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# "There's a real hole here": Female Masochism and Spectatorship in Michael Haneke's *La Pianiste*

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“There’s a real hole here”:

Female Masochism and Spectatorship in Michael Haneke’s *La Pianiste*

by

Morgan J. Jennings

A thesis proposal submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Humanities  
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## **ABSTRACT**

In this project, I examine the relationship between female masochism, performance, and spectatorship in Michael Haneke's film *La Pianiste* (2001). The film stages a relationship to sexuality that structures the subject's excruciating negotiations with the other as always mediated by the law, the letter, or the body as instrument, which is allegorized by the protagonist's occupation as a piano teacher. In my analysis, I identify the ways in which the film paradoxically offers a critique of mediation's effect on the feminine position while encouraging viewers to confront the possibility that desire is only possible through these mediations. Contributing to feminist theory and psychoanalytic film theory, I foreground the way in which the film's complex portrayal of female masochism produces indeterminacy via masochistic spectatorship. Ultimately, I argue that the unmarked position of feminine masochism, which is historically, psychoanalytically, and literarily reserved for male subjects, challenges the spectator to take enjoyment into account when approaching mediations of violence and sexuality.

## INTRODUCTION

### Statement of Purpose

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a particular approach to filmmaking emerged in French cinema, including “cinema of sensation” and “new French extremity,” which pushed to the limits film’s potential to evoke embodied, tactile responses in the spectator. In the midst of these transgressive styles,<sup>1</sup> Austrian director Michael Haneke adapted Elfriede Jelinek’s 1984 novel, *Die Klavierspielerin* with his 2001 French-language film *La Pianiste* (*The Piano Teacher*). Categorized as a parodic melodrama by the director, and described as either a romantic drama or erotic thriller by film critics, *The Piano Teacher* falls outside the scope of these movements. While the film’s brutal juxtaposition of violence with sexuality seems to fit in with these extreme tendencies, Haneke’s formal techniques effectively cut the spectator off from sensation. The cinema of sensation, writes Martine Beugnet, “[...] undermines conventional patterns of optical appropriation” and “challenges the ‘consumer’ gaze to suggest a more reversible – threatening or empathetic – mode of understanding of the ‘object’ of the gaze.”<sup>2</sup> I argue, by contrast, that Haneke’s film implicates the spectator by foregrounding this voyeuristic, consumer gaze and taking full advantage of the mediation and abstraction the camera apparatus allows. Through “conventional patterns”, with techniques that highlight the act of seeing, Haneke works against the contemporary cinema of sensation. Distance fuels the film’s particular ethical charge: its anesthetic aesthetic emphasizes the limits to understanding or empathizing with the “object” of the gaze.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*, Martine Beugnet is careful to avoid categorizing the films she discusses as constituting a specific movement. However, the criteria used to organize these heterogeneous forms of transgression exclude films like *La Pianiste*.

<sup>2</sup> Beugnet, p. 178

In Haneke's film pleasure and power are inextricably linked to visibility, but the film's cool visibility constantly thwarts our desire for knowledge. For instance, viewing *La Pianiste*, we cannot forget the presence of the camera as a mediating apparatus, but we are barred from ever losing ourselves or getting caught up in the image by "consuming" it. Instead of "understanding" the object through phenomenological experience—whether positive or negative—we are faced with an object that persists in its opacity. In *La Pianiste*, that object is the enigmatic desire of the other. Desire, in its alterity, is translated into masochism and represented on-screen through repeated acts of self-cutting, emotional abuse, battery, and sexual violence. The film's detached presentation of violence—not the violence in itself—makes for painful spectatorship. Images of violence never conceal or distract from the enjoyment of looking that frames them. In this thesis, I examine how Haneke's techniques of alienation collide with viewing pleasure to reveal the ethical implications of mediated enjoyment.

Haneke's film uncovers the structure of this anxious encounter with mediation by unflinchingly representing female masochism and thereby making visible, but not knowable, the enjoyment of the other. Masochistic relationality, both in form and content, has its ethical stakes in how we situate ourselves as spectators before the other's desire. According to patriarchal, historical conventions, the feminine subject position is aligned with masochism. As a result, the potential transgressive nature of masochism is reserved for male subjects who perversely take up the feminine position. According to psychoanalytic theory, this feminine marking cannot be written into the symbolic order. However, *The Piano Teacher* not only puts female masochism on-screen, but also structures the film around the excessiveness and unwritability of feminine enjoyment. As the limits of the frame contain this female self-wounding, the other's opaque enjoyment creates a hole in the body of the film. Far from finding ourselves sutured into the film and made whole, as spectators we are founded by this "hole" in the other. My thesis will intervene in feminist theory and film theory by examining how masochistic spectatorship, paired with masochistic representations, requires a unique

relationality with respect to alterity. I am interested in exploring an ethics that takes into account the obscene enjoyment of the other. In doing so, I will contribute to both film studies and feminist philosophy.

Both a limit to knowledge and a surplus that exceeds it, this paradoxical, inaugural lack has been undertheorized in relation to female masochism. My thesis mobilizes Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to complicate the way in which pleasure, gender, and power are linked in contemporary feminist theorists and film theory. Feminine masochism has been identified as a pleasurable viewing position, but this position has not been adequately approached in relation to viewing representations of female masochistic enjoyment. Furthermore, discussions of on-screen female masochism tend to downplay its potential, simplifying the position as one that ultimately conforms to a heteronormative ideal. My aim is to make room for this masochistic enjoyment. To do so, I turn to the Lacanian notion of feminine jouissance, which follows the non-logic of the death drive. Exceeding as well as shaping the symbolic domain, jouissance serves no legible or rational purpose. Exploring this useless enjoyment of jouissance, I examine how a feminine subject who is undoubtedly produced by power is not necessarily determined by it. This indeterminacy, in turn, is reflected in the spectator. Unable to lock down the coordinates of the female protagonist's desire, the spectator is simultaneously interpellated to draw the limits of her jouissance. As a result, *La Pianiste* draws out the spectator's own entanglement between knowledge and enjoyment. Emphasizing the productive limits and excessive enjoyment that are central to masochism, I foreground the role that mediation plays in *both* feminine subjection *and* enjoyment. By combining the indeterminacy of enjoyment via feminine jouissance with the enjoyment of indeterminacy via masochistic spectatorship, I offer a mode of legitimizing female masochism through mediation, not in spite of it.

Both in form and content, *La Pianiste* exposes mediation, limitation, and difference as necessary for any type of transgression of patriarchal law and culture. In this way, the film offers a

critique of media's effects on the modern subject's sexuality and relationality because its participation in a self-reflexive representation of the voyeuristic experience of cinema. Whereas mainstream, sensationalist cinema runs hot, covering over limitation and law with an easy and direct avenue to enjoyment, Haneke's film refuses to give up the gap central to desire. Instead, enjoyment is part and parcel of the law, parsed out and never complete. Embracing cold aesthetics, *La Pianiste* presents repressive law and its transgression as two sides of the subject's deadlock of enjoyment that never make a whole. Throughout the film, a detached, controlled camera follows the protagonist, middle-aged piano teacher Erika Kohut, as she attempts to navigate her masochistic desires in contemporary Austrian society. Haneke discloses Erika's world via sterile cinematography, long takes, and long shots, which reflect her distance and alienation from those around her while enhancing our own estrangement as viewers. As we track Erika through scenes of ice-rinks, metal bars, keys, and barriers, she and others blend into this environment, glacial and mortified. However, this cool, visual structuring of the body of the film does not and cannot contain the bodies within the film. Instead, sexuality is presented as a perverse eroticism that re-inscribes these structural limitations by exceeding them. The bodies of both Erika and Erika's female double, her pupil and rival Anna, bear the brunt of the rigid disciplinarity of the conservatory. Anxiety is made visible through blood, vomit, tears, snot, and even diarrhea, as female performances are pushed to the limits. Moreover, the repetition of the sterile, hard locations in which sexual acts are performed: the shiny tiles of a public bathroom floor, the smooth surface of an empty bathtub etc., only serves to underscore this defiant quality.

My analysis looks closely at the haptic, optic, and linguistic registers of the film in order to explore how the film locates and structures enjoyment of the body. This enjoyment seems to only be possible within the coordinates of language and law, mediated by media and visibility. Masochism presents one solution. But, refracted through multiple planes of voyeurism, the other's perversion becomes more complex as we watch Erika get off on watching. Thus, the film can only offer its own

sterilized type of pleasure, twice removed. However, this “only” is misleading. By divorcing knowledge, power, and pleasure from visibility, Haneke’s film holds the spectator accountable for her enjoyment. My critical encounter with *La Pianiste* rethinks masochism, both in the context of feminist theory and film studies, by locating jouissance at the root of the illegibility of Erika’s pleasure. Underscoring the unmarked nature of this position, my reading of the film makes room for female masochism to count as something more than a limited mode of transgressing norms and subverting laws only to end up reinforcing them. At the intersection of film studies and philosophy, my work sets forth an approach to feminist ethics, rooted in the encounters with the unconscious desires that art objects provoke.

The divided reception of Haneke’s film reflects the difficulty in deriving a message from a feminine subject’s desire for helplessness and submission. To solve this problem, it seems, many critics and commentators are quick to read details from Jelinek’s novel into *La Pianiste*, thereby filling in blanks in terms of character motivation, emotion, and desire. I take these blanks as my starting point in order to explore how knowledge of the other fails and what this failure means for spectatorship. According to Haneke, one of the key differences between Jelinek’s novel and his adaption is that his film offers an objectification and universalization of Jelinek’s subjective, emotionally charged prose. Throughout *La Pianiste*, the viewer is effectively prohibited from possessing ample emotive knowledge or contextual information through which to identify or sympathize with the characters. Erika’s thoughts, especially regarding her relationship to sexuality, are left unspoken and the film remains “realist,” structured without any type of imaginative, visual relief through fantasy or dream sequences. However, these blanks are integral to understanding the film’s complex, darkly parodic presentation of female desire as always caught within an economy of performance, role-playing, and strategic language games. It is precisely because of this opacity, which renders palpable important lacks in

knowledge, that the film forces viewers to project, discern, and problematize the lines between reality and fantasy, intimacy and injury, and sexuality and brutality.

Adding to this escalating confusion is the fact that Erika's relationship to desire is far from stable: her masochistic position is punctuated by sadistic acts, and built into her appearance as a voyeur is the inverse, inevitable exhibitionism that brackets her action (since her voyeurism mirrors our own). For philosopher Gilles Deleuze<sup>3</sup>, masochism is marked by activity, not passivity. The Deleuzian masochist draws out the other's anxiety by carefully orchestrating situations in which one's partner must draw limits to the masochist's pain and pleasure. Analogously, *La Pianiste* places the spectator in a position of utter anxiety, confronted with the demand to determine the contours of pleasure and what counts as potentially pleasurable. This impossible demand, complicated by the film's attempt to make room for and legitimize masochistic female desire, in turn uncovers the way in which limits to and of desire are always being renegotiated.

Emphasizing Haneke's visual structuring of Erika's two primary relationships in the film, both with her mother and her "love interest," I examine how the film first establishes the conditions for intersubjectivity as at once a power play and a type of playful performance capable of producing pleasure. This relational fluidity is mirrored in the shifting roles and power dynamics through which Erika's desire circulates: teacher/pupil, mother/child, and lover/beloved. By staging a relationship to sexuality that underscores the subject's interactions with another as always mediated by the violence of the law, the letter, or the body as instrument—allegorized by Erika's occupation—the film paradoxically offers a critique of mediation's effect on the feminine position while encouraging spectators to confront the possibility that intimacy is only possible through these mediations. The intimacy produced by violence punctuates the film, as Erika's perversely erotic modes of relating to her body, her mother, and her lover all bear the mark of unbridled jouissance. The film is structured

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<sup>3</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Leopold Sacher-Masoch. *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*. New York: Zone, 1991.

around a constitutive gap: an anxiety-producing failure of knowledge. This failure succeeds in producing a parallel intimacy with the spectator precisely because there is no answer to the question: how should we encounter the enjoyment of the Other?

### **Literature Review**

Winning the Grand Jury Prize at the 54<sup>th</sup> Cannes Film Festival, *La Pianiste* garnered critical acclaim and has since received considerable attention by film theorists. One major point of division arises in the scholarship on the film regarding its ethical significance. This contentious aspect can be emblemized by tracing competing negative and positive readings that hinge on the closing sequence of the film. Walter rapes Erika; Erika encounters Walter at the conservatory shortly thereafter, leaves, and stabs herself—although obviously not lethally. Does this final act of self-cutting belie a move towards liberation from power structures and the law, or do her perversions end up adding up to a mere consolation prize that allows her to cope with her familial, social, and economic disempowerment, thereby strengthening the ties that bind her to subjection? Whereas theorists including Margarette Landwehr, Christoph Kone, Fatima Naqvi, Andrea Bandhauer, and Harriet Kimble Wrye reach pessimistic conclusions about Erika's future, others including Frances Restuccia and Catherine Wheatley read the potential for radical liberation into Erika's final act. Departing from both camps, I argue that the ambiguity of this particular scene is a culminating event that highlights the spectator's position with respect towards the film as a whole. Since there is no discernible "message" to be gathered from the story with respect to masochism, violence and media, or female sexuality, the line between freedom and captivity cannot be written. Feminine jouissance is precisely that which exceeds the phallic function or symbolic order and the source of Lacan's misunderstood claim: "La Femme n'existe pas" (Woman does not exist). The impossibility of deciding on meaning of the film's ending betrays our desire for closure and interpretation—it exposes our desire for an

answer or object to make the story feel complete and whole. However, the very openness and undecidability of the ending formally mirrors the structure of feminine desire: the masochistic viewing position of not-knowing is aligned with feminine jouissance of there being nothing to know.

While the end of the film is filled with uncertainty, many theorists have reached pessimistic conclusions nonetheless. Margarete Landwehr, for example, cites passages from the novel and emphasizes the fact that there is no sense of community in Erika's world:

As she leaves the concert hall into the streets of Vienna with the endless stream of passing cars and anonymous drivers, we sense that her life will continue along the same self-destructive path with no intervention from a caring friend.<sup>4</sup>

Along similar lines, Fatima Naqvi and Christopher Kone compare the ending of the film to the novel: “[...] Haneke's film remains truest to its acerbic original: there is no there there for all the characters, women and men alike.”<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that the film intentionally lacks the knowledge provided by Jelinek's stream-of-consciousness style, yet another theorist, Andrea Bandhauer, cites the novel to support a pessimistic conclusion regarding Erika's fate. For Bandhauer, Erika's world is fine until she meets Walter and is thrown off balance. Since Erika is shown to be turn left upon exiting the conservatory—the same direction from which she arrived with her mother, Bandhauer concludes that Erika is returning home. Instead of open-endedness, the film's ending is marked by a “circular quality that sees her returning to her mother's realm.”<sup>6</sup> Even if Erika is returning home, which is far from certain, this fact by no means precludes the possibility of a shift in her relationship to desire. Caught within an anonymous, repetitive, and careless world, would Erika's only solution be a physical escape?

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<sup>4</sup> Landwehr, Margarete. "Voyeurism, Violence, and the Power of the Media: The Reader's/Spectator's Complicity in Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher* and Haneke's *La Pianiste*, *Cache*, and *The White Ribbon*." *International Journal for Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 8.2 (2011): pp.117-32. 130.

<sup>5</sup> Naqvi and Kone, p. 145

<sup>6</sup> Bandhaeur, Andrea. Michael Haneke's *La Pianiste*: An Adaptation of Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*", *Literature & Aesthetics* 16(2) December 2006: 269-281. p. 280

In my view, these readings risk trapping Erika in the role of victim, depriving her of any semblance of agency. In contrast, my thesis will approach this repetition in terms of the psychoanalytic drive towards jouissance and actively reiterated performances. Citing Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, Landwehr argues that in *La Pianiste* the media becomes the main culprit as relationships to images replace our relationships to others. In this way, the spectator of the film is equally charged with passivity and complicity in the face of violence. I claim that this one-sided approach misses the point in terms of the role mediation plays throughout the film, especially considering the fact that these analyses reduce masochism to passivity. Instead of being held captive, rendered helpless and unable to engage with the world, the spectator viewing *La Pianiste* is constantly being called upon to take a stand—to take responsibility for the relationship between violence and enjoyment.

