

The Piano Teacher: Femininity, Sexual Identity, and Repression

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Abstract: Michael Haneke explores themes of femininity, sexual repression, and identity in his character study film *The Piano Teacher* (2001). But what can we take from Erika Rohut, the main character? She is a complex representation of abuse, violence, masochism, and control, attributes we can look to when exploring female sexuality's representation in cinema. She also exhibits a paradox that exists within female masochists, how her sexual perversions correlate with her understanding of misogyny and violence towards women. An analysis of her actions and behaviours is an attempt to understand the psychology behind her motivations and decisions, using the readings of film techniques Haneke utilises and the little backstory we are provided. In addition, the sympathy Haneke inspires within us is explored, examining just why we ardently emotionally invest ourselves in Erika's story, despite her toxicity and recklessness.

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Sexuality in Contemporary Cinema: An Exploratory of Character?

Sex sells. There is something about sex that ignites the curiosity of men and women alike, although the latter has been pushed into keeping this fact shrouded; said curiosity sells tickets, making sex an alluring agent for any consumable film. As sexuality in film is taboo but frequent, its portrayal often fits into a mould deemed acceptable by society's standards- heterosexual and romantic. When filmmakers decide to stray from this mould into more illicit representations of the act, it almost always comes at the expense of the female characters - with gratuitous and graphic sexual assault scenes, still framed within a male sexual fantasy that lingers sensually on the body parts of tortured women, such as the brutal scene in *Perfect Blue* (1997, Kon) and shows such as *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). Sexual violence seems to be inherent in representing sexuality in cinema, and since women can be the main subjects, in turn, it stands as a pillar of female sexuality's representation in media.

In spite of this, a more positive outlook of female sexuality, still fitting within the acceptable portrayal of sex in media, has gained recent traction with shows such as *Sex and The City* (1998-2004) and *Let the Sunshine In* (2017, Denis). Michael Haneke explores the esoteric side of female sexuality, which is often underrepresented in cinema, in his 2001 film *The Piano Teacher* - the main character, Erika Rohut, is a sexually repressed piano teacher whose violent sadomasochistic fantasies are ignited by her meeting with a young man who pursues her. Rather than shying away from these sexual deviances, the film is a full character study into the psychology of the character, and although her sexual fantasies are a thin veil for her personal and home life, they stand to be tools to investigate Erika's psyche while shedding light on sexuality many women may indulge in, albeit not openly.

An eclectic choice of films was examined as the subject matter surpasses the conventionality of genre, psychological thriller *Black Swan* (Aronofsky, 2010), horror *Raw* (Ducournau, 2017), drama *Mademoiselle* (Richardson, 1966) and the film to be investigated *The Piano Teacher* (Haneke, 2001). Illuminating this film are excerpts from interviews with the director, articles exploring psychology and philosophy such as *Jouissance and Desire in Michael Haneke's "The Piano Teacher"* and *Feminist Responses to S/M and The Piano Teacher*, and books exploring

eroticism and neuroticism in female characters, *Death and Sensuality: a Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* and *House of Psychotic Women* respectively.

When Horror is not a Horror: How Haneke Crafts His Films

No, *The Piano Teacher* is not a horror. But watching the film is reminiscent of watching a classic edge-of-your-seat thriller, it's content brutal, disturbing, and unwavering; its long takes give you almost no room to breathe, and the only comfort present in the viewing is knowing that you can pause at any time. The film at times is so

captivating and entrancing that pausing feels impossible. Unlike the works of directors like Tarantino, Haneke's violence may be graphic but is seldom given the importance or attention it may insist upon. The long takes are uninterrupted and the normalcy of gore unnerves the viewer even more. In one scene,



Erika casually self-mutilates and Haneke shows the whole act from start to finish unceasing. Haneke achieves his cinema of cruelty by showing the viewer a moral perspective on reality through his longer takes (Speck, 2010, p.186). Reminiscent of Erika's exhibition of voyeuristic tendencies, we too become the voyeurs, being forced to watch uninterrupted and helpless [Fig. 1].

Haneke rarely turns to music to accompany his scenes, the only music in the film being the diegetic Viennese piano symphonies.

