see Youens 1991, 55–58). All the songs portray him as alienated; but Song 17, "*Im Dorfe*" ("In the Village"), which sounds through many of the film's scenes, especially emphasizes the traveler's distance from ordinary humanity. The phrase repeated in the film's many rehearsals, "*Es bellen die Hunde*" ("the dogs are barking"), signals the hostility of the petit-bourgeois world to the rootless traveler; and the sleeping burghers' dreams of the possessions they long to acquire reinforce the wanderer's estrangement from the dreams and desires of ordinary humanity: he is "finished with dreams" so "why should [he] linger among the sleepers?" ("*Ich bin zu Ende mit allen Träumen, was will ich unter den Schlafern säumen?*") The repetitions of Schubert's themes can be read, then, not only as an analogue to Erika's solitary night wanderings, but also as the leitmotif of her estrangement from other human beings. She seems to be incapable of using words, sexuality, or music to reach others.

Commenting on the film's use of the *Winterreise*, Robin Wood astutely develops the parallel between Erika's and the wanderer's alienation from

- ordinary humans. Wood is sympathetic to Erika's estrangement from "normality": "If a culture is sick at its roots, then 'normality' will be simply the manifestation of that sickness. Erika has access to all the turmoil and confusion that underlie and discredit 'normality' and refuses to be lulled into its deceiving dreams" (2002, 59–60).
7. Feminist film critics have pointed out that the visual dimension of film noir can work against its containment of the femme fatale's sexuality within a male-centered narrative structure, sometimes allowing the viewer to glimpse the femme fatale as a subject (see Place 1998, 48; Gledhill 1998, 29–30; Dyer 1998, 119). Joan Copjec has a different view of the noir hero from the one I present here. In her eyes, noir heroes in general, and Neff in particular, give themselves over to jouissance, so the law, the big "Other, no longer exists" for them and thus no longer provides them with "protection from jouissance" (1995, 196, 191).
 8. Maria Van Dijk argues that Haneke's directorial tone of detachment blocks empathy with Erika: "Haneke constructs a position for us as voyeur, . . . following [Erika] at a distance and never allowing us to come to grips with her in any satisfactory way. . . the audience cannot engage or sympathize with Erika" (2002, 2).
 9. Hilary Neroni's article on Jane Campion's cinema brilliantly describes the effects of feminine jouissance on narrative: "Every attempt to include feminine jouissance within a narrative structure has the effect of destabilizing this structure and arresting its movement" (2004, 218).
 10. My conception of vomiting's symbolic function owes much to Greg Forter's (2000, 85–92) probing and eloquent description of the relations between vomiting and the maternal object in Faulkner's *Sanctuary*.
 11. Joan Copjec has described the danger that the proximity of the object *a* poses to the symbolic subject. If the subject comes too close to the object *a*, then the fundamental fantasy supporting symbolic identity collapses: "instead of $\$ \diamond a$, we get $\$ a$: the shriveling up of the distance separating the two terms results in the collapse of the fantasy structure" (1995, 131).
 12. Robin Wood reads Erika's sexual actions here and elsewhere as a response to her mother's repression of Erika's sexuality (2002, 60). According to Wood, Erika's sexuality recapitulates "our sexual history over the past hundred years," moving between the extremes of sexual repression and overindulgence in a commodified, alienated form of sexuality (55, 58).
 13. Haneke says in an interview that in *The Piano Teacher* "we are seeing a very Austrian situation. . . . The music is very beautiful, but . . . this culture takes on a social function that ensures repression" (Sharrett 2003, 30). That Haneke may be alluding to Austria's repression of its Nazi past (and not simply to Erika's sexual repression) seems probable to me, especially since he goes on to say that "these issues are not just subjects of the film's screenplay, but are also concerns of the Elfriede Jelinek novel." Jelinek often says in interviews that her work has been particularly concerned with reminding Austria of the Nazi past it has attempted to repress—a repression that allows fascism to continue into the present. The Nazi past is a subtext of everything she writes, she says, "hang[ing] over everything like a threat" (Bethman 2000, 62). But she cautions that a work of art cannot state this material too explicitly or it becomes kitsch: "One must translate it into other terms, one must work indirectly, one must find pictures for it" (Jelinek et. al. 1995, 49; my translation). The political reminders of Nazi Austria that surface explicitly in Jelinek's other works—notably *Stecken, Stab und Stangl*, *Wolkenheim*, and *Kinder der Toten*—together with Haneke's assurance that the film remains true to the novel's concerns, support the notion that Erika's and the mother's techniques of control echo Nazi tactics.