Departing from these passivity-driven interpretations, Frances Restuccia calls for the radical therapeutic potential of transgressive acts, perversion, and masochism. Responding to Slavoj Žižek's reading of the film,<sup>7</sup> she sets the masochism in *La Pianiste* against another cinematic portrayal, *Secretary* (Steven Shainberg, 2002). If the matrimonial, contractually sealed union of Lee and Mr. Gray in *Secretary* represents the move towards enjoyment of one's symptom, then *La Piniaste* takes us to the "absolute zero" of Erika's fundamental fantasy and thereby gives her "a chance to overcome her psychic problems."<sup>8</sup> Working within a Lacanian framework, Restuccia is suspicious of the passionate attachment to one's symptoms that *Secretary* presents as a solution. At the end of *Secretary*, by marrying her dominant boss, Lee remains contractually bound to her daddy issues. While I disagree with the distinction Restuccia sets up between the two films, her positing of a radical potential for "desubjectivation" in the final moments of the film succeeds in beginning to break up the structural bonds that dominate readings of *La Pianiste*. Restuccia is careful to take into account the film's

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<sup>7</sup> See *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, or the Žižek documentary *A Pervert's Guide to Cinema* for his discussion of the film in relation to Lacanian theory.

<sup>8</sup> Restuccia, Frances L. *The Use of Perversion: Secretary of The Piano Teacher?* p.3

ambiguity: “The very indefiniteness of the ending of *La Pianiste* stands for the void that has raised the possibility of Erika’s rebirth.”<sup>9</sup> But by approaching the “void” or lack at the end of the film as potentially productive strictly within the world of film, however, Restuccia misses the ethical implications this indefiniteness fuels with respect to spectatorship. At once developing and complicating Restuccia’s analysis, I argue that the void’s creative potential primarily comes into play when the spectator is faced with an indeterminate answer to what the “use” of Erika’s perversion might be.

### **Sources and Methods**

*La Pianiste* confronts spectatorship with the social charge of female masochism, thereby demanding a critical rethinking of the role masochism has played historically as a perversion. One scene, in particular, reveals the sinister repercussions of intimately linking sexual identity with deviancy. Walter Klemmer has received Erika’s letter, which contains her detailed instructions on how her body should be put to use—“[...] sit down on my face and punch me in the stomach to force me to thrust my tongue into your behind”—to which he responds with rage and disgust. Soon thereafter he arrives unexpectedly at the apartment that Erika shares with her mother. Confronted with her written desires, her fantasies divulged, he insults, condemns, and castigates her via *diagnosis*: “You’re a witch, a pervert! You want to give everyone your illness, don’t you? Not me!” Both metaphysical and medical, Walter’s appellations reveal the way in which sexuality is organized as an object of knowledge, divisible based on rules and exceptions. Since Erika’s sexuality exceeds the scope of what Walter considers to be her role—any woman’s role—in normal heterosexual relations, she is abnormal and ill, her perversion a contagion from which Walter must protect himself. This is only the first step, because she is also “a witch”—possessing a power that is completely alien to Walter and under which

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<sup>9</sup> Restuccia, p. 12

he has no control. In both instances, the otherness of Erika's desire—of her *jouissance*—must be put in check. This dangerous quality of the Other's desire finds its roots in sexual difference. Whereas male masochism is a well-documented psychoanalytic perversion, female masochism is unthinkable and obscene.

To begin disentangling the difficulties in portraying female masochism on film, it is necessary to step back from film theory and track the history of masochism itself, which is especially important given that this history is predominantly a history of male masochism. Breaking up the conflation that we have come to be familiar with, “sadomasochism,” I will establish a definition of masochism that is not complementary to or simply the inverse of sadism, named after the infamous libertine, the Marquis de Sade. Based on the life of Austrian author Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, the term “masochism,” was coined by Austrian psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his series of case studies on sexuality, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886). Compiling over a dozen narratives from male patients exhibiting masochistic tendencies, Krafft-Ebing describes this phenomenon as “a perversion of uncommonly frequent occurrence,”<sup>10</sup> based upon an abnormal “instinct of subjection” to a woman's will.<sup>11</sup> In this model, the mixture of horror, humiliation, and shame men experience as a result of their perverse desires, is in fact built into the enjoyment of the perversion itself. Enjoyment comes from breaking the law—in this case gender-based norms.

Things get more interesting when Krafft-Ebing turns to feminine masochism, which he dismisses as inconsequential because of the patriarchal socio-historical conditions in which female submissiveness is taken for granted. Following this line of thinking, there would be nothing subversive or perverse about following the law, only in breaking it. What enjoyment can be gained by a subject who has no choice but to be subjected to the will of another? As Krafft-Ebing puts it,

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<sup>10</sup> von Krafft-Ebing, Richard. *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Special Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct, a Medico-legal Study*. N.p.: Forgotten, n.d. 26 Sept. 2012. Web. 8 Oct. 2016. <forgottenbooks.org>. p. 119

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121

ideas of subjection are, in woman, normally connected with the idea of sexual relations. [...] they form the harmonics which determine the tone-quality of feminine feeling. Anyone conversant with the history of civilization knows in what a state of absolute subjection woman was always kept until a relatively high degree of civilization was reached.<sup>12</sup>

Krafft-Ebing is already identifying a shift in social current, the apparent linear progress of civilization, yet this more “progressive” move does nothing to alter the feminine position. The “poetic” dimension of masochism available to male subjects is out of reach to women because female subjection is weaved into the fabric of society. As such, it has become a normal, necessary adaption to contingent circumstances:

Under the veneer of polite society, the instinct of feminine servitude is everywhere discernable [...]. The barbarian has his wife plow for him, and the civilized lover speculates about her dowry; she willingly endures both [...]. Cases of pathological increase of this instinct of subjection, in the sense of feminine masochism, are probably frequent enough, but custom represses their manifestation. Many young women like nothing better than to kneel before their husbands or lovers.<sup>13</sup>

As this passage suggests, feminine subjection exceeds physical manifestations, but is dispersed throughout different channels and “polite society” by no means escapes this asymmetry. While this dated examination of pathology is meant to be descriptive, not prescriptive, it nonetheless introduces the way in which norms undoubtedly shape and limit desires. Rigid heteronormative customs seem to leave little room for perverse expressions of female masochism, especially in the context of a patriarchal, heteronormativity-based discipline like late 19<sup>th</sup>-century psychiatry. However, by turning to Sacher-Masoch, whose life’s work and lifestyle served as the basis for Krafft-Ebing’s nominalization, categorization, and sterilization of masochism, we can begin to envisage the ways in which dramatization and role-playing can loosen the bonds of the law and normalization.

Sacher-Masoch’s most famous novella, *Venus in Furs* (1870), brings to the fore the importance of performance in masochistic desire, while also introducing the ideal as the organizing principle of this sexual structure. Semi-autobiographical, the multi-framed story opens with the narrator falling

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<sup>12</sup> von Krafft-Ebing, p. 137

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 138

asleep while reading Hegel, and dreaming about a woman, whom he recognizes as Venus, the goddess of love. When he wakes up, he notices an oil painting of the same woman from his dreams, which, early in the story, sets up the problem of discerning representation from reality. Relaying his dream to Severin, his host, the narrator discovers that the painting is in fact a portrait of Severin's former lover, Wanda. The painting is described as "a biting satire on modern love: Venus must hide herself in a vast fur, lest she catch cold in our abstract northern climate, in the icy realm of Christianity."<sup>14</sup> Here the masochistic relationship promises a type of hidden, concealed warmth—something that has become increasingly difficult to gain access to. Furthermore, there is a dimension to masochism that satirizes "modern love" while nonetheless offering a means to obtain it. Encountering intimacy amidst a world of abstraction thus becomes the problem which masochism attempts to avoid, dramatize, or solve.

Severin proceeds to tell the narrator about his masochistic relationship to Wanda, a story which he has already written down and titled *Confessions of a Supersensualist*. To add yet another layer to this retelling of sexual history, these confessions are re-transcribed as the narrator's personal diary. I emphasize the structure of the novel because the elements of narrative-building and story-telling—the form in which male masochism is portrayed—mirror the problem that the masochist faces by combining reality and fantasy. As the two men attempt to compare the ideal image (the painting) to the "real" woman (Wanda), Severin remarks: "I was dreaming with my eyes open."<sup>15</sup> For Severin, the ideal partner, the incarnation of his fantasy, is unsustainable. He scripts her every action, but once her performance takes on a life of its own, it becomes unbearable, as this exchange between Wanda and Severin elucidates:

Severin: You take my fantasies too seriously.

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<sup>14</sup> Deleuze, p. 124

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Wanda: Too seriously? When I undertake something, there can be no question of jesting. You know that I detest all play-acting and melodrama. Was it my idea or yours? Did I lead you into this or is it you who aroused my imagination?<sup>16</sup>

Sacher-Masoch's tale ends in woe. In the end, Wanda leaves Severin heartbroken, on the brink of suicide. Instead of performing her role for the other, Wanda enjoys herself and the limit between fantasy and reality that makes playing with this limit enjoyable becomes dangerously arbitrary. Entwining the aesthetic, the ideal, and the erotic, this case of male masochism provides the coordinates necessary to establish a masochistic structure independent of sadism. At the same time, this fluid relationality engenders transgender identifications between a presumably male reader who is at once faced with Severin's suffering and Wanda's satisfaction.

Almost a century after its publication, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze turns to *Venus in Furs* in order to revive the creative complexity of masochism, which in his view has been historically overshadowed by psychoanalytic simplifications.<sup>17</sup> This revival rests upon two major claims. First Deleuze argues that the masochistic subject does not seek pleasure in pain, but rather approaches pain as a necessary step to attaining pleasure: there is a temporal gap and in this suspended state of waiting, enjoyment is gained. Second, masochism and sadism are two very distinct structures. For Deleuze, sadism operates via "mechanical, cumulative repetition," whereas masochism is sustained by "aesthetic and dramatic suspense."<sup>18</sup> Where the sadist is obsessed with movement and action, the masochist is obsessed with motionlessness—thus we get the frozen image of Wanda, suspended in time, at the beginning of *Venus in Furs*. Furthermore, these two structures hold fundamentally different relationships to the law. Sadism approaches the law with what Deleuze characterizes as "irony," an

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.167

<sup>17</sup> I will draw on psychoanalytic conceptions of masochistic perversion, hysteric neurosis, and sexual difference throughout my project and do not find Deleuze's definition of masochism in *Coldness and Cruelty* (1967) to be irreconcilable with these models. David Sigler has also offered an analysis of masochism in order to draw parallels between Lacan and Deleuze. See "'Read Mr. Sacher-Masoch': The Literariness of Masochism in the Philosophy of Jacques Lacan and Giles Deleuze." *Criticism* 53.2 (2011): pp. 189-212.

<sup>18</sup> Deleuze, p. 31

upward movement towards a principle that overrides the law—culminating in the paradoxical institutionalized anarchical reign of the superego as absolute evil.<sup>19</sup> In other words, sadism degrades all laws and replaces them with a power that transcends the law. This negation thrives in an entirely different atmosphere than masochism, which is dependent on the law. In terms of masochistic relationality, the contract between two subjects creates the law, resulting in “humor,” a “downward movement that reduces the law to its furthest consequences.”<sup>20</sup> The masochistic reliance on the contract foregrounds the way in which transcendence is attained only when mediated by the singular act of writing. Once limits are set in stone and roles are prescribed, only then can the masochist get off on never catching up to them.

Central to understanding the notion of masochism is its link to perversion: masochism is initially defined as a deviation from the norm. Since Erika can neither live up to the norm of feminine sexuality nor completely deviate from its bounds, her identity and autonomy throughout *La Pianiste* are constantly challenged. For example, in the open sequence of the film, Erika’s rebellion against the rules and restrictions of her mother consists of buying an expensive dress. Outraged, her mother tells her that this purchase is off limits for someone of her age and standing. After Erika begins her sexual, “deviant” relationship with Walter, her clothing, hair, and make-up choices shift—she dresses herself in femininity. Erika’s masochism is bound up in her status as a woman and heteronormative ideals are built into this identity.

In order to further establish the repercussions of this intimate relationship between identity and sexuality, feminine masochism must also be understood in terms of the organizing principle of normativity. Rules are made possible by exceptions; but what happens when there are only exceptions? This fundamental struggle between normalization and abnormality leads me to the genealogical work

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 77

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 78

of Michel Foucault, both *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality: Volume I*. Central to Foucault's discussion of normalization is the slide between data-collection, plotting the average, and the production of an optimum point towards which a subject should move. Nothing is intrinsically valuable about falling within the average bounds, but nonetheless built into the quantitative plotting of points is a qualitative, normalizing judgment. As descriptions become prescriptive, the subject is coerced by the mere act of being described, because being measured is always being measured against a norm. Under the matrices of disciplinary power, docility is the price paid for being recognized as a normal subject. Instead of subscribing to this complete and total notion of power exerted on and promulgated by the subject, whereby any notion of resistance only feeds back into a strikingly adaptable and omnipresent circuit of power, I maintain a pathway to resistance through desire. By way of my analysis of *The Piano Teacher*, I demonstrate how this notion of utter docility to the law is challenged by Erika's position.

Working with this entanglement of knowledge and power, I will examine psychoanalysis and film studies in order to uncover the way in which visibility and sexuality become key to understanding the modern, sexed subject. The subject is acted upon by power but also activated by it. In this way, we identify ourselves with and through the power that subjects us. This paradoxical foundation of the subject is what makes viewing *La Pianiste* problematic and productive. As spectators we are tasked with validating an enjoyment that undoubtedly takes place through performing techniques of power and reiterating one's status as subjected to another. The stakes of this viewing position lie in coming to terms with the fact that Erika's agency—her pleasures, her subversions, her perversions—are produced by performing a role that has already been given to her.

In *La Pianiste* Erika is undoubtedly subjected to these power structures and she constantly runs up against the fact that her sexuality is abnormal and perverse. However, my thesis also highlights the way in which female masochism is obscene. Obscenity, an offense to decency and morality, is often

equated with the ability to provoke uncontrollable sexual desires, reflected in Walter's fear of "catching" Erika's sickness. Michael Haneke in fact characterizes *La Pianiste* as the result of his intention to make an obscene, although not pornographic film. In Linda Williams' groundbreaking work on the relationship between obscenity, pleasure, and the female body, *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visibility*, photography and cinematography are identified as modes of enforcing, fulfilling, and thwarting the subject's will to knowledge. Throughout the history of photography and hardcore pornography, capturing visible evidence of the invisible event of the female orgasm becomes possible only through performance—a performance that is also at the core of masochism.<sup>21</sup> For Williams, obscenity should also be understood as that which is off-scene and off-screen. In *La Pianiste*, this obscenity, parodied as the pleasure of the other in the form of Erika's masochistic sexual pleasure, is put on screen. It is Erika, however, who gets off on watching herself, not the spectator. When we first witness Erika's act of self-cutting, she is holding a mirror between her legs as she cuts her vulva. A masochistic act is visible for the spectator in this scene, but the "source" of Erika's enjoyment—her now wounded genitalia—is not. In the same vein, the "invisibility" of female pleasure is replaced by the visibility of the stream of blood that drips down the side of the bathtub and the legibility of Erika's phrase, "Mother, I'm coming", which she calls from the bathroom when her mother announces that dinner is ready. My reading of the film will emphasize how Haneke's intertwining of violence with sexuality reconfigures the spectator's position with respect to the obscenity of female sexuality.

Expanding upon Williams' work, I connect this obscenity of female pleasure with Lacanian *jouissance*. A product of neither nature (substance) nor culture (signification), but rather a remainder resulting from failure of signification, *jouissance* is based on an imperative to enjoy at all costs, beyond

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<sup>21</sup> I have in mind Chapter 7 of *Hardcore*, "Pleasure, Power, and Perversion," where Williams focuses on sadomasochistic pornography. Drawing from Deleuzian masochism, she emphasizes the way in which performance is a mode through which women come to enjoy their suffering.

the pleasure principle, beyond reason, and beyond limits. Playing on the homophony of *en-corps* and *encore*, in *Seminar XX: Encore*, Lacan links embodiment to repetition and distinguishes between two types of jouissance, a distinction which serves as the basis for his theory of sexual difference. In phallic jouissance, enjoyment is based on mis-taking the Other for a part (*objet petit a*), a failure made possible by the fact that the subject is wholly subjected to the phallic function (wholly castrated by language). On the other hand, the jouissance of the Other, what Lacan also refers to as surplus or feminine jouissance, is the exception to the rule that makes phallic jouissance possible. In this way, the subject who is barred from the Other, from *objet petit a*, is only possible because of the Other. Castration is possible only because not-all (feminine) subjects are subject to it.

In order to situate female masochism with respect to feminine jouissance, I turn to the work of Lacanian feminist theorist, Joan Copjec. In *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists*, Copjec combats common misunderstandings surrounding Lacanian sexual difference by explaining how being arises out of impossibility. Under the laws of sexual differentiation, subjects are radically unknowable. Sex is what accounts for the paradox of subjectivity: one is undeniably produced by the law but only insofar as the subject occupies and stands in as the place of its limit. In other words, far from transcending the world of signifiers, subjects are subjected to language and the law but irreducible to it. Foucault criticizes and rejects psychoanalytic models for contributing to implicit normalizing tactics, but for Lacanian theory, sexual difference is the kernel of subjectivity that exceeds this normalization. In my thesis, I look closely at *La Pianiste's* singular dramatization of female masochism, rooted in feminine jouissance, in order to shed light on the “built in” masochism, or subjection to power and language, that produces any subject. If subjection is the price to be paid for recognition and identity, what role do female masochism and the jouissance of the Other play in relation to this circulation of power?