I have too much respect for music to simply throw it in my films, which is why music rarely comes up in them. Usually music is used to hide a film's problems. Here music becomes a part of the film itself. (Haneke, 2001)

His approach to using music in his films is methodical and sparse. Similar to his approach to cinematography, the camera movement is minimal, serving only to track our characters; instead, Haneke chooses to trust the story, initially a book written by Elfriede Jelinek, and the incredible performances of the actors, specifically Isabelle Huppert. Not to say the other aspects of the

mise-en-scène are anymore lacking, they instead remain reserved to allow the strength of these two aspects to reach their full potential. His calm and reserved artistic choices are closely linked to his main character and her relentless composure.

Female Sexual Repression on the Screen

Erika presents a facade of professionalism and insouciance, yet she often experiences dissonant power shifts, from god-like in the eyes of her students then reduced to a silly disobedient child in the eyes of her mother. These two power dynamics only further elevate the sexual repression to which Erika is subjected to; where she is an esteemed pianist, she risks losing the respect of her peers by openly enjoying sex. When she is a daughter, she is berated for wearing revealing dresses and unable to freely leave her mother's home. The dichotomy of her personality leaves no room to execute her desires, and in turn, they manifest in violent and unorthodox paraphilia. The same situation is akin to how the film *Mademoiselle* (1966, Richardson) presents its titular character about 35 years prior to the release of *The Piano Teacher*.



[Mademoiselle] is the teacher, the mentor, the role model. The one who can be counted on to keep everything orderly and right. Clearly she clings to this role, and her sense of pride depends on it. But her pride is compromised by her feelings for the Italian, which she despises as weakness. Angry that he has caused her to be weak, she behaves violently. (Janisse, 2022, p.145)

Fig.2: Mademoiselle engages in her relationship that damages her pride

Erika shares these pressures and violent tendencies with Mademoiselle, and similarly her sexual desires become reciprocated [Fig.2] by a young man who incessantly pursues her, Walter Klemmer. Before meeting Klemmer, Erika's sadomasochistic desires are not placed on a single person, she instead passes the time watching pornography and partaking in voyeurism. Post-Klemmer however, this insatiable suppressed desire instigates violent actions, such as when Erika harms a promising student by pocketing shards of glass in her coat. As Erika unveils her desires to Klemmer, she is met with aversion and revulsion, his disgust reflecting societal

distaste for open displays of abnormal female sexuality. Because of this, along with a coherent understanding of why Erika's character acts the way she does, we empathise with Erika's character: she's more than a woman in a story, she is a representation of the lengths sexual repression can take women.

Morose Mothers in *The Piano Teacher* and *Black Swan*: Abuse and Its Link to Repression



Fig 3: Erika and her mother argue

The Piano Teacher does not shy away from a tumultuous mother-daughter relationship. Indeed, societal pressures highly influence Erika's repression, but it is the enmeshment between Erika and her mother [Fig. 3] that proves to be an outstanding aspect of the film and her repression. The Mother - a character that remains unnamed and instead dons an authoritative title - is

controlling and tyrannical, "her mother operates as if there no law or limit regulating a mother's possession of her child and her rights to that child's body and will" (Wyatt, 2005, p.453). Haneke repeatedly shows us their disturbing bickering and squabbles, often culminating in physical altercations, hair-pulling and peppering each other with slaps.

This mother-daughter relationship is parallel to the one established in Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) where the main character Nina and her mother have a similar age-inappropriate possessive dynamic. Both mothers project their success and career fantasies onto their daughters, controlling their practices and interactions with their peers.



Fig. 4: Nina and her mother in Black Swan

Akin to Erika, Nina also experiences sexual repression, although tamer. She also exhibits self-destructive behaviours such as reckless behaviour and self-mutilation in response to her mother's strict nature. While Nina's mother bathes her lovingly [Fig. 4], Erika's mother and her

share a bed to sleep: the two present an intimate relationship with their daughters (with little boundaries) expressing their admiration for their blooming careers, “the parent's ambition, cloaked in what is in the child's best interest, seduces the child into a gratifying relationship with the parent, one in which the child is indulged as the favourite.” (Libby, 2011).