References

- Benjamin, Walter. 1950. Theses on the Philosophy of History. In *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968, pp. 253–64.
- Bethman, Brenda. 2000. "My Characters Live Only Insofar as They Speak": Interview with Elfriede Jelinek. In *Women in German Yearbook*, 16:61–72.
- Champagne, John. 2002. Undoing Oedipus: Feminism and Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher*. *Bright Lights Film Journal*, 36: <<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/36/pianoteacher1.html>>
- Copjec, Joan. 1995. *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Cowie, Elizabeth. 1990. Fantasia. In Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie, eds. *The Woman in Question: M/F*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 149–96.
- Dyer, Richard. 1998. Resistance through Charisma: Rita Hayworth and *Gilda*. In Kaplan 1998, pp. 115–22.
- Evans, Dylan. 1996. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.
- Felman, Shoshana. 1987. *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fink, Bruce. 1995. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Forter, Greg. 2000. *Murdering Masculinities: Fantasies of Gender and Violence in the American Crime Novel*. New York: New York University Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1925. Negation. *S.E.*, 19:233–39.
- Gledhill, Christine. 1998. *Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism*. In Kaplan 1998, pp. 20–34.
- Jelinek, Elfriede. 1983. *The Piano Teacher*. Trans. Joachim Neugroschel. London: Serpent's Tail, 1988.
- , Jutta Heinrich, and Adolf-Ernst Meyer. 1995. *Sturm und Zwang: Schreiben als Geschlechterkampf* (Storm and Compulsion: Writing as Sexual Struggle). Hamburg: Ingrid Klein Verlag.
- Kaplan, E. Ann, ed. 1998. *Women in Film Noir*. London: British Film Institute
- Lacan, Jacques. 1957–1958. On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis. In *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977, pp. 179–225.
- . 1959–1960. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*. Trans. Dennis Porter. New York: Norton, 1992.
- . 1962–1963. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety, 1962–1963*. Trans. Cormac Gallagher. Unpublished.
- . 1964. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1978.
- . 1969–70. *Le Séminaire. Livre XVII. L'envers de la psychanalyse (1969–70)* [The Seminar. Book 17. The Other Side of Psychoanalysis]. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Paris: Seuil, 1991.
- Mann, Thomas. 1924. *The Magic Mountain*. Trans. John E. Woods. New York: Vintage, 1996.
- Miller, Jacques-Alain. 1997. The Drive is Speech. *Umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious*, 1:15–34.
- Neroni, Hilary. 2004. Jane Campion's *Jouissance: Holy Smoke* and Feminist Film Theory. In *Lacan and Contemporary Film*, eds. Sheila Kunkle and Todd McGowan. New York: Other Press, pp. 209–32.
- The Piano Teacher*. 2001. Dir. Michael Haneke. Vienna: Wega Film, and Paris: Arte France Cinema.
- Place, Janey. 1998. Women in Film Noir. In Kaplan 1998, pp. 47–68.

- Restuccia, Frances. 2004. The Use of Perversion: *Secretary* or *The Piano Teacher*? *The Symptom* 5, ed. Josefina Ayerza (online journal for lacan.com) <<http://www.lacan.com/lacan1.htm>>
- Sharrett, Christopher. 2003. The World That is Known: An Interview with Michael Haneke. *Cineaste* 28.3:28–32.
- Shepherdson, Charles. 2000. *Vital Signs: Nature, Culture, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.
- Sjoholm, Cecilia. 2004. *The Antigone Complex: Ethics and the Invention of Feminine Desire*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Theweleit, Klaus. 1977. *Male Fantasies*. 2 vols. Trans. Stephen Conway. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Thompson, Larry V. 1971. *Lebensborn* and the Eugenics Policy of the *Reichsfuhrer-SS*. *Central European History*, 4:54–77.
- Van Dijk, Maria. 2002. Alienation and Perversion: Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher*. *Bright Lights Film Journal* 36 <<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/36/thepianoteacher.html>>
- Wolfson, Manfred. 1965. Constraint and Choice in the SS Leadership. *Western Political Quarterly* 18:551–68.
- Wood, Robin. 2002. "Do I Disgust You?" or Tirez pas sur *La Pianiste*. *CineAction* 59:54–61.
- Wright, Elizabeth. 1991. An Aesthetics of Disgust: Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Klavierspielerin*. *Paragraph* 14(2):184–96.
- Wrye, Harriet. 2005. Perversion Annihilates Creativity and Love: A Passion for Destruction in *The Piano Teacher*. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 86:1205–12.
- Youens, Susan. 1991. *Retracing a Winter's Journey: Schubert's Winterreise*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Zizek, Slavoj. 2002. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*. London: Verso.
- . 2003. *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.