By approaching the feminine position, keeping in mind the combination of “society as the psyche writ large” and “psyche as society writ small,” I offer a nuanced account of the feminine perversion of masochism (historically reserved for male subjects) and the process of female subjectivation (the relationship to language that produces the feminine subject). Similarly, feminist philosopher Judith Butler calls for an understanding of subjectivity that includes both psychoanalytic (Freud, LaPlanche, and Lacan) and Foucauldian, structuralist and post-structuralist theories. For Foucault, the subject can never escape: the only recourse is to work towards a different relationship to power, with varying styles and degrees of oppression. As feminist Lacanian theorist Joan Copjec has argued, the structural position of feminine jouissance represents the law’s failure, which opens up the possibility for combating this power.

By putting the opacity of a perverse, female gaze on display, *La Pianiste* boldly confronts feminist critiques of apparatus and gaze theory and invites re-readings of feminist psychoanalytic theory. As Scott Richmond and Elizabeth Reich layout in their introduction to *Cinematic Identifications*, the reception of apparatus theory quickly shifted from embrace to outright rejection.<sup>22</sup> As Damon Young puts it “voyeurism fell out of fashion as quickly as a child star whom puberty has suddenly stripped of his infantile charm.”<sup>23</sup> At the intersection of apparatus theory and Freudian-Lacanian inspired gaze theory, in this model, cinema projects representations and produces meaning-making spectators. This process is split between two levels. In primary identification, the spectator creates meaning by identifying with the camera apparatus itself. In other words, we identify with the activity of looking and the gaze. Only through a secondary identification can a subject then narcissistically identify with characters on-screen. Laura Mulvey was among the first film theorists to vocalize the

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<sup>22</sup> Richmond, Scott, and Elizabeth Reich. "Introduction: Cinematic Identifications." *FILM CRITICISM* 39.2 (WINTER 2014-5): 3-23. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Dec. 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Young, Damon. "The Vicarious Look." *FILM CRITICISM* 39.2 (WINTER 2014-5): 25-59. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Dec. 2016.

male-coded, misogynistic underpinning of the professedly universal subject of primary identification. Emerging from the structures of Classical Hollywood Cinema and second-wave feminism, film theorists vigorously rejected this theory of cinema that lacked room for the female spectator. Instead, theorists argued that there is no such thing as a pure gaze and identification is always-already socioeconomically, historically, and culturally conditioned.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, identification is far from seamless; there are constant ruptures, interruptions, and rerouting. Within this issue, Young reassesses Mulvey's critique and argues for maintaining Freudian-Lacanian approaches to film theory. By attributing a decidedly masculine violence to the gaze/apparatus model, Mulvey conflates voyeurism with sadism in order to drive home an important, but more complicated than she makes out, feminist point. Young's aims converge with my own in combatting the pervasiveness of this misunderstanding of both psychoanalytic theory and its mobilization in film theory. Turning film theory inside out, Young argues that, "far from reifying an illusory stable heteronormative male subject, cinema encodes a decidedly perverse, queer voyeurism."<sup>25</sup> Characterizing primary identification as inherently perverse and erotic, Young's piece distinguishes psychoanalytic film theory from these misplaced critiques by emphasizing how looking itself is pleasurable and uselessly so. In giving us "over to a 'passion for perceiving' that serves no purpose,"<sup>26</sup> cinema produces drive, but does not determine it. Whereas Young focuses on the freedom engendered by cinema's polymorphous boundlessness, in my project, I am concerned with the masochistic resonance of this indeterminacy.

With this theoretical framework in place, I offer an analysis of *La Pianiste's* complex staging of a disciplined, masochistic subject, exploring the enjoyment activated and position secured by repeated subjections and power plays. In my analysis of *La Pianiste*, I will frame Erika's position as caught between these two modes of subjection. Instead of privileging either Erika's hopelessness or

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<sup>24</sup> Richmond and Reich, p. 8

<sup>25</sup> Young, p. 18

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 45

hopefulness, I aim to reveal the ethical position in which the spectator finds herself, upon not having an answer. Excerpted from the film's opening exchange between mother and daughter, the realization that "There's a real hole here" drives my thesis. Organized around the possibility that absence produces something real, my interventions into film theory and feminist philosophy will unearth the ethical repercussions of indeterminacy and enjoyment.

## MASOCHISM AND PERFORMANCE

Haneke's film *La Pianiste* (2001) offers a self-reflexive presentation of female desire as always mediated by performance and voyeurism. Both physical and emotional violence are undoubtedly present throughout the film, but Erika Kohut, the protagonist, is not merely a victim to external violence and limitations that impede her agency. Emphasizing Haneke's visual structuring of Erika's two primary relationships in the film, both with her mother and her "love interest," in this section, I examine the way in which masochism is aesthetically staged and performed. *La Pianiste* exhibits the subject's excruciating negotiations with the Other as always mediated by the Law, the letter, or the body as instrument—allegorized by Erika's occupation. Through content as well as form, I argue that the film establishes the conditions for intersubjectivity as both a power play and a type of playful performance capable of warranting pleasure. In this way, the film offers a critique of mediation's effect on the feminine position even while encouraging viewers to confront the possibility that desire and intimacy are only possible through mediation.

*La Pianiste* sets the stage for these mediated desires by tracking Erika as she maneuvers through spaces of enclosure and confinement. Throughout the film, pleasure and power are inextricably linked to visibility, but Haneke's cool, detached cinematography constantly thwarts our desire for knowledge. Highlighting the camera's function as an always-present recording apparatus, this formal technique continuously reiterates the viewer's relationship to the film as one of distance. While the camera is undoubtedly controlled, this by no means places us as spectators in a position of control over what we see. On the contrary, we find ourselves, or, rather, catch ourselves looking. Instead of opening the film through an establishing shot, Haneke orients us as already inside, confined to a dimly-lit interior room, with a static close-up shot of double doors. From within the room, we hear an arrival from

outside, announced by the sound of keys. With the potential for both locking and unlocking, entrapment and liberation, this aural sign traverses and reinforces the visible barrier that blocks us from seeing the source. We are visibly separated from Erika, which also means that her position in the film begins outside of the camera's reach. This distance situates us as waiting for her arrival and introduces Erika through the lens of surveillance, which becomes more apparent and thematically reiterated once her mother begins treating Erika as if she were a criminal.

When Erika arrives on scene, she appears to have entered an empty apartment, until the sound of a television program playing diegetically off-screen becomes audible. Introduced along with the sound of media, Erika's mother emerges from the recesses of the apartment, greeting her with "Good evening, my child," so that the first act of naming that occurs in the film is one of both endearment and infantilization. Erika's mother, who passionately watches over her daughter's movements, also relentlessly watches television media. Erika plays the part and non-verbally responds to her mother's greeting: she sighs and is visibly irritated. Wearing a housecoat as opposed to her daughter's trench coat, the mother, it seems, is entombed in the domestic sphere and spends her time waiting for Erika to return. Anticipating the narcissistic, jealous turn the relationship between mother and daughter will take, the isolation, stasis, and boredom that surround Erika's mother are reflected by these external significations. At first her mother maintains her caring tone, benignly asking "Home already? I'm so happy," as if her arrival was too early—unexpected but welcomed. Viewing Erika from the perspective of an over-the-shoulder shot of her mother, we are positioned inside her home, waiting with mother, with the daughter's expression of impatience and annoyance on full display. However, this affection serves as a screen for deep-seated aggression. The first exchange of dialogue occurs between mother and child, but the film's language is saturated by deception. This deception functions in two ways: not only is the mother's strategic affection bound up with violence, but the spectator is also deceived after believing in the mother's unmediated care. Illusion is built on a real performance.

The sincerity of her mother's first statement is immediately undercut as Erika attempts to leave the room through another closed door and is blocked by her mother who commands, "Wait, not so fast." Through this force of language, her mother immediately begins postponing Erika's departure, which, as now becomes apparent, is an act of retreat into the privacy of her bedroom and an avoidance of her mother's—and the camera's—penetrating gaze. Erika attempts to explain that she is tired and wants to go bed, but this disclosure of knowledge is immediately turned against her. Her mother reframes her mode of escape into an entrapping question: "Why are you tired?" and an entreaty: "Might I know where you've been all this time?" In both instances, inquiries based on care become implicit accusations of guilt. Erika begins the film off-screen, but her mother's confrontation repositions Erika front-and-center. The mother's desire for her daughter's answers unfolds in tandem with the spectator's desire to uncover the secrets of the mother-daughter relationship. As we watch Erika respond to her mother's demands, we are built into the inquisition.

Lacking ample emotive knowledge or contextual, background information, we are nonetheless thrown into the scene and find ourselves called upon to make sense of their relationship. This frustrating experience prevents the viewer from getting off on either knowledge, visibility, or identification. Any innocent attempt to get to the bottom of this encounter is underwritten by guilt because the violence of demanding to see and to know is reflected back to the spectator. Completely altering the meaning of her first greeting and charging it with malice and irrationality, her mother begins an interrogation, pointing out her power through her knowledge of Erika's routine. Since Erika's last pupil left three hours ago, in that time gap she must have been doing something wrong. At the core of the mother's ability to wield the power of language over her daughter is her ability to reflect the absurdity and contradictory nature of language use. The ease with which Erika's mother slides from "back so soon" to "all this time" is only one instance of this contradiction. As viewers, we sense the undeniable violence of this exchange, all the while potentially aligned with Erika's mother in

terms of camera positioning and because of our own curiosity regarding her daughter's whereabouts. Erika's mother's desire for knowledge, which mirrors our own, dysfunctions via her thinly disguised interrogation. Her mother's questions betray the fact that she already knows Erika's routine, which also puts Erika's role as victim to this maternal manipulation into question. The apparent sadistic concern that seems to dominate the scene will soon unravel into a mutually-masochistic display whereby performance turns the tables on visibility.

Nevertheless, Erika's mother is introduced as reflecting the law as a disciplinary force back to her daughter: policing her schedule, demanding that she account for time lost, and desiring to know everything about her, even and especially when they are apart. Begging "please," Erika tries once more to open the door, but her mother's verbal preventions escalate into physical violence. Her mother pushes her backwards. In this shot, Erika is facing away from the camera towards the door, which on the one hand makes it impossible to discern her visual reactions to her mother, and on the other, ensures that her mother's violence is directed towards the viewer just as much as it is towards her daughter (later in the sequence we are constantly looking over Erika's shoulder). More importantly, the medium-long shot framing creates a sense of distance that, paired with the dim lighting, further thwarts our attempts to connect emotionally with either character. It also enhances our sense of detachment from the scene, while nonetheless drawing attention to the performance of the actors. What might otherwise be an experience of empathy and emotional connection based on being immersed in the drama, is instead an uncomfortable viewing position with respect to the performative roles of two characters as they act out for each other. Instead of focusing on close-ups of facial reactions or pain, the camera distance turns the mother's need to extract the truth from her child into a spectacle at once intimate and distant.

Violence produces intimacy as Erika's mother's weapon of choice oscillates between the body and language. Her mother complements her physical means of restraint with the verbal imperative

“No, you don’t!” and conditions her physical freedom with confession: “Not until you tell me!” While Erika, a middle-aged woman, is apparently permitted to leave this maternal space, she must be punished when she returns, not for leaving it in the first place, but for being gone for too long—for being unaccounted for. Her potential for enjoyment outside the home is thus always simultaneously limited and propped up by her mother’s law, whereas the mother’s time spent in the company of the ubiquitous television is punctuated by these exciting moments of her daughter’s arrival and departure, which are exciting especially when they go off-script.

The important role that masochism plays in *La Pianiste* begins to surface once these apparently excessive confrontations between mother and daughter are revealed to be precisely part of their relational “script.” The ambivalent space between knowledge and concealment, entrapment and liberation, is a source of enjoyment for both mother and daughter. Erika’s mother’s encroachment into her daughter’s space is emphasized as she repeats “No” and pushes Erika away more forcefully. Her movements now limited, Erika turns towards the viewer and seems to walk closer to the camera and the source of the television voices. Her version of answering or giving in requires a question of her own and only fuels the flame of her mother’s inquisition: “I went for a walk. Do you mind?” Here Erika turns away from us, blocking out her mother’s image completely, so that all we see is the tightly bound bun, back of her trench coat, and the thin leather strip of her purse. She continues speaking, although we cannot see her face: “I spent eight hours in my cage. I was tired and needed some air.” Here Erika frames her position as a teacher and disciplinarian in terms of entrapment. Despite the fact that at the conservatory she occupies a space of power over her students, she wants her mother to know that this role is also “a cage” from which she needs respite. Establishing that Erika is financially supporting her mother, this fact also situates her within the middle class, beholden to the eight-hour work day. It is important to note that the German title of Jelinek’s novel translates to *The Piano Player*, creating a discrepancy between her identity and her job, a difference that is retained in

Haneke's original French title *La Pianiste*, but from which the English title *The Piano Teacher* deviates. As a piano teacher, Erika is aligned from the beginning with aesthetics, but with her space for potential aesthetic pleasure framed in the context of capitalism, teaching music as a mode of earning money, it becomes a "cage" that exhausts and suffocates her. "My cage" also draws a parallel between the space of the conservatory and the space of the home, which is almost comedic given the fact that based on what we have seen, the home seems to be the cage she should be worried most about escaping. At this point, there is no reason to believe Erika's description, since it is information strategically given to placate her mother, who reigns over the home as if it were a cage, blockading her from her room and suffocating her in the same way. This excuse, then, works twofold: by lying to her mother she attempts to fulfill the other's desire for knowledge, but built into the act of submission is the critique of the mother. It is in her house, not at work, that she suffocates—her attempt to open the bedroom door is in itself an expression of a desperate need for air, and, through lying, she has the potential to indirectly express an even more telling truth.

At the same time, Erika, the captive, describes it as "my cage," which suggests that imprisonment of one's own might be preferable to a space entirely under the jurisdiction of Mother.<sup>27</sup> This difference is reflected in the way in which Erika attempts to look out the window of the apartment that she shares with her mother but is interrupted before she can pull back the curtain. In the first scenes that take place in the conservatory, her workplace, Erika is always positioned gazing out of blindingly bright windows. Erika's mobility, introduced by her possession of keys at the beginning, then suggests a freedom to move within different types of imprisonment, laws, and limits. In addition to freedom to move within spaces, these keys offer the potential to set limits to and map out these

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<sup>27</sup> It is important to note that Erika's mother's name is never given in the film. In the credits, she is referred to simply (although not so simply) as "The Mother." See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0254686/>.

spaces, both physically and symbolically. Erika's response to her mother's control is to match her deception.

Her mother, of course, does not buy into her explanation and walks towards her, attempting to wrestle the purse from Erika's shoulder. Once Erika enters this private space, even the belongings on her person no longer belong only or completely to her. In this opening scene, the stage is set and a pattern of performance emerges—this exchange is one among a series of repetitions. Erika feigns defending herself or putting up a fight; she goes through the motions of resisting, but gives up each time, which we realize as her purse slides off her shoulder into her mother's hands. We are also keyed into the fact that her mother suspects or knows exactly what Erika is hiding but, instead of getting to the point and directly accusing her of a particular crime, she initiates a charade, which reinforces her perverse bond with her daughter. Turning on an overhead light, illuminating the space in order to root out the Truth, and standing in front of a mirror to further establish an atmosphere of interrogation, Erika's mother begins opening her daughter's purse. Whereas in the earlier frames we are aligned with mother, here the shot is reversed so that we are viewing the mother's penetrative act over Erika's shoulder. As a result, we simultaneously view her mother reaching her fingers into the pocket and Erika touching the back of her neck—in an erotic, both guilty and protective gesture—until her mother ecstatically exclaims, “Ah, just as I thought,” and pulls out a silk dress. Caught like a naughty child, Erika stands before her mother and we are left surmising, but uncertain, that she bought the dress with every intention of being found out.

Throughout this sequence, it would be easy to take the bait and accept Erika as victim to her mother's wrath and manipulations. Despite the fact that relationships in the film are marked by ambiguity and ambivalence, both between Erika and her world (of objects and others) and the film and the spectator, critics often oversimplify these relationships and read this space as only oppressive. For example, in “The Key to Voyeurism,” Fatima Naqvi and Christopher Kone argue that this scene

sets up a restrictive domain for both Erika and the spectator: “ [...] there is no way out of this claustrophobic interior and [that] the spectators will be hostages, forced to witness [...]”.<sup>28</sup> In this case, we as spectators are “forced” to witness the altercation between Erika and her mother, in the same way in which Erika will be “forced” to submit to her mother’s surveillance and interrogation. These readings neglect the active role that Erika plays in choreographing and taking up her relationship to her mother, as well as the enjoyment gained through deception. This description of a seemingly criminal act that we are forced to watch fails to take into account the pleasure in being guilty, bearing witness, and being found out.