Both characters lash out violently at some point in these films, whether it is a direct response to their mother’s strict and overbearing natures or otherwise is not entirely clear, but attributing the psychology behind their toxicities to this relationship is palpable. However, even with these violent actions, we still find a way to sympathise with both of these women. Is it the point within the story we’ve seen these actions happen, after we’ve been introduced to the turbulent relationships with their mothers? Or the way the filmmakers have approached humanising their characters thus far? It may be a concoction of both of these elements that we choose to remain emotionally attached to these protagonists. Bert Olivier analyses how the mother-daughter relationship fuels Erika’s neurotic behaviour through a Lacanian perspective.

Professor Kohut’s psychotic acts of self-mutilation and desire for masochistic treatment at the hands of Walter are intelligible as desperate attempts to breakdown the unsolicited ‘alienating armour’ imposed on her by her mother. (Olivier, 2005, p.10)

It is with our knowledge of Erika’s home life we sympathise with her obligation to escape this “alienating armour” Olivier describes, and we continue to sympathise although we may not morally agree with her behaviour. To what lengths does our sympathy go? The character of Walter Klemmer may be the encapsulation of this question.

Male Responses to Female Masochism in *The Piano Teacher*

Erika walks into a store indignantly, she spots her male student. He is surrounded by his group of friends, snickering in the dirty magazine section and passing demeaning comments to the woman he and his friends ogle at. During their following piano lesson, Erika reprimands the student for his chauvinistic remarks, threatening to inform his parents. This particular scene represents a paradox within Erika’s character; she expresses her demeaning wishes for violence to Walter, but also scathingly scolds her student for demeaning women with his crude comments. This provides

the context for a scene with somewhat split opinions: a little after Klemmer expresses disdain for Erika and her letter, he returns to her home and violently recreates the contents of her letter. With the knowledge that Erika takes offence to the way her student spoke of women, it's clear Erika has boundaries for her tolerance towards the degradation of women.



Fig. 5: Walter reacts to Erika's letter

One thing that separates her fantasies from Klemmer's assault is the concept of consent. Erika is willing to engage in a sadomasochistic relationship only if it's written out with its exact boundaries [Fig. 5]. When Walter decides to fulfil these requests, he does it unwelcome and forcefully. Still, people have interpreted the scene

to be a culmination of regret within Erika for what she had asked for. Maneesha Deckha argues that the original author, Elfriede Jelinek, reveals her intentions through Klemmer's mocking attitude.

Whereas it is possible to interpret Klemmer's actions up to this point as possibly staging the scene that Erika describes in her letter, Klemmer's mocking reference to the letter strongly suggests that he does not act out of a desire to fulfill her sexual fantasies, but to hurt and humiliate her and avenge himself for his own humiliation and emasculation, for which he blames her. (Deckha, 2007, p.455)

Up to this point, Klemmer presents a powerful aversion to this violence. However, it can be contrived that violence is less of a problem for Klemmer, but more so the lack of control that embarrasses him. It is made clear from the start who exhibits the most power within this relationship, Erika is the teacher, she commands Klemmer during their first sexual interaction, and even in her masochistic and submissive demands, she still holds control over how it is played out. After being met with Klemmer's disgust, Erika begs for his love, revealing her repressed desire for more than bondage, but love and a relationship with somebody who desires her. This shift in the power dynamic gives Klemmer more strength and more hold over Erika,



Fig. 6: Erika pleads Klemmer for another chance

and she is no longer in control [Fig. 6]. This means when her requests are fulfilled by Klemmer, the violence is completed on his own terms, which proves to be easy for him, and lacks the boundaries of a healthy S/M relationship - mutual consent and a clear power imbalance.

The Ending: Regain of Power?

Draped in clean black blazers, the crowd weaves in and out of a concert hall, and the camera remains still, observing. Now Erika, donning a pale yellow top, stands between the audience members, her outfit not the only thing removing her from the throng: her face is battered with bruises. She joins her mother and is now face to face with her worst offence, the young pianist she gravely injured and her overbearing mother. They are mirrors, and up until this moment, Erika has been oblivious to this. Is this why she hurt her? Soon Erika is left alone, she paces back and forth in anticipation, searching through the joining crowds of people. In the blink of an eye, Klemmer arrives, his physical presence small within the frame, but the same cannot be said for his emotional one. He nonchalantly quips his respects and cavalierly climbs out of frame, Erika is astounded and violated, tears well up in her eyes, but her face does not betray the indifferent facade she is so used to. Suddenly, she pulls out a kitchen knife she placed in her purse and stabs herself in the shoulder, allowing a grimace to paint her face and her yellow top becomes stained by the flower of blood blooming [Fig. 7]. She leaves the auditorium, returning to her self-restrained and poised mask. The camera remains on the door long after she's left.