If the form of the opening sequence establishes the theme of problematic interpersonal relationships—the familial mother-daughter bond as couched in performance, deception, and intrigue—the content that is produced by this interrogation uncovers the particularity of *feminine* performativity. Erika’s mother tries to “find Erika out” via maximizing visibility. She looks through the hidden contents inside of Erika’s purse, but reaching inside in an attempt to bring something to light only leads her to another surface. The dress, which functions by concealing, coding, and revealing the feminine body, demonstrates that turning the purse inside-out uncovers fabric, and with it, fabrication. In this way, our desire, along with Erika’s mother’s desire to see more, becomes impossible to satisfy.

Erika’s lies are attempts at covering over her desire for sexual identification, but this identification is inextricable from the commodification of female allure. It is the *cost* of the dress that is Erika’s mother’s preliminary concern as she asks “Where is the bankbook?” and continues “10,000 Schillings! Tell me, have you lost your mind?” By now, she is speaking mostly to herself, because Erika

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<sup>28</sup> Naqvi, Fatima and Christophe Kone. "The Key to Voyeurism: Haneke's Adaption of Jelinek's The Piano Teacher." *On Michael Haneke*. By Brian Price and David John. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2010. pp 128-9.

has left the room. Erika's method of retaliation against her mother's found object is to find a missing one: she rummages through her closet and returns, charged with triumph, to indignantly counter, "Where is my grey autumn suit?" Erika hides her dress in order to maintain it; her mother on the other hand, replies "no idea" and seeks to locate objects in order to make them disappear. With this absence looming in the background as an open question, the two women begin to fight over ownership of Erika's most recent purchase, until they end up literally ripping the fabric that marks Erika's desire to buy into and participate in the female masquerade. Outraged, Erika again mirrors her mother's actions, matches violence with violence, and rips out a handful of her mother's hair, yelling "bitch!" In this pivotal scene, women's bodies are turned inside-out. The invasion of Erika's purse is an inquiry into her sexuality and torn fabrics require retaliation in the form of injuries to the flesh.

At this point, the film significantly and abruptly cuts to a close-up shot of the television, which up until now has been playing in the background, invisible, but suddenly takes up the entire frame. The television show acts as a commentary on what we have just witnessed: commodification, mediation, and objectification are put on the screen within a screen. The phrase "bitch" cinches the sequence between mother and daughter and introduces the media that Erika and her mother consume, thus suggesting that television is the most natural of associations to be made with the word. If the introduction of television itself inside of the film was not enough, the content of the medical drama (apparently about dentistry or oral surgery) explicitly presents a conversation between doctors about a television talk show and the relationship between the sexes. Erika's word choice thus becomes all the more problematic, an indication of the media's hand in cultivating performance as well as setting the terms in which future performances will unfold. In the show, a black female doctor explains, "The creep was defending the idea that women are inferior to men," to which one of the three white male dentists replies "rubbish." Aggression directed from mother to daughter and vice versa is juxtaposed with commentary on television's portrayal of male misogyny and suggested hypocrisy. During the

discussion about female inferiority, a man with a face injury sits on the exam/operating room table, referencing the media consumer and film viewer's fixation with injury. Turning to this screen within a screen immediately after cutting away from a physical altercation, the film suggests that it is giving us exactly what we want in terms of drama and violence. While this snippet only lasts for twenty seconds, fines, excrement, sexual difference, and violence are all referenced, its brevity and compactness serve to highlight the media's pervasive power and presence in Erika and her mother's seemingly isolated domain.

Functioning as a transition for a lapse in time, the television clip is revealed to be a point of view shot from Erika's mother's perspective who is now seated on an armchair. Our act of watching is mirrored back to us as we watch Erika's mother watch the television screen in an attempted break from her confrontation with her daughter. Stroking the torn dress that is draped over her lap, Erika's mother bookends the violence that introduced the television clip with the phrase "Should cut your hands off! Beating your own mother!" Here the law as superego becomes manifest in the content of the berating: Mother judges Erika's actions within the context of a moral imperative—the reference to herself as "mother" instead of "me" indicates that the punishment for beating one's mother in general should be a form of castration. As a pianist, Erika's hands are an instrument for producing music, which in turn produces financial support for herself and her mother. At the same time, Erika's hands are instruments capable of wielding violence and vulnerable to that violence. Returning to the theme of feminine presentation and performance, her mother further stands by her actions by adding, "The dress was too gaudy anyway. You should know what suits you at your age."

The knife twisting in deeper, these words are heard over a medium close-up shot of Erika's pained reaction while a close-up of the female doctor appears on the television screen from a distortive angle at the edge of the frame. Erika's performance unfolds juxtaposed with another actor's mediated image: she stands in relation to her mother in the same way as the character in the show. In this vein,

the fragility of Erika's self-image shares the screen with an image of a television actress. This screen, reminds us that these secret purchases are not only out of her price range, but incompatible with the norms required for women of her body type and age, according to her mother and the media. Projecting her mother's verbal blows to her body, Erika calls her mother a "cow," upholding the value of slimness, cemented into place based on the illusion of male desire. The first introduction to Erika's articulation of fantasy, "I wish," is cut off by a close-up of her mother who presses, "what? You daren't say it? Don't bother, I know what you wish." Putting words in her daughter's mouth and staking claims in her daughter's desire, Mother identifies her own death as the daughter's ultimate fantasy.

As fantasy is pushed to the limit, Erika's mother identifies something other than her daughter's grey autumn suit as missing. Touching her head, mother begins crying and says, "There's a real hole here." Then the film cuts to a close-up of Erika, whose eyes are filling with tears. Her mother adds that the "real hole" is "here too." However, the "here" to which Erika's mother refers is off-screen; while we assume that Erika's mother has gestured to her heart, the camera lingers on Erika's reaction. The site of this lack remains ambiguous, but it leads to reconciliation between the two women. Erika breaks down and, still crying, smiles through her tears, and apologizes. Both women mirror each other and ask "but why do you do these things," to which neither is capable of offering a verbal response. Instead, mother and daughter make contact with each other through their shared losses and woundings. Part of the answer to why Erika and her mother continue to return to these elaborate emotional pyrotechnics seems to be found in the intimate, tear drenched reconciliation that the performance teases out.

Similar to Naqvi and Kone's reading of *La Pianiste*, Jean Ma describes the film's depiction of the Mother-daughter dyad as a "rivalrous paranoid vacuum."<sup>29</sup> Writing as a practicing psychoanalyst,

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<sup>29</sup> Ma, Jean. "Discordant Desires, Violent Refrains: "La Pianiste"" Grey Room 28 (Summer 2007): 6-29. JSTOR. Web. 11 Mar. 2016. p. 459

Ma argues that Erika remains in the imaginary stage, and stunted, cannot properly construct the coordinates of her fantasy. Trapped in this position with her mother, there is no gap in the desire of the Other that Erika cannot fill. Ma's reading, however, fails to take into account this productive element of the perverse relationship. I argue, by contrast, that the ritualized violence between mother and daughter, which is undoubtedly both rivalrous and paranoid, is far from vacuous; rather, it proves time and time again to reap enjoyment and cultivate intimacy. As a result of aggression, distance and gaps are established that make room for the two women to demonstrate affection.

Within the coordinates of the mother/daughter dyad, the absence of the other of the mother leaves no room for renunciation or sacrifice, or in Freudian and Lacanian terms, castration. For Lacan, desire requires a lack, a gap for metonymic shifting, for moving between partial objects and partial drives. From Erika's position, however, without a proper signifier of castration, the Mother's demand never gets relegated to the realm of desire as fantasy. In the imaginary stage, the Other is embodied in the Mother, or primary caregiver, as one is caught up in false being—being that which fills in the hole in the (M)other. An ego, crystallized and embodied, manifests as a physical (whether flesh or image) answer to the other's call. On the other hand, in the symbolic stage, one grapples with the Other as language, the elusiveness of fantasy, and symbolization of demand into desire. In the symbolic stage, the subject is constituted via the activity of suspension, of keeping the thing-in-itself at bay. Without any mechanism by which to shore up the pleasure promised by embodying the answer to the mother's incessant demand, the subject is trapped in a position of passionate—because attempting to be exactly what another wants and thereby having a fixed position is inherently pleasurable—subordination and subjection to the Other.

Erika does not exactly produce, but rather reflects back, a hole in her mother's body—a lack that, as her mother points out, exists somewhere else too. Most importantly, her affection is mediated from the start by vision. Erika is preoccupied with the damage she has done and wants to see her

mother's wound, a desire that will be repeated in a later scene when Erika steals a glance at her mother's genitals while physically dominating her in the bed they share. Sitting at her mother's side to have a look at the hole in her hair, Erika touches her mother's head and her inspecting hands become tender, caressing, embracing and, ultimately, embraced. Establishing both Erika's performative and voyeuristic relation to others, Haneke prevents the viewer from seeing what she can and reflects back our own desire to do so in the process. Both alienation and identification are built into the act of looking, so this removal and detachment also presents an opening, albeit a limited one.

The repercussions of this "real hole" are located in Lacanian jouissance. A product of neither nature (substance) nor culture (signification), but rather a remainder resulting from failure of signification, jouissance is based on an imperative to enjoy at all costs, beyond the pleasure principle, beyond reason, and beyond limits. Playing on the homophony of *en-corps* and *encore*, in *Seminar XX: Encore*, Lacan links embodiment to repetition and distinguishes between two types of jouissance, a distinction which serves as the basis for his theory of sexual difference. In phallic jouissance, enjoyment is based on mis-taking the Other for a part (*objet petit a*), a failure that is made possible by the fact that the subject is wholly subjected to the phallic function (wholly castrated by language). On the other hand, the jouissance of the Other, what Lacan also refers to as surplus or feminine jouissance, is the exception to the rule that makes phallic jouissance possible. In this way, the subject who is barred from the Other, from *objet petit a*, is only possible because of the Other. Castration is possible only because not-all ("feminine") subjects are subject to it. If "getting off" is a type of enjoyment or jouissance, it is also a mode of exculpation—no one within or viewing the film is able to get off "scot-free," but the relationships in the film suggest that it is nonetheless possible to get something out of guilt and implication.

After limitations between bodies are transgressed via hair-pulling and mutual tears, Erika's social limitations, at least those according to her mother, are introduced. During their bedtime routine,

Erika's mother reiterates her daughter's failed attempts at indulging in her femininity, this time in the context of Erika's elevated status. She chides, "I don't understand why someone of your standing slaps makeup on and fritters money away on frocks that will so go out of fashion." This "misunderstanding" further casts judgment on Erika's behavior by drawing limits to what is acceptable for her to wear and what is considered a presentable appearance, based on her social position. Erika's ambivalent desire to be like her mother is unveiled when she notes that her mother used to have a dress exactly like it. This detail occurs as an afterthought to their earlier argument, which reveals that once Erika is in a position of relative security, she feels safe enough to let on that her apparently clear-cut act of defiance was, in fact, also a loving act of mimicry. But her veiled compliment is disavowed by her mother, who, instead of accepting her daughter's claims that the dress is ageless, timeless, and classic, emphasizes that she must not forget her "standing" on the one hand. On the other, in the context of her pupils, her mother urges her not to allow herself to be "surpassed." Here Erika's talent becomes a limit, which her role as piano teacher complicates. Her students' success must not exceed her own, but it is through her relationship to one of her students that Erika finds a proper opportunity to actively choose herself as subordinate to the law. As a result, the normal behavior for someone of her social standing, gender, and age, according to her mother and the media at large, becomes subordinate to Erika's enjoyment and part of her own performance.

Whereas Erika and her mother initially struggle for power, mistaking, injuring and, finally, touching each other via the articulation of language, Erika and her student Walter first miss each other via the articulation of space. Fittingly, the film introduces Walter as Erika and her mother are about to take an elevator at the conservatory. Too late, Walter is trapped outside and Erika locks the door in front of him. Smirking, he walks off frame, but the architecture of the building is set up so that the vertically-bound elevator passengers have a clear view of the series of horizontal landings required by those who take the spiraling stairs. As Erika ascends each floor, she is able to watch him running in

front of her, as if in circles, until he beats her to the final destination. Keeping in line with the play of appearances and performance between Erika and her mother, the introduction of Walter through visual puns reveals spatial limits only to later playfully, but also aggressively “get around” them. Erika and her mother were in a constant struggle to get the best of the other. The goal was never to win once and for all, but, rather, to keep playing, extending limits, and carving out spaces for oneself in the other and for the other in oneself through self-injuring games.

Erika’s foray into the world outside of her home is disclosed via cold cinematography, long takes and long shots, all of which serve to reflect her distance and alienation from those around her while enhancing our own estrangement as viewers. As we follow Erica through scenes of ice-rinks, metal bars, keys, and barriers, she and those that surround her blend into this environment, glacial and mortified. These cinematographic techniques also work to align the viewer with the frustration of Erika’s desire. Walter, an object of her desire, first appears on screen barely noticeable to the viewer in the background of a medium long-shot of Erika and Mother as they enter the conservatory. Walking arm in arm in natural light, with no color surrounding them, Erika’s beige and neutral attire offers no hint of the bright, floral fabrics hanging unworn in her closet. Once Walter enters behind them, Erika glances back at him, if only for a second.

This look however, becomes extremely important once we realize that Erika intentionally prevented Walter from sharing the elevator space with herself and her mother. Subtle pauses and stolen glances become the currency through which desire and knowledge of desire are exchanged. Initiating a game of her own, Erika meets Walter’s gaze as she closes the doors. Then, bars from the gate swipe across her face, so that the film visually establishes the line Erika wants drawn between them. At the same time, this act of limitation harks back to her mother’s imperative that she not forget her standing. It is because of the space opened up by Erika’s barring act that Walter is able, against her mother’s wishes, to momentarily surpass her.

While Walter runs up the stairs, the transparency of the elevator creates the perfect stage for Erika and her mother to watch the spectacle unfold. For the first time, but not the last, Walter shows off his athleticism to Erika and the spectator. Once the elevator doors close, the women simultaneously look at each other to demonstrate their shared acknowledgement of an outsider's sudden presence in their lives. The elevator vertically ascends each floor and creates a fence-like pattern of lines that cross over Walter's body. Horizontal motion is repeated as Walter runs across the frame, contrasting and complementing the mother and daughter's rhythm. Analogous to the television show that is intermitted between Erika and her mother's fight and reconciliation, Walter's movement across the screen offers a comedic reminder of the pleasure of looking and watching. At one point in the sequence, he can even be seen smiling while running across the landing. Through an over-the-shoulder shot between the two women, we are positioned between them, anticipating the next floor and when Walter will make his next appearance. The desire for knowledge, for wanting to see more, here appears as a simple desire, but the dark underside of this demand for on-screen visibility is uncovered soon thereafter.

When Erika and her mother reach their destination, Walter is already waiting for them at the door. Echoing the structure of Erika's intimate verbal confrontation with her mother, this second introduction spatializes the previous sequence's language play. This visual deception of limits elucidates the complex process of attempting to catch up to and not be surpassed by another. Following the way in which the relationship between Erika and her mother was founded on their shared, unspoken commitment to thinly-veiled deceptions, futile evasions, and fraudulent insults, Erika's relationship with Walter is made possible because of this carefully-calculated sabotage.

## MASOCHISM AND COURTLY LOVE

Thus far, I have offered analyses of these two scenes to argue against simplistic readings of Erika's masochistic style that equate masochism with passivity. By underscoring the orchestrations and carefully selected oscillations between distance and intimacy that Erika deals in, I argue that these scenes set up a much more complicated structure to Erika's masochism than most theoretical approaches to the film allow. Translated into cinematic language, the opacity of feminine jouissance manifests in gaps and misfires that mark the motions and word choices of the characters. As a result, we are left unable to make sense of how each part fits into the whole and forced to grapple with the remnants of open-ended games.

In the introduction, I referred to the film as a parody. In this section, I will lay out the ways in which *La Pianiste* parodically works on the spectator by effectively uncovering the violence built into the intersubjective power struggle of courtship. Throughout the film, Walter and Erika's burgeoning romance is repeatedly described by the lovers in terms of games and rules. Walter enters the scene seemingly far from being his lover's equal and enacts the role, an almost masculine masquerade, of tortured lover. Erika effectively fills the role of his object cause of desire, or objet *a*, until she confronts him with her own desires and demands. By provoking a rethinking of masochism, *La Pianiste* also subverts and critiques the melodrama of romance, which makes room for only certain types of female masochism to succeed. In this sense, Erika's "failure"—her inability to maintain Walter's desire—is that she conforms a bit too perfectly with his object.

Echoing Sacher-Masoch's conception of masochism, courtly love is characterized by Lacanian psychoanalysis as a complex, successful mode of covering over the failure of the sexual

relation by actively placing more superficial barriers in the way. Courtly love thrived during the Medieval period (when women's mobility and desire was particularly structured by patriarchal law) and most often began with no more than a subtle exchange of glances. The structure is familiar: a troubadour obsessively worships an unavailable Lady from afar, acquiescing her every wish, however ridiculous or degrading, thereby perpetuating a romance that remains unconsummated. *La Pianiste* reveals the proximity of courtly love to masochism, as Walter's version of idealism clashes with Erika's "perversion" of it. As a result, we find that dis-entangling perversity from non-perversity is as impossible a task as fulfilling the Lady's desires. Impossibility collides with anxiety, and this confrontation reaches its climax through violence.

Romantic performances in *La Pianiste* must also be framed in light of the classical piano performances and culture against which they unfold. At first, Erika and Walter relate to each other and to music in parallel. When they meet for the second time, we are keyed into where they stand for one another through a juxtaposition of their performances. As we view the film, music functions as a medium that refracts and reflects the characters' desires, thereby allowing us to gauge these desires. The set-up of the two performances are almost identical: a shot of the pianist's fingers on the keys from above, a reaction shot from the audience, a close-up of the pianist's face. In Erika's case, this close-up is paired with Walter's visibly pleased and excited reaction to Erika's passion. The difference, however, offers insight into the power dynamics that underwrite these apparently reciprocal performances. In Erika's performance, she shares the stage with a male pianist; together, they play Bach's Concerto for Two Pianos in C Major. Moreover, a female student sits behind her, ready to turn the page. In the audience shots, we watch as the attention shifts from one side of the room the other, except for Walter, who keeps his eyes locked on Erika. Conversely, Walter occupies the space of his performance alone, except for when his uncle introduces him to the crowd. Afterwards, Walter approaches Erika and inserts himself into the conversation, offering words of admiration, sealed with

cultured politeness: “I hope it’s not too forward of me to kiss the hand that plays such Bach.” Harkening back to the many overhead shots of hands over keys shown throughout, Walter’s flirtatious remark takes the part for whole. In turn, Erika sustains the structure common to courtly love by distancing herself from her admirer, who goes out a limb to declare his interest. Instead of directly acknowledging his compliment she supplants` his “unfashionable enthusiasm” with coldness.

Despite the fact that Walter enters the musical community already linked through his familial ties, during a break between performances, he points out that classical piano enthusiasts are a dying breed. Erika agrees with Walter that “families like this are no more.” This identification of exception, of being out-of-date and out-of-step with the times, reminds us of the ideal that mediates Erika and Walter’s relations. Not only does Walter draw attention to the non-existence of their cultural group, he also distances himself and Erika from the rest of this group, asking: “Look at them, do you think they give a fig about the benefits of illness?” After Walter cites the academic overratedness of Bruckner, Erika counters his example with her own and brings up philosopher Theodor Adorno’s essay on Schumann. Schumann became a composer after failing as a pianist—two of his fingers became permanently crippled after he bound them in order to improve his playing.<sup>30</sup> Possibly suffering from the physical and psychological effects of untreated syphilis, Schumann was often suicidal, and spent his final years in an asylum.<sup>31</sup> Foreshadowing Erika’s own inflicted violence and rigid corporeal discipline, this citation also brings out the way in which illness can be associated with romantic genius. Erika admits that she is fascinated by the “twilight of the mind,” the threshold between holding onto one’s sense of groundedness and “being completely abandoned.” Erika elaborates on this fascination by associating Schumann with her father, rhetorically asking: “since my father died completely mad in Steinhof asylum, I can talk easily about the twilight of the mind, can't I?” Walter comes to the table

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<sup>30</sup> Jensen, Eric Frederick. “5 Things You Never Knew About Schumann.” *NPR*. 10.08.2012. Web. 20 Apr. 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Friedl, Reinhold. "Some Sodomasochistic Aspects of Musical Pleasure." *Leonardo Music Journal*, 2002. p. 29

playing with romantic tropes of madness and genius, but this is all for show; Erika, in turn, claims first-hand knowledge of the “benefits of illness” and will show Walter exactly what “abandonment” and “twilight” entail.

In a later scene, a repetition of the opening sequence, as Erika returns home too late, we get the same shot of the closed door as she enters the apartment. Inside, her mother has once again turned her daughter’s feminine accessories inside out. She has ransacked her closet, ripping garments from the hangers and tossing them in a pile on the floor. By now, Erika’s mother’s domination is securely aligned with visibility. She attempts to keep eyes on her daughter at all times and when that is no longer possible, she will make visible the things that Erika wants to keep hidden. *La Pianiste* continues to drive home the fact that visibility is no guarantee of knowledge of the other. In *Read My Desire*, Copjec analyzes the failure of such a relationship through a Lacanian critique of Foucauldian-inspired and historicist approaches to film theory. The difference between these two conceptions of the subject sheds light on an important dimension of the “real hole” hit upon by the film’s masochism and spectatorship. Instead of conflating desire as both an effect and realization of the law, psychoanalysis insists on the one hand that there is a difference between the two and, on the other, that this difference produces a fundamentally split subject. The very act of surveillance makes the subject “extimate,” so that the most intimate part of ourselves is at core external, sent from the other and received as our own. At a loss to account for this negative by-product, the subject appears to herself to be guilty, and therefore must be hiding something. According to the panoptic apparatus, the gaze marks the subject’s visibility; for psychoanalysis, the gaze marks the subject’s culpability. Guilt feeds into deception, redefining the gaze, so that it “stands watch over the inculcation—the faulting and splitting of the subject by the apparatus.”<sup>32</sup> Within each seemingly complete field of vision, the subject will always doubt this certainty and ask not only “what is missing from this picture,” but also “what is being

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<sup>32</sup> Copjec, Joan. *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1994. p. 30

hidden?” By pulling at the fabrics from Erika’s closet, her mother draws attention to the seamlessness of this link between the all-visible and the all-known. Something *must* be hidden from her. Because of this impasse, the subject

...is the effect of the impossibility of seeing what is lacking in representation, what the subject, therefore wants to see. The gaze, the object cause of desire, is the very object cause of the subject of desire in the field of the visible...It is what the subject does not see and not simply what it sees that finds it.<sup>33</sup>

This “something missing” is reflected in the form of the uncovering, but decidedly sexual in the content of what is and is not uncovered. As I noted in the opening scene with the purse, Erika’s mother’s approach to getting to the real of her daughter’s desire is to rifle through mere surfaces. In terms of gaze theory, this feminine turn inscribes the way in which female subjects continue to find something lacking in images of themselves.

Erika is thus “greeted” by her mother, who slaps her twice in the face before informing her that her father died today. What this second death opens up, albeit subtly, is the complexity of subject formation. To the audience, the father has been absent for the film, written off early on. However, this scene simultaneously resurrects Erika’s father while suggesting that he is apparently as good as dead, or perhaps, better off dead than insane. By reversing the chronology of speaking death, *La Pianiste* inverts its double logic: the symbolic, excessive process of mourning that produces meaning of the thing-in-itself precedes the real death. While her father lives, Erika brags of his death—the father’s premature symbolic death is used as currency that ups the ante for Erika’s interpretative ability. His material death is inconsequential, almost an afterthought. As a result, in the structure of the film’s plot, it becomes the excessive element that disrupts the narrative and pokes holes in Erika’s sincerity. Madness and illness make for successful flirtation material, but this conversation point also isolates the difference between speaking about the “twilight” of the mind and being “completely” mad.

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<sup>33</sup> Copjec, pp. 35-6

In *La Pianiste*, the impossibility of the relationship between Erika and Walter lies in the gap between language and desire: taking words at their face value and assuming that people mean what they say and say what they mean leads to violent misunderstandings. Many critics characterize the moral of the story as a warning from Erika to “be careful what you wish for.” However, it is Walter who first brings the discussion of illness into play, in an attempt to identify and align himself with Erika. The beginning of Walter’s traditional approaches to courting Erika, this appreciation for what madness might do for art only works for Walter at a distance. He is utterly horrified and disgusted once Erika lets him in on the secret of her “illness.” The romantic dimensions of insanity that Walter so confidently offered up as an icebreaker, are completely lost on him.

Walter takes his turn at the piano after this conversation with Erika, and changes the program at the last minute, dropping Schoenberg’s Opus 33b for the Scherzo from Schubert’s Sonata in A Major. In an interview with Slavoj Žižek, Isabelle Huppert identifies this scene with Erika’s attraction to Klemmer: as he goes off-script and plays the piece by Schubert from memory, Erika’s desire for him is entangled with the ideal realm of the music to which she has devoted her life.<sup>34</sup> An engineering student, Walter, who Haneke admits he intended to make more complex than the character in Jelinek’s novel, is defined by superficiality and technicality. Even the passion that he exhibits in the beginning, which he puts on full display at every opportunity, fulfills the requirements of any chivalrous script. In other words, his communication with Erika is filled with clichés, but these clichés succeed. By changing his piece in response to their discussion of madness, Walter’s performance addresses Erika directly—his introduction singles her out. During his performance the camera stays tight on Erika’s face as she takes her turn to watch, but she is also being closely watched by her mother, who is reading her reaction in the same way that we are encouraged to. With visibly twitching lips, Erika’s facial muscles resist breaking into a smile. Over this close-up shot of Erika watching, the diegetic music is

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.lacan.com/actuality/2014/07/473/>. 06.07.2014. Accessed 03.20.17.

replaced by *Im Dorfe, In the Village*, a song from Schubert's song cycle for voice and piano, *Die Winterreise, Winter Journey*, (1828). This musical bridge ensures that the lines "...Dreaming of what they don't have, replenished of good and bad. And next morning, all flown away" are paired with Erika's visible stirrings of desire. These Lyrics are pasted over Erika's delicate reaction to Walter's performance as if to leave no doubt that this is the beginning of a love story. The content of the song reminds us, however, that there is real gap between wanting and having. Seeming to set up a reciprocal, complementary relationship, *La Pianiste* sets this relationship up to fail and replaces it with impossibility. In her analysis of the relationship between romantic and aesthetic idealization in the film, Ma notes that:

The task of music and, indeed, of art itself is not to appease or to harmonize the frictions and tensions generated by social contradictions but rather to enunciate, reveal, and hyperbolize such tensions in order to render them available to consciousness.<sup>35</sup>

This bait and switch structure makes us aware of our own desires to interpret the desire of the other as part of a whole. At the same time, these early moments between Erika and Walter demonstrate the easy fluctuation between performance and spectatorship. Yet, by the end of the film reciprocity is nothing more than a dream, and we find Erika refusing her place at the piano. Music sets the stage for interpretation and we are lead through the impasses of reading desire, but instead of being left with nothing, what we have is the boundlessness of indeterminacy.

Walter avenue of pursuing Erika is literally competing: he must audition before her to become her student. Opting for structure, he already props up their potential for a sexual relationship on an academic, pseudo-contractual one in which rules and roles are already established. During Walter's test, as his performance progresses, Haneke cuts tighter and tighter on Erika's face. Duration is gauged through proximity to Erika's gaze. Abrupt changes in sound accentuate the sharpness of the cuts, so that the closer the camera gets, the more visible Erika's emotions become. It is as if with each further encroachment on Erika's own spectatorship with our own, it becomes more difficult for her to restrain

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<sup>35</sup> Ma, p. 24

her emotion. Enjoyment is undoubtedly written on her face. This time Erika's mother is not there to witness her daughter's desires, but as spectators we are there to intercept and interpret them. While Erika enjoys the other's performance, her charged gaze is limited by the spectator's. In this way, the interpretation of music and performance transmits knowledge while this mediation serves as a safeguard against becoming an open book.

Throughout the first quarter of the film, Erika and Walter's romantic performances read like a traditional romantic comedy, organized via a will they/won't they structure in which no means yes, and in Walter's case, yes will mean no. The cold façade of disinterest conceals passion; desire gives way to disgust. Despite the legibility of Erika's appreciation for Walter's performance, she publically departs from her peers and is the exception to the almost unanimous vote to accept him. One of the most impressive things about Walter is his lack of professional training. Since "low voltage" engineering is Walter's main occupation, his talent on the piano is received with all the more enthusiasm. Describing his "histrionics" as "suspicious, or even unpleasant," Erika reiterates her fears about the superficiality and performative exuberance of Walter's passion. As the line between these performances (musical and romantic) are blurred, the film isolates the role of "the ideal" in the sexual relationship, along with the spectator's attachment to the superficial. Appearances might be deceiving, but the relationship between Erika and Walter reveals what happens when appearances don't deceive.

Slavoj Žižek argues that far from becoming obsolete, the logic of courtly love is found in contemporary relations between the sexes. Who is "the Lady" of courtly love? Lacan subverts many of the assumptions behind the Lady, which place her at the level of spiritualism, idealism, and transcendence. The exaltation of the lady is not spiritual, but, rather an abstraction that "pertains to a cold, distanced, inhuman partner—the Lady is by no means a warm, compassionate understanding

fellow-creature.”<sup>36</sup> As a placeholder for the (male) lover’s desire, the Lady “stands for the man’s narcissistic projection which involves the mortification of the flesh-and-blood woman.”<sup>37</sup> If the Lady is a projection, Žižek asks, “where does that empty surface come from, that cold, neutral screen which opens up the space for possible projections?...The mute mirror-surface must already be there. This surface functions as a kind of ‘black hole’ in reality, as a limit whose Beyond is inaccessible.”<sup>38</sup>

Instead of succumbing to passion, the relation between the Lady and her admirer is built on a foundation of suspension, operating at the level of the conditional “as if” tense. I argue that this structure is vital to understanding how *La Pianiste* works on the spectator by setting up the illusion that the relationship between Walter and Erika could be one in a series. The forbidden scenario between an older woman and a younger man is all too often played out either in masochistic terms (a domineering Wanda) or in terms of courtly love whereby something in the Woman is set apart from the rest, making her inaccessible. Without getting into the details of this double standard, I will only note that for women, age is almost always the sufficient condition for impossibility.

In both masochism and courtly love, man approaches the Lady, and the Lady carries herself, *as if* she were inaccessible, when, for all intents and purposes, she is. As Lacan explains in *Encore*, “[a] very refined manner to supplant the absence of a sexual relationship is by feigning that it is us who put the obstacle in its way.”<sup>39</sup> In the *La Pianiste*, it seems as though Erika is successfully setting up herself as the inaccessible object that provokes Walter’s desire. In this way, she fills the trope of the female Master, setting up barriers so that Walter may continue to traverse them, enjoying the chase in all of its theatricality. But, once she discloses her masochistic orientation to their relationship, “the

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<sup>36</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. “Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing.” *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality*. Verso, London. 2005. pp. 89-112. p. 89

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90

<sup>38</sup> Žižek, Courtly Love, p. 91

<sup>39</sup> Fink, Bruce. *Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX*. New York: Norton, 1998. p. 69

man's response to the woman's 'Yes!', obtained by long, arduous effort, is to refuse the act."<sup>40</sup> As Žižek puts it, in the masochistic relation, "violence is never carried out, brought to its conclusion; it always remains suspended, as the endless repeating of an interrupted gesture."<sup>41</sup> As the story goes, masochism is never really about violence and courtly love is never really about consummation. By contrast, in romantic melodramas two are traditionally expected to be united as one. These genres and styles converge in *La Pianiste*, as the deadlock between the sexes cannot bear the weight of this suspension and two missing parts do not make a whole. Instead, the relation snaps, but it fails in two ways. For Walter, this failure is marked by wounding and obtaining Erika; he forces Erika to consummate, thereby incinerating, the relationship. For Erika, this failure is marked by self-wounding. In both cases, the failure of two making a whole is inscribed via violence on the feminine body. While maintaining a critique of the sociological and psychological explanations for this inevitability, I refuse to leave unturned or answered the undeniable presence of Erika's enjoyment. Slavoj Žižek sets up this distinction with respect to courtly love, and its uncanny proximity to masochism should give us pause when thinking about how *La Pianiste* frames femininity. Žižek asks, where do women stand, in regard to these limitations and infringements on their autonomy:

How then, are we to interpret this perseverance of the matrix of courtly love? It bears witness to a certain deadlock in contemporary feminism. True, the courtly image of man serving his Lady is a semblance that conceals the actuality of male domination; true, the masochist's theatre is a private *mise en scene* designed to recompense the guilt contracted by man's social domination; true, the elevation of woman to the sublime object of love equals her debasement into the passive stuff or screen for the narcissistic projection of the male ego-ideal, and so on.

...this very semblance [...] provides women with the fantasy-substance of their identity whose effects are real: it provides them all the features that constitute so called 'femininity' and define woman not as she is in her jouissance feminine, but as she refers to herself with regard to her (potential) relationship to man, as an object of his desire.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Žižek, *Courtly Love*, p. 101

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>42</sup> Žižek, p. 108

Here the line between masochism (male masochism) and courtly love becomes even more tenuous, as both are defined by performance. Setting up the symbolic coordinates of gendered identity, these semblances situate feminine subjects in the role of object, but jouissance remains outside the limits of these matrices of desire. The female masochism that fills *La Pianiste* critiques this model by refusing to disentangle femininity from feminine jouissance. Instead, the spectator is left to make sense of the painful juxtaposition of violent realities and violent fantasies.