Fig. 7: Erika's final grimace before she stabs herself and exits

Haneke uses an open ending to emphasize the film-spectator relationship (Jeffries, 2001), his films often fit with the apparatus film theory, which can be described as “an affinity between the

movie audiences and the eyes of the movie cameras being used in a cinematic film.” (Filmtheory.org, 2014). This has not stopped theories from being developed and shared online.

It's a way of taking her agency back, of showing him and herself how deeply she's hurt, and of cauterizing the internal wound with an external one, its execution equally drastic in comparison to the sexual and violent exchanges between them. With one brief, violent motion, Erika has put an end to their misshapen relationship and had the final word. How can you be a victim when you're assaulting yourself? (Hayes, 2013)

Still, Haneke avoids the simple solution of telling the audience how to interpret the film by depriving the viewer of a concise conclusion. The film's reserved nature and its hidden ending are reminiscent of the major theme of sexual repression, its violence and gore bubbling at the surface, waiting to be acknowledged, but rarely given the attention it desires.

Masochism and Control

From perversion to awakening, to desire and pleasure, female sexuality is a nuanced subject, one more recently than ever being explored by all kinds of filmmakers. Whether they choose to approach the subject directly like in Steven Shainberg's *Secretary* (2003) or to use a gruesome extended metaphor such as cannibalism in Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2017), both of these approaches seem to break through a common taboo and unveil the “mystery” associated with female sexuality. What these films, as well as *The Piano Teacher*, accomplish are female characters with depth and motivation behind their desires, rather than framing them as temptresses or “demireps.” The psyches of these characters grow past the notion of just sex and are instead explored for their ramifications of pain and a general desire. Ducournau explores the close link between sex and violence in *Raw* [Fig. 8], established by Bataille (1957, p. 92) these elements are bound to coincide:

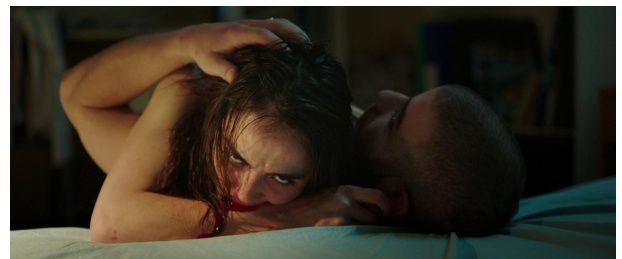


Fig. 8: *Raw* (2017) mixes violence and sex

...we now consider the similarity between the act of love and the sacrifice. Both reveal the flesh. Sacrifice replaces the ordered life of the animal with a blind

convulsion of its organs. So also with the erotic convulsion; it gives free rein to extravagant organs whose blind activity goes on beyond the considered will of the lovers. Their considered will is followed by the animal activity of these swollen organs. They are animated by a violence outside the control of reason, swollen to bursting point and suddenly the heart rejoices to yield to the breaking of the storm. The urges of the flesh pass all bounds in the absence of controlling will.

The comparison to violence and sex elucidates the mind behind the masochist. In all these films, the protagonist experiences a somewhat sexual awakening, specifically with another party involved. Raw, ugly, awkward, and unnerving, their sexualities may be shunned but this uninhibited exploration of their perversions represents a recollection of their power and independence. What hides behind the submissivity they feign is a control they all possess.

Identity and the Character Study

Stories often gone untold are making their way to us as we speak, controversial and taboo subject matters may no longer be off limits, and Michael Haneke does not hesitate to attack these matters when he can. Haneke takes us into the world of a lonely woman, her life chaotic, but we feel prepared for what is to come. He shows us her every day, the mundane, and flings us into a cataclysmic story of desire, lust, and anger. What hides behind the mask of emotionlessness, repression, and self-inflicted violence is Erika Rohut. A character who manages to display a conglomerate field of emotions and motivations. One who is more than her sexual desires, her mother's overbearing nature, and her piano expertise. Instead, she is an amalgamation of humanity, femininity, and perniciousness; flawed and deep, she is the wound she cuts within herself.

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