### “SO-CALLED ‘FEMINITY’”

After Erika vocally rejects Walter’s application to become her student, his name still appears next to hers on the acceptance list. Directly from this triumph, couched as a defeat, the film cuts to Erika in the bathroom. Whereas Erika creates the first “real hole” of the film on her (m)Other’s body, she cuts the second hole into her own flesh. Failing to produce tears, this hole draws blood. It is important to note that in both cases, signs of the cut, lack, or hole are visible, while the thing-itself is never accessible to the spectator on-screen. The “real hole” Erika’s mother gestures to in her hair is not visible to us; likewise, Erika’s self-made hole is invisible, but undoubtedly present. *La Pianiste*’s preoccupation with wounding and invisibility offers insight into the key role that lack plays in the structuring of sexuality. Moreover, the invisible and the vaginal link mother to daughter in the logic of *La Pianiste*, signaling a markedly feminine wound.

Dressed in a silk floral robe (a much more “femininely coded” piece of clothing than anything we’ve seen so far), Erika carefully unwraps a razor blade from her purse. Everything is already prepared—another instance of the repetition and ritual that structures her desire. Sitting at the edge of the bathtub, spreading her legs, she holds a mirror, the kind often used for putting on make-up, in one hand and the small blade in the other. Looking at the reflection of her vulva in the mirror, Erika makes the cut and blood trickles down the edge of the white bathtub. The camera remains at a distance from Erika; her seated posture obscures both her reflection and what is being reflected, rendering it impossible for us to see exactly where or what she is cutting. A real wound has been made, but we are structurally incapable of seeing it. Only the effects of this hole, the blood, among other signs, are on-screen. Despite the fact that we can safely assume that she is cutting her genitals, the form of the film ensures inaccessibility as much as certainty.

Erika reaches for a maxi-pad to soak up the blood and, in this instance, the fact that women bleed anyway conveniently masks the fact that one wants to bleed. Instead of serving as a necessary reminder of fertility and the possibility of becoming a mother, Erika's blood is an unnecessary excess and the remainder of her pain. Menstrual blood too, is a surplus, that comes from a woundless hole. Erika's act re-inscribes this lack by doubling the wound. In a later scene, Erika lies in the bed she shares with her mother, holds her down by the wrists, and mounts her. The subsequent struggle for separation includes kisses, cries, declarations of love, and most importantly, a stolen glance. After it seems as though Erika has calmed down, she draws near to her mother's body again: this time pulling away in triumph, Erika declares "I saw the hairs on your sex." Again, the shot we get is of Erika looking at something—the female genitalia—that we cannot see. And when Erika speaks of what she sees, it isn't "the sex" that is visible, but, rather, something less interesting and more mundane, "the hairs" that cover over it. Lacan offers an account of how this compensation functions by explaining that:

one can only enjoy a part of the Other's body, for the simple reason that one has never seen a body completely wrap itself around the Other's body to the point of surrounding and phagocytizing it That is why we must confine ourselves to simply giving it a little squeeze, like that, taking a forearm or anything else—ouch!<sup>43</sup>

Rather than desiring to phagocytize, or ingest, her (m)Other's body, Erika seems to want to be phagocytized. She wants to return to the space where it was possible to be completely encapsulated, consumed, and destroyed by another body. But, in order to be consummated, it must be possible to be taken whole. Erika's violent, hysterical outbursts at the impossibility of this union are only tempered when she is able to see a part of her mother that was heretofore off-limits. Visibility of the part stands in as a reconciliation prize for the loss of the whole. While Erika is in the bathroom, her mother is not forgotten. We hear her yell off-screen: "Dinner is ready!" and Erika replies "coming, mother!" Not

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<sup>43</sup> Fink, *Encore*, p. 23

only is the fact of menstrual blood invoked in Erika's masochism, coding it as female, Erika's simple phrase evokes a climax that has nothing to do with procreation. Our knowledge of Erika's enjoyment does not stem from visible signs of bodily pleasure—the orgasmic indications of her masochism are purely linguistic. This perverse enjoyment seeps from the body through language as the spectator not only participates, but imbues the word-play with its meaning through interpretation.

Several aforementioned theorists have focused on this masochistic scene, but none remark on the ease with which Erika switches from one mirror to another. After using the first mirror to see between her legs to make the cut, she then turns to the reflection of her face in the bathroom mirror to make herself presentable. Erika brushes and smooths her hair before joining her mother for dinner. While she bleeds “in private,” her public appearance must nevertheless remain presentable. Erika's precautions prove ineffective: she is unable to conceal the traces of her act. Her mother misrecognizes the blood—on the surface both look the same—and asks “What's wrong with you? Look. Is that why you're in a bad mood? You might be more careful. It's not very appetizing.” If the idea that Erika might involuntarily be bleeding is unappetizing, how then are we to categorize her self-inflicted wound? What does Erika see when she looks at herself? Part of the answer (but never the whole) can be found by turning to Copjec's distinction: film theory has often framed the screen as mirror, but for Lacanian psychoanalysis the mirror itself is a screen.

In this screen as mirror model, we see (or don't see) ourselves reflected on-screen. These representations give us a sense of who we are. As an institution, cinema produces one social discourse among others that contributes to the construction of the spectating subject. If the problem with cinematic representation were its monopolization by the male gaze, the solution would be to produce a multiplicity of those representations to match the diversity of the spectators who consume them. However, Copjec argues, instead of constituting a resistance to power, these differences feed it by further carving out smaller and smaller cuts of subjectivity that can be subjected to more intense

scrutiny. Resistance can only occur by acknowledging that there is a different kind of cut. Instead of merely carving out the subject via external differences by making perversion visible, Lacanian psychoanalysis insists on the way in which the gaze carves up the subject. For apparatus-based film theories, the subject coincides with the gaze; for Lacanian psychoanalysis, the subject is barred from the gaze. Instead of being found in the image, the gaze is

located 'behind' the image, as that which fails to appear in it and thus as that which makes all its meanings suspect...The gaze is not clear or penetrating, not filled with knowledge or recognition; it is clouded over and turned back on itself, absorbed in its own enjoyment.<sup>44</sup>

We can only infer that Erika pushes the blade into her flesh; we cannot see the cut, but we know that it is made because she bleeds. Denied access to both the reality and reflection of this masochistic act, we are placed into a matrix of looks in which the gaze leads only to an absence. As Erika sees different parts of herself reflected in both mirrors, the gaze ensures that she will continue to misrecognize herself. Looking for something that structurally cannot be there, the subject at once identifies herself as lacking and assumes that something else, the other, must make up for excessive, unaccounted-for lack with knowledge.

For Lacan, sexual difference arises out of the two ways in which subjects persist in enjoyment, despite this constitutive gap. Feminine *jouissance*, the *jouissance* of the Other, lies in persisting in the hole or not not-all of being. Phallic *jouissance* lies in taking parts of the Other's body as if they could be added together, one-by-one, to make one's being whole. Like masochism and sadism, the phallic and feminine structures of *jouissance* are by no means complementary. If they were, the subject could be known and enjoyed in its entirety. When Lacan controversially remarks that "the Woman does not exist," this is because *the* Woman, the complete, unified, knowable Other is an impossibility. The subject relates to the Woman as the missing piece. Woman is split between being wholly subjected to language (the phallic function) and her status as Other, despite the fact that there is no Other of the

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<sup>44</sup> Copjec, p. 36

Other. Because of this lack of a guarantee and lack of a limit, Woman is not-all and stands for the *failure* of the limit.<sup>45</sup> The suspended status of the Woman is really a way of saying that “there’s no such thing as a knowing subject.”<sup>46</sup> It is within this structure of impossibility that the film situates the spectator, daring us to come to terms with our own limits.

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<sup>45</sup> Copjec, *Supposing the Subject*, pp. 35, 44

<sup>46</sup> Lacan, *Encore*, p. 126

### BITCHES AND PIGS

We learn more about Erika's relationship to her "so-called femininity" when we are introduced to a doubling of Erika and her mother: Erika's female student, Anna, and her similarly over-bearing mother. As a teacher, Erika is in the position of telling Anna's mother that her daughter doesn't have what it takes. In this way, she becomes the mouthpiece for her own mother. She reminds Anna's mother that the amount of work doesn't matter—all that matters is the result. Without "total commitment," a pianist cannot get anywhere. Faced with her inadequacy, Anna cries and her mother chastises her appearance—she needs to wipe the snot and tears from her face. Even with failure in sight, there is never a reason to make oneself unpresentable or give way to the weaknesses of the body. Reversing this mirror-image, Erika leaves the mother-daughter pair and abruptly goes from her authority and alignment with mother, to being a daughter who pleads and argues with her own mother over the phone that "she's not a baby." Despite these protestations of her independence and maturity, she is nonetheless being framed in front of a wall of children's drawings. Both times Erika decides to go on one of her perverse excursions, she must first set up a series of lies and deceptions to prevent her mother from knowing her whereabouts. In the first case, she calls her mother before leaving the conservatory to go to some unmarked location, instead of working late.

Wearing her trench coat and bun from the opening scene, Erika ascends another transparent elevator and Schubert's Piano Trio in E Flat Major plays as she walks through a crowded shopping mall. Ironically playing with the apparent difference between Erika's high-brow bourgeois vocation and the "low-brow" pornography she will get off on watching, this scene calls into question the difference between the ideal and the obscene. Erika walks into the sex shop purposefully—it is obvious that this isn't her first time, but, for the spectator, there was nothing to foreshadow the

perversity of her destination. In her analysis of this scene, Bandhauer writes that Erika “seems to glide effortlessly from one world into the other without any apparent realization of the perversity and utter sadness of her existence.”<sup>47</sup> This description of sadness, underwritten by a critique of the pornographic, seems to suggest that a woman paying to see hardcore pornography is just as absurd as a woman enjoying the masochistic position. The film pushes back against this view, by reminding us that even outside of her mother’s gaze, she is still an object to be looked at, subjected to the gaze of the men that surround her. As she waits for her turn in the private viewing room, Erika does not look away from those who look at her. She makes space for her own gaze and enjoyment. Remaining poised, she cannot get around being aware of these looks.

Once inside, she is faced with not one, but four videos to choose from. In another analysis that reads this scene as a critique of pornography, Landwehr argues that “[i]n these films, intimate acts are debased, fragmented into disjointed images. Erika’s view of female body parts portrays this devaluation of women into commodities. The whole individual is not known.”<sup>48</sup> What Landwehr misses in this characterization is the way in which pornographic, commercial parts of the female body relate to Haneke’s framing of the intimate acts that occur between Erika and her mother. If we keep this difference in mind, far from proving that the whole individual cannot be known, these direct hardcore images offer up the false promise that links wholeness with visibility. By contrast, Haneke’s indirect and invisible handling of the female body—Erika’s cut and her mother’s hairs—re-inscribes the absence that drives visibility. “Erika’s view” of the female body, then, does not follow a strict one-to-one correlation with the media’s representation of them. *La Pianiste* leaves us with two, irreconcilable modes of mediating an incomplete body.

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<sup>47</sup> Bandhauer, p. 272

<sup>48</sup> Landwehr, p. 119

Erika selects a video of a woman laying on her back and performing fellatio, while a man stands over her. Reaching into a wastebasket, she holds what can safely be assumed to be a semen-covered tissue to her face. For Bandhauer, this detail signals an “utter loneliness and complete disengagement with her own body.”<sup>49</sup> She goes on to argue that “the unsettling incongruity of sound and image leaves Erika “literally caught between the world of the sublime and the world of sexual exploitation and emotional depravity.”<sup>50</sup> Schubert’s “Im Dorf” is repeated over Erika’s impenetrable expression. Lyrically, the piece reflects Erika’s position as an exception to the world around her:

*Bark me away, you waking dogs,  
Don't let me rest  
in the sleeping hours!  
I've reached the end of dreams.  
What will I do  
amongst the sleepers?*

Reiterating the notion of a threshold, the subject of Schubert’s song cycle wanders through the countryside in winter, after being spurned by his lover. Separated from his chance at being one with the object of his dreams, the wanderer finds himself alienated because he is now awakened to the realities of disenchantment and disillusion. In part prophesizing the end of Erika’s relationship with Walter before it even begins, this song relegates the ideal, both in terms of romantic love and classical music, to the realm of illusion. These trajectories meet up in the spectator’s own perverse position: we watch Erika consume images of hard-core pornography while we listen to Schubert. Far from retracing the line between the sublimity and depravity as Bandhauer maintains, this scene ironically places the spectator in the position of mediating the two and acknowledging their proximity.

Rather than representing Erika’s disconnect from her body, this scene opens up channels for accessing bodily enjoyment through mediation. Against Landwehr and Bandhauer, I argue that the film goes further than merely critiquing the objectification of women’s bodies. If pornography is in

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<sup>49</sup> Bandhauer, p. 269

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

the business of making up for invisibility via maximizing visibility, as Linda Williams has argued,<sup>51</sup> we should be cautious about equating Erika expressionlessness with a lack of enjoyment. *La Pianiste* undermines this notion that there is an intimate act that occurs between two bodies, which the film-within-a film cuts up and debases. When Walter and Erika will repeat this sex act, there are no “hardcore” images—the action is barely visible. Instead, the visibility that will be produced is in the form of Erika’s vomit, not Walter’s erection or ejaculation. The next scene, much less discussed in secondary literature, addresses these critiques of pornography head-on and outlines the ambivalent role the media plays in shaping the subject. The film cuts to a shot of a wall of glossy, colorful porn magazines as a teenage boy reads:

*Mare in heat seeks ardent,  
successful stallion,  
for jumping and dressage.  
Must be 8 inches.*

Here, we come the closest to Erika explicitly reflecting on gender roles, and are faced with the same contradictions as she faces in her masochistic desires. Erika recognizes her student reading the magazine, acknowledges him by name, and joins the gaze of the group of adolescent boys who are looking at the wall of posing women before abruptly departing. The boys turn their gaze from the many women on the wall to Erika as she walks away, repeating the structure of the men who looked at her while she was directing her own gaze toward hardcore pornographic images.

In both cases it is clear that, to the men in the film, Erika’s presence throws off something about the way they enjoy women. She does not belong, but she is there, looking, nonetheless. Erika’s awareness of this deadlock emerges when she confronts her male student.

During their next meeting, Erika attempts to teach him a different kind of lesson. Using her knowledge of his extracurricular activities, she taunts him and teases out an apology. We are aligned

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<sup>51</sup> Williams, Linda. *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* Berkeley: U of California, 1989.

with Erika's position of power as she crosses her arms and stands over him while he sits below her at the piano. Similar to Erika's role in castigating Anna, this exchange bears the structure of the masochistic position. Erika now gets to script the punishment another will pay for a transgression that she herself has committed. His attempt at an apology only traps him further and Erika presses him on what, if anything, is beneath his language use:

Why? Why are you sorry? What for?  
It doesn't work like that. Sorry isn't enough, if I don't know why.  
Are you sorry because you're a pig?  
Or because your friends are pigs?  
Or because all women are bitches for making you a pig?  
Or just because you got caught?

If Erika had merely chastised the student for viewing obscene materials, it would be easy to frame her lashing out only in terms of projecting her own guilt over the pornographic. Erika's tirade situates the problem of pornography in the problem of sexual difference. Her overly aggressive line of questioning keys us into this point. It is insufficient for the male student to be sorry for his actions—"it doesn't work like that." What Erika really seems to be pointing out is the fact that the apology is paradoxically necessary and useless. She explains this ambiguity by listing four possible reasons for the student's apology. First, he could be apologizing for being a particular man, a "pig." However, Erika doesn't add content to this accusation—without enunciating the crime, we know and he knows that it has taken place. Young men looking at naked women is wrong. Second, he could be apologizing on behalf of his friends, for all other men, who are pigs in general. The third, partly ironic reason adds another layer of responsibility for the conundrum of sexual objectification: taking women into account, Erika posits that he is apologizing because *all women* are bitches for making pigs out of men. She acknowledges the negative position she feels "forced" to be in, as if her existence were the root of the problem. The fourth reason for the apology has nothing do with human "nature," but merely getting caught, an act with which Erika is intimately familiar.

Erika's power-trip style monologue addresses one of the key issues the film grapples with: the apparent deadlock between the sexes. Search for something to base this difference on, and there is no definite answer, only a series of superficial distinctions. Built into Erika's rant against succumbing to sexual curiosity is the fear that women are blamed for their own objectification. Retrospectively, this scene also evokes the question of violence against women, a problem that will be raised explicitly but remains unsolved at the end of the film. Erika's enjoyment is implicated in her dominance over the student, which we see most clearly in her choice of punishment. She tells him that she will inform *his mother* of his behavior at once. While the student is visibly horrified, we never see this ousting brought to fruition. The anticipation of being found out is punishment enough.

Lies continue to pile up in the name of desire precisely so that Erika's mother will not find out about her behavior. On the phone with her mother, Erika both orders her not to call and embarrass her during her made-up practice session. She cites her fear of being considered "a little girl" by her peers as an excuse to do something very "grown-up." Also, Erika also arranges for a woman to lie to her mother, if she does call. The woman, Walter's aunt, is happy to oblige Erika's request, remarking "I adore lying in the name of love." In the traditional or courtly version of a love story, intersecting fabrications are noble. In Erika's case, however, it is not a lover she seeks, but another opportunity to watch. Seated in a movie theatre food court, she looks on at the much younger crowd of teenagers surrounded by Coca-Cola and Hollywood movie advertisements.<sup>52</sup> When the signal for the show goes off, we realize that Erika didn't come here to see a movie. Appearing only after the picture has already begun, Erika is uninterested in the images on-screen and instead walks through the rows of parked cars until she finds what she is looking for. Watching through the dark car window as two movie-goers have sex, Erika watches them and urinates. Getting caught in the act, the man

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<sup>52</sup> Haneke self-referentially underscores the link between sexuality, popular sex, and the movies by changing the location of this scene from a park in Jelinek's book, to a drive-in theatre in the film.

attempts to pursue her and yells “Stay there, cunt! Are you crazy or something?” Erika is guiltier for watching sex than the couple is for actually having sex. After calling her male student “a pig,” she is in turn deemed a “cunt” by the man who catches her enjoying a private moment in a public space.

These moments in the film where popular culture pervades and mediates sexual relationships contextualize the courtly love motif that drives Erika and Walter’s relationship and remind us that sex cannot occur in a vacuum. Whereas it seems like there is a difference between the noble rituals of courtly love and the lowly pornographic image, both patterns mediate the sexual relation by inserting a third term—an impossible ideal—between them. In the next section I examine how this third term wreaks havoc on the pair’s chance of becoming a couple.

### THIN ICE/BROKEN GLASS

The next time Walter sees Erika, she makes it a point to tell him that she voted against him, and continues to erect barriers to their relationship by criticizing his musical style and throwing his sincerity into question. In Walter's continuing declarations of love, his reasons run the gamut of romantic melodrama: "I fought to win your attention. Give me a chance. I know you're not as indifferent as you pretend. I neglected my studies for you. It's the truth!" Here we see the way in which responsibility is transferred from male to female beloved, but Erika has already anticipated this turn in the previous scene ("women are bitches"). Erika, like the Lady, finds enjoyment in this position. Shifting his focus from engineering to classical piano, Walter still retains his technical approach to romance, admitting, "I've had you stuck on my mind like a nut on a bolt. I apologize for being so technical." Walter frames his decisions entirely around Erika, explaining that he never intended to apply to the conservatory and had no other choice but to follow his desire. In an extremely melodramatic exchange, Walter urges her to pretend she has a migraine so that they can leave together but Erika refuses. Underlying these proclamations that make up the majority of what we hear from Walter in the first half of the film, are sinister, but completely ordinary notions of what it means to be in a relationship. They go virtually unanalyzed in the literature surrounding the film, perhaps because they so are mundane. Because of this pervasiveness, they are key to understanding the complex way in which the film poses the question of the place for female masochism in the guise of a heteronormative relationship.

Erika's response is to reclaim Walter's desire for her to lie—the migraine becomes her justification for kicking him out, not an excuse for them to play hooky. In the next shot, Walter is frustratedly seen through a translucent door, descending the conservatory stairs. A recurring shot

throughout the film, the camera remains fixed on the now closed doors. In a reversal of the action that introduced Walter, Erika follows him down the stairs. Rather than seeking to catch up to him, she maintains a certain distance from the object of her desire, in order to better reap the enjoyment of watching him. She peeks out the door to see him get his hockey equipment from his car,<sup>53</sup> retreats back into the conservatory as he walks by, and once he is off-frame, she appears again from the recesses of the building and starts to follow him.

As Erika asserts her voyeurism, the film never fails to remind us of the structures she is coming up against. The next shot shows two female figure-skaters gracefully spinning at an ice rink, until a team of male hockey players dart into the frame. The women's motions cease as the men overtake their space. Rambunctiously and sloppily slapping their sticks against the ice, the players circle the women until they exit the rink. As they are leaving, Walter skates by them, apologizing, and they giggle triumphantly. From this interaction, we get a reaction shot in medium close-up of Erika, who watches from outside the gate. This sequence takes us on a carefully paced out chase and subtly shows us that what is being sought after, once reached, is still barred from us. Structuring desire, this gap is worked through over and over again the film. As Erika stands watching Walter from afar and the bars vertically cross her face. She smiles, enjoying the real hole that separates herself from his gaze. Erika is hidden from him, but not from the spectator.

After Erika watches Walter charm the ladies into being happy about being chased off the ice, jealously steps onto the scene. We have seen Erika rip a hole into her mother, then into her own flesh. The next cut is orchestrated by Erika against her female rival—her double, Anna, who also has an

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<sup>53</sup> Note the important shift from the book, where Walter's sport of choice is canoeing, not hockey. This change allows Haneke to take advantage of metaphors of coldness and cruelty: "you can't just get a man going and take refuge on the ice" as well as the hyper-masculine associations with the sport. Writing portions of this thesis during the Stanley Cup playoffs, I was constantly struck by the not-so-subtle phallic handling of equipment (goalies stroking the shaft of their sticks after blocking goals, announcers shouting that a player's stick has failed him when it breaks on contact, to name a few), not to mention the way in which rules carve out room for violence. Fighting, of course, will incur a penalty, but nothing elicits a louder, more animated response from the spectators.

overbearing mother who takes credit for her daughter's sacrifices. When Anna cannot contain her anxiety about performing, her body bears the brunt of this excess. Crying, she explains that she was late to the performance because of diarrhea. Erika watches as Walter consoles Anna, putting his hand on the small of her back and sitting at her side while she again plays "Im Dorf." While the camera focuses on Erika's visible reactions to Walter consoling and supporting her rival, the singer accompanying Anna sings the lines:

*Why do I avoid the roads  
Where other travelers go,  
Seek out hidden paths  
through snowbound rock outcrops?  
And yet, I've done nothing  
to make me flee my fellow men.  
What is this foolish desire  
Driving me into the wilderness?*

Driven by her own wild jealousies and desires, Erika's eyes brim with tears and she flees mid-performance. Once downstairs, Erika takes a scarf from the coat check, wraps a glass with it, steps on the glass, and empties the crushed shards into Anna's coat pocket. An extremely well-thought out and indirect way of injuring another, Erika's act ensures that her student will stop failing in front of Walter. She returns to seat herself among the audience, as if nothing has happened. Afterwards, we hear off-screen screams, while onscreen Walter humbly admits to Erika his shortcomings: he is superficial and lacks sensitivity. Erika seizes the opportunity to leave and does not need to see the results of her actions, saying "The sight of blood makes me ill. Go to her. Be her brave protector." A man is heard saying "nothing to see here" over a shot of Walter looking disturbed as a crowd gathers around Anna and she holds up her bloody hand. There is, however, something to see. Suddenly, Walter looks up, in Erika's direction. Not only does Erika escape the scene, she heads to the bathroom, apparently wanting to revel in her victory in private. In the women's bathroom, she locks the stall. Haneke's camera remains fixed on the closed stall door and then a shot of the empty bathroom, as if waiting

for someone to enter the frame. Closed doors not only represent barriers; they simultaneously hold the potential for opening, as characters continue to move through spaces in order to follow and watch one another.

At the moment when Erika steps away, does Walter realize what she has done? Either way, he follows her into the women's bathroom—into a space that is off-limits to him—and locks the door. More aggressively, he leaps up over the stall and supports himself to look down at her on the toilet. Leveraging his body, he bends down, dangling his feet over the door. Erika opens the door and he embraces her, pulling her towards him. Pulling up Erika's skirt and unzipping his pants, Walter lowers her to the floor, in the image which has become the emblem of the film's marketing campaign. Out of context, it appears to capture two lovers, overcome by passion in a public space. By closely analyzing the power struggle that occurs between the two beyond the commercial image that unites them, I want to unpack the way in which heteronormative ideals are messily entangled with female masochism.

Breaking away from Walter's kisses and telling him to stop, Erika stands back up and begins to manually stimulate him. In a seemingly sadistic manner, Erika directs his gaze by demanding "Look at me, not at your penis," to which he replies "be quiet." Erika wants something from him, but this thing that she wants has nothing to do with hugging, kissing, or penetrative intercourse. Landwehr identifies the alignment between Erika and the director in this scene, noting that Erika "controls the action, just as Haneke controls what we see (Klemmer's agonized face) and do not see (the source of his agony)...By withholding what can be seen and known, Haneke calls attention to his power over viewers."<sup>54</sup> As we have seen, this link between power and visibility is not as simple as Landwehr makes it out to be. Withholding what can be seen and known always produces an excess. *La Pianiste* never

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<sup>54</sup> Landwehr, 122. For a similar comparison, see Birchall, p. 6.

allows us the benefit of assuming that the film holds all the answers to the questions it poses. Haneke himself makes this point (with regards to the family being the root of all problems) in an interview:

I wanted to describe this in as detailed a way as I can, leaving to the viewer to draw conclusions. The cinema has tended to offer closure on such topics and to send people home rather comforted and pacified. My objective is to unsettle the viewer and to take away any consolation or self-satisfaction.<sup>55</sup>

The director, as masochist, aims to “unsettle the viewer” and cultivate an openness that cannot be mended. When Erika reverses the gendered stereotype, by taking up the role of director to a very confused actor, Walter, she may seem to hold power over him, but he soon calls her bluff. Erika’s masochistic position unfolds in tandem with the masochistic techniques of direction. The lack of knowledge at the core of the other, produces not submission, but the capacity for resistance. As Copjec frames this relation:

If there is a lack of knowledge in the Other, there is necessarily a surplus of meaning in the subject, an excess for which the Other cannot account, that is to say, there is something in the subject that escapes social recognition.<sup>56</sup>

When Landwehr concludes that Erika’s tale is tragic because she simultaneously wants to be both object and subject of the gaze, she leaves out this surplus of meaning that no look can account for. Walter is impatient and, failing to communicate with Erika, wants only to play out the ideal parts of his May-December romance. He tries to kiss her again and says “I love you. Why do you hurt me?” In response, Erika drops to her knees, so that only a sliver of her head is in frame and begins to orally stimulate him. We watch Walter’s visible facial reactions in real time, without cuts, as Erika continues to tell him to be silent. By refusing his signs of romantic affection, she refuses to allow him to think that he is giving her something that she wants. Each of her demands serve to recalibrate and overcompensate for this difference. His gaze—along with the spectator’s—is redirected from the hand

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<sup>55</sup> Sharrett, Christopher. The World that is Known: Michael Haneke Interviewed. 4:1. 8 March 2004. <http://www.kinoeye.org/04/01/interview01.php>

<sup>56</sup> Copjec, p. 161

job and blowjob action—and refocused on Erika’s expressionless face. After being confronted and cornered by Walter’s desire, Erika empties the sexual encounter of Walter’s textbook romantic passion and replaces it with her own script.

As soon as he says “It’s coming,” Erika pulls away and tells him that she will write everything down, so that her desires will be available for her lover to peruse at will. Erika wants to leave him sexually frustrated, but also in a state of incompleteness and suspension in relation to her. Her once eager to please lover does not accept this demand and complains “You can’t leave me like this!” Erika replies, “I’ve no desire to touch that now.” Once Erika seems to have maintained a higher ground, Walter begins his ongoing condemnations of her perversity. He says “It’s totally sick what you’re doing here. And it hurts!” Turning away from Erika and the camera, Walter masturbates until Erika redirects him. To Erika, he is stupidly “ruining” their desire. She wants to watch him and he does not understand why. Shaking his head, he counters “it’s you that’s stupid. You should know what you can and can’t do to a man. You bitch! The playing field has to be level.” Erika is once again a bitch for making a man face her desires, and, literally, her face instead of his own penis. At this unsurprising insult, Erika begins to leave, but Walter promises to obey her at the last minute. She unlocks the door, leaves it open, and lingers at the threshold before deciding to return to Walter and give him what he wants. Ensuring that he does not turn away to finish in private, Erika explains how future events will unfold: “You will receive my instructions. By letter. Or face to face. Or maybe over the phone.” This choice of mediums for the delivery of desire excites Erika; we are left waiting with Walter to learn the contents of the secret desires she might hold. Another effective instance of postponement, Erika’s promise of a letter exemplifies the fact that:

The desire that it precipitates transfixes the subject, albeit in a conflictual place, so that all the subject’s vision and revisions all its fantasies merely circumnavigate the absence that anchors the subject and impedes its progress.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Copjec, p. 38

Erika and Walter's first sexual encounter is filled with these continuous interruptions, hesitations, pauses, and stops. Once brought to an end, it is clear that something has changed.

Zippering his pants, Walter shakes his head and laughs in disbelief. Stretching his body again, he turns towards Erika and smiles triumphantly. In what might best be describes as a charade of masculinity, rivalling any feminine masquerade, Walter jogs in place and slaps her lightly in the face, before ever reading her letter. Physical domination is already built-in to his conquest. Walter's tone of romantic longing is replaced by a patronizing jab, "How about a little smile? Don't be so serious, pretty lady." Aligning himself with sexual knowledge and Erika with lack, Walter verbally undercuts Erika's claim to authority and reduces her aesthetic coldness to a cliché conception of an uptight "bitch face." He invalidates his own claim that the playing field should remain equal. Walter may be her student, but he reminds her of his physical superiority. Once Walter comes, he offers up visible proof of his strength and virility. Running out of the room, jumping into the air, and kicking his feet together, he circles the hall as she watches and tells her "Next time, we'll do much better. I promise. Practice will make you perfect." For Walter, Erika represents a challenge that can be surmounted in steps. He declares that he will work on her and refuses to acknowledge the future delivery of Erika's desires.

In the next scene, Erika uses the assumption that the inverse of feminine beauty is masculine violence to her advantage. In a meeting with Erika after her daughter's injury, Mrs. Schrober explains the real tragedy is that since her daughter was far from attractive, the piano was her only shot at success. Anna's mother mourns, "she'll be scarred for life. Just image, a pianist with a disfigured hand." Erika comforts Anna's mother by telling her "They'll find the *man* who did it...*He* deserves his hands chopping off." Covering over Erika's guilt, this assumption cements the link between violence and masculinity. In a telling choice of words, when Mrs. Schrober asks who will be taking her daughter's place, Erika answers "no one," before clarifying that she herself will fill in for the student. Pointing

out the exchangeability of women, Erika's answer also unwittingly identifies herself with the negative core of subjectivity grappled with throughout the film.

## LOVE LETTERS

After meeting Walter halfway during the bathroom encounter, Erika comes to their next piano lesson full of criticism of his capacity for interpretation. She points out that her lover lacks depth and ignores the dynamics of Schubert's piece. Surface appearance rears its head again when Erika remarks that Schubert was ugly, as opposed to Walter, whose handsomeness assures that "nothing will ever hurt him." Since in the previous scene, Walter accused Erika of hurting him, these words express Erika's doubt for her own capacity to make a mark on him. Feigning a coughing fit, she walks to her purse and hands the promised letter of instructions to Walter, who wants nothing to do with it. He is unable to connect Erika's criticism of his performance to her issues with him as the recipient and translator of her desires. Dead set on living out the formulaic fling, he wants the two of them to run away together for the weekend. Walter is the one who urges Erika to "let go" and give into her emotion, without being able to fathom that she is doing exactly that by giving him her letter. This exchange embodies the way in which the sexual relation fails in two ways, even as Walter locates the blame on Erika's side: "Why destroy what could bring us together? Why can't I look at you?" He continues to reject her version of love, without even knowing that it is a perversion:

Walter: I love you.

Erika: Don't be so cowardly.

Walter: Is what you've written just as cowardly?

Upon first viewing, we are still unsure of what Erika has written, along with Walter. With Erika's insistence that Walter read the letter first, their relationship reaches another impasse. But, Walter takes

his turn in picking up the slack and ensures that desire remains in motion. Erika has followed Walter through the streets of Vienna to the ice rink during the day; now Walter follows Erika home under the cover of darkness. In a long shot, we see him before Erika does. He runs up the stairs after her and tries to kiss her on the landing of her apartment. She lets him inside, but in order to have privacy from Erika's mother, he needs to move a dresser in front of the door, since Erika's room lacks a lock.

During the climatic unveiling of the letter—Haneke keeps returning to Erika's mother. She turns up the TV to muffle the sound as she presses her ear to Erika's door. She pours a cocktail. She jiggles the door handle and demands that this erected barrier be taken down at once, to no avail. Inside the room, Walter kisses Erika and moves her to the couch, but she instructs him to read her letter first. He repeats "I said I don't want to read any letters. I'm here, you're here. We're made of flesh and blood." Owing up to his superficiality, Walter appeals to the body and has no clue what language has to do with love. Continuing his "level playing field" sense of justice, Walter finally agrees to read Erika's words but warns, "I don't know how much longer I want to play this game." Erika is seated on the couch, Walter faces her in a chair with his legs crossed, a structure that closely resembles an analytic setting. Accordingly, it will end in a diagnosis. We watch Walter read the letter from an over the shoulder shot, so that we hear him reading Erika's words, but see Erika's face:

*On the contrary, if I beg, tighten my bonds, please.  
Adjust the belt by at least 2 or 3 holes.  
The tighter the better.  
Then, gag me with some stockings I will have ready.  
Stuff them in so hard that I'm incapable...of making any sound.  
Next, take off the blindfold, please,  
and sit down on my face and punch me in the stomach  
to force me to thrust my tongue in your behind.*

While reading, Walter laughs in disbelief and asks, "Is this supposed to be serious?"

"You're making fun of me, aren't you? You want a slap?" He has already slapped her in the face and told her to shut up and be quiet, but, put in black and white, these terms of love sound like a joke:

*For that is my dearest wish.  
Hands and feet tied behind my back  
and locked up next door to my mother  
but out of her reach behind my bedroom door, till the next morning.  
Don't worry about my mother, she's my problem.  
Take all the door keys with you from the apartment.  
Don't leave a single one here.*

Walter stops reading and asks:

What will all this open up for me?  
Maybe you'd open your cultured  
mouth and comment on this shit.

*If you catch me disobeying any of your orders,  
hit me, please, even with the back of your hand on my face.  
Ask me why I don't cry out to mother or why I don't fight back.  
Above all, say things like that, so that I realize just how powerless I am.*

To prove that she is serious, Erika shares with Walter the tools that she wants him to use, asking that he excuse *her* technical language. In order to get to her box of whips and gags, in a symbolic gesture, Erika must go through a stack of fashion magazines that conceals it. Erika begins to cry and kneels at his feet as she explains herself to him:

Are you angry with me? I hope not.  
It's not very well, written I know.  
I'm a pianist, not a poet.  
After all, love is built on banal things...Do I disgust you?  
That's not necessary.  
The urge to be beaten has been in me for years.  
I waited for you, you know?  
It's not a joke, all I wrote. You know that.  
From now on, you give the orders.  
From now on, you choose what I am to wear.  
What colour do you prefer?  
You never said. You're not talking to me?  
You're angry? Say something then.

Walter classifies and condemns her, answering, "You're sick. You need treatment." Erika pauses at the clothes in her wardrobe, before returning to Walter to offer, "If you want to hit me, hit me."

Instead of fulfilling her request, he refuses and spits in her face:

I don't want to soil my hands. No one would touch your sort, even with gloves on.  
I swear I loved you. You don't even know what it is. Right now, you repulse me. Fuck it.

To Walter, Erika's love letter is proof that she doesn't know what love is. Her question "Do I disgust you?" targets us as much as Walter. From the fashion magazines of popular culture, to the fashion choices in her closet, the objects in Erika's room force us to come to grips with the fact that Erika's masochism is inseparable from her consumer-inspired idea of femininity. This proximity makes perversion all the more impenetrable to Walter. When Erika's "cultured mouth" comments on the banal "shit" of her phantasy, these words merely offer a seal of approval for Walter to exert his power over her. Walter's utter disgust at accepting the terms of this relationship, which is written by Erika as if she had some say in the matter, sheds light on the way in which the rules of romance cover over sexual difference. As Žižek explains, the contract attempts to compensate for difference, but

[t]he bourgeois principle of contract between equal subjects can be applied equally to sexuality only in the form of the perverse—masochistic—contract in which, paradoxically, the very form of the balanced contract serves to establish a relationship of dominance<sup>58</sup>

Erika's combination of forced and chosen subjection is too much for Walter to handle. His conception of his beloved is shattered and he leaves her.

In his essay on *Coldness and Cruelty*, Deleuze points out the often repeated joke: When the masochist says "are you going to hit me", the proper sadist's response is "no."<sup>59</sup> Žižek identifies this misunderstanding of the complementarity between the two as another failed attempt to cover up the impossibility of the sexual relation. For Žižek, this "stupid joke" reveals the problem between the two: what part of the subject enjoys masochistic humiliation? Whereas the sadist enjoys the eradication of the symbolic integrity of the subject that is beaten and this enjoyment depends on the subject's horror

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<sup>58</sup> Žižek, *Courtly Love*, p. 109

<sup>59</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. "From the Sublime to the Ridiculous." *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso, 2009. pp. 188-189

at being beaten, the masochist's master takes up "the much more ambiguous position" of executing the masochist's contractual orders. Walter's refusal does not complement Erika's demand by torturing her further; he not only fails to interpret them properly, he fails to give himself over to interpretation at all.

This link between knowledge, interpretation and enjoyment is explored in Lacan's *Encore: Seminar XX*. In the section titled, "Une letter d'amour", or "A Love Letter," Lacan accounts for why the relationship between sexes fails. To review, the sexual relationship is not put in terms of the binary between biologically or socio-culturally identified male and female subjects. As Jacqueline Rose explains, for sexual difference, "anatomy figures, but only as figure--it is a sham."<sup>60</sup> Instead, the sexual relationship refers to the way in which subjects relate to the signifier. Sex is not produced by signification, "sex is produced by the internal limit, the failure of signification."<sup>61</sup> In this way, sexual difference is not symbolic, only the inscription of its failure is. Copjec differentiates between symbolic sex and real sexualisation thus:

Sex serves no other function than to limit reason, to remove the subject from the realm of possible experience or pure understanding. This is the meaning when all is said and done, of Lacan's notorious assertion that 'there is no sexual relation': sex, in opposing itself to sense, is also by definition, opposed to relation, to communication.<sup>62</sup>

Under the laws of sexual differentiation, subjects are radically unknowable. Sex is what accounts for the paradox of subjectivity: one is undeniably determined by the law but only insofar as she occupies and stands in as the place of its limit. In other words, far from transcending the world of signifiers, subjects are subjected to language (and the law) but irreducible to it. Erika's position with respect to desire is split between her identification with the male gaze, the way in which she finds herself signified and objectified as the other's objet *a*, and the way in which this illusory wholeness makes a part of her

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<sup>60</sup> FS, p. 44

<sup>61</sup> Copjec, Joan. "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason." *Supposing the Subject*. London: Verso, 1994. p.18

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

unknowable to herself. There is no common ground for understanding between the two, so "...a man is traumatized by not being able to assume his symbolic role and a woman by not possessing the object of the Other's desire."<sup>63</sup> When Erika looks in the mirror, she sees nothing of what the other sees. There is a hole in her image that bars her from herself because she searches for something in her more than herself. Operating at the level of spectatorship, this necessary limit prevents us from completely understanding how or why Erika enjoys. The relation between self and other—always mediated through language—fails.

Once Walter leaves, the film cuts to the television screen, cementing Erika's feminine position:

*...came to North America with the Spanish. Left to roam free, they became the famous Mustang. Today's cowboys' most loyal companion is the quarter horse. Very fast over short distances and with good stamina...*

This television snippet echoes the tongue-in-cheek passage that Erika's student read aloud to his friends, which metaphorically compared a woman to a mare in heat. Like the roaming mare or Schubert's wanderer, the perverted nature of Erika's masochism is associated wildness. However, the flipside of this freedom is her quick subjection to the other's desire—she easily becomes a loyal companion to the quintessential macho man, emblemized by the American cowboy.

Accordingly, Erika shows up at Walter's hockey practice. This time, instead of remaining a silent observer, she goes inside the building and asks for him. The façade of coldness now broken, Erika begs for Walter to forgive her. She lies on the ground, repeating the position of the pornographic images she watched earlier in the film, and beckons Walter to come on top of her. Calling her ridiculous—for finally giving into him after it's too late—he refuses. Erika now takes up the position of lover and Walter the beloved. She pleads "You want me, don't you?...I love you. I'll never write anything you don't want." As Erika kneels in front of him, Walter pushes her away and she falls to floor. Walter is worried about privacy, but Erika interprets this as protectiveness. Only when she

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<sup>63</sup> Salecl, Renata. "Love Anxieties." *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*. By Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink. Albany, NY: State U of New York, 2002. p .94

dramatically throws her arms around his neck, repeats I love you, and passionately kisses him does Walter reciprocate. While the couple speak to each other in “I love you’s”, their relationship “doesn’t stop not being written.”<sup>64</sup> Ensuring this relationship never stops failing, Walter is fixated on the notion of Erika as Woman. A shot of oral sex, structured so that the obscenity of the act is not visible, ends with Erika turning away from Walter and towards the camera, vomiting on her hands and knees. Face to face with an altogether different kind of intimate bodily act, we are forced to look at Erika’s vomit on the floor even as she repeats: “don’t look, don’t look.” Walter takes this visceral response as a personal insult. Taking her excrement as a sign of his own rottenness, he says “I must really disgust you. No woman ever puked it back.” Here Walter identifies Erika through negation. She is immediately compared with all women and excluded from the group.

In this scene, the sexual relationship is so bound up in language that it enacts through the body the impossibility of signification. Sexuation, the difference between the way subjects make sense to each other and find enjoyment through enjoying what is meant, accounts for the fact that meaning is always incomplete. When these two subjects come together, Erika maintains her idealism and purity, speaking of love, while Walter can only speak, repetitively and obsessively, of puke:

**Erika:**

I'm clean. I'm all clean. Like a baby. Inside as well as outside.  
For you and thanks to you, darling. Do you like me calling you darling?  
It's absolutely marvelous. You must be patient.  
I'll give you all the names, we'll play all the games you want.

**Walter**

You know you really stink?  
Sorry, you stink so much, no one will ever come close to you.  
You'd better leave town until you don't stink so bad.  
Rinse your mouth more often, not just when my cock makes you puke.

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<sup>64</sup> Fink, *Encore*, p. 144

In both cases, language fails. Erika provides Walter with the necessary names and games, but these emblems of power are not enough to make up for Walter's gnawing sense of self-inadequacy. His words, in turn, turn Erika into the powerless object that he thinks she wants to be. Erika's enjoyment, wholly subjected to language, written word for word, remains completely opaque. Knowledge is absent not only from Walter and the spectator but to Erika herself. Concluding his love letter with a question about the feminine subject and jouissance, Lacan insists that it is:

no different from the question whether the term she gets off on beyond all this 'playing' that constitutes her relationship to man—the term I call the Other, signifying it with A [autre is other in French] –whether this term knows anything...Does the Other know? <sup>65</sup>

The film leaves us with a resounding no. But, as Lacan insists, there is no reason for us to know why. *La Pianiste* takes us through the visual and linguistic plays that attempt to bring two together. Filled with masochistic performances and courtly games, a real hole persists. This persistence is what puts us to work—to draw limits to the places where limits cannot be drawn and to accept the opacity, the jouissance of the non-knowledge of the Other. Taken aback by Walter's final words, Erika opens the doors and practically falls onto the outdoor rink. Sliding her way across the blindingly white ice, Erika is unable to gain a solid footing. She is visually lost within time and space—her own fantasies and ideals are strange to her. Bearing witness to this failure, we mirror her suspension and craft meanings that slide along with the image of indeterminacy.

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<sup>65</sup> Fink, *Encore*, p. 89

## CONSUMATION WITHOUT CONCLUSION

*Can we rely on what masochistic perversion owes to male invention and conclude that female masochism is a fantasy of male desire?*

-Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, 731

I introduced *La Pianiste* by situating the film in the context of a dominant thread of transgressive French cinema, namely, cinema of sensation and new French extremity. This vast array of styles finds its unity in the aim to invoke in the spectator an experience of embodiment that predates the apparent unity of the desiring, speaking subject. Calling for a return to the body, both of the film and spectator, the cinema of sensation embraces a synesthetic approach to spectatorship that diffuses the detached subject, thereby freeing up one's relation to objects and otherness. Evoking the jarring, bodily effect images of violence and sexuality have on inspiring both empathy and revulsion in the spectator, this approach to filmmaking is transgressive insofar as it calls into question the distinction between self and other. I argue that this sensual indistinctness fails to account for the structural indeterminacy affirmed by *La Pianiste*. Worked out through Erika's masochism, the gulf between self and other is formulated as an effect of a deeper impasse.

Embracing the impossibility of distinguishing the body from language, separation, and distance, *La Pianiste's* aesthetics signal a radical departure from these movements that seek to get around the gap. While Haneke's film includes images centered on the materiality of the body, especially in the graphic violence of the closing scenes, indeterminacy is inextricable from structure and limitation. When the spectator arrives on-scene, located before the screen, mediation has already made its mark. The problem of approaching the otherness of the other does not lie in the fact that the screen

is mistaken as mirror, that the cinematic apparatus encourages us to misrecognize the body as image. Restoring the sensory dimensions of experience to our reception of the image does not bring us closer to the object. Through the indeterminacy of *La Pianiste*, we come up against the defiance and resistance of meaning—what Lacan calls signifiante—incribed as sexual difference. Thus, the materiality that at first glance seems to be accessible through the immediate body, is really the materiality of the signifier.

In *La Pianiste*, a simultaneous resistance to and persistence of meaning is accomplished precisely through mobilizing techniques akin to French extremity and sensation, but with completely different aims with respect to the relationship between ethics, gender, and mediation. Consisting of a rape and self-stabbing, the film's final scenes drive home the fact that "[t]he essence of the object is a failure."<sup>66</sup> Leaving the spectator without respite or closure, these images of violence are at once reminders of the enjoyment of the Other and the impossibility of the sexual relationship. In the end, the romance between Erika and Walter, it seems, was never meant to be and doomed from the start. On the surface, both characters get what they asked for; the spectator, in turn, gets to see and consume images of violence and sex, but no one is left satisfied.

Without undermining the indeterminacy that I have argued the *La Pianiste* succeeds in maintaining, I aim to bring to light the ways in which this indeterminacy radically alters our approach to spectatorship. As I turn to the final scenes of the film, Lacan's question about the status of female masochism looms largely in the background. Can we conclude that Erika's fantasy is a product of male desire, or misogynistic media culture, or the stifling Viennese conservatory atmosphere? I began my thesis aligning female masochism with masochistic spectatorship. Now, I want to return to the idea that what is masochistic and anxiety-producing about the film's portrayal of female masochism is the fact that conclusions about the fantasy of the other cannot be drawn. If Erika's desire is, in fact,

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<sup>66</sup> Fink, *Encore*, p. 58

propped up by the patriarchal law and the masochistic contract, we cannot “rely” on this grounding as our basis for knowing, understanding, or judging Erika’s perversion. Accumulating knowledge of the other in no way guarantees understanding the other. Attempting to wholly identify with the positive characteristics of Erika’s desire, tracing the origins of her urge to be beaten, we come up against a wall, or, more faithful to the film’s visual logic, a locked door. Our relation to viewing pleasure, wrapped up in the intimate performances of violence and sexuality, is a negative one. *La Pianiste* puts psychoanalytic and feminist film theory to the task of rethinking a mode of spectatorship marked by extimacy. The “real hole” or negative core, which, separating the jouissance expected from the jouissance received, binds Erika’s enjoyment to our own. If anything can be certain with respect to Erika’s fantasy by the film’s close, it is the pervasiveness of uncertainty.

Seeking his own satisfaction, Walter bangs on the door to Erika’s apartment in the middle of the night. After Erika unlocks the deadbolt, Walter accuses her of manipulating and depraving him. His line of reasoning holds Erika responsible for the newfound perverse element of his desire: “Shut up, you sad cow! Just then, I was under your window and I was jerking off. That's what you want, huh?” He maniacally points to his temple, indicating that Erika has gotten inside of him. Vaguely gesturing to his lower body, he struggles to fill in the blanks of what Erika wants: “You want to.... Is that it? You're a witch, a pervert! You want to give everyone your illness, don't you? Not me!” Possibly in order to placate Walter’s visibly escalating rage, Erika accepts this responsibility by apologizing, but Walter says “fuck your apologies,” which becomes a literal insult. Asserting his physical dominance in the domestic, feminine space, he slaps Erika in the face and pushes her mother. Erika’s mother draws attention to this power imbalance, threatening: “Just because we're women doesn't mean you'll get away with it.” But, in the end, Walter does “get away with it.” At these words, Walter continues to manhandle Erika’s mother, forcing her into the bedroom and locking the door.

Returning to Erika, he probes her for information, but these questions are emptied of their force. Instead of gaining knowledge about Erika's desire, both for himself and for the spectator, this direct confrontation aimed at bringing the truth of fantasy to light only renders it more opaque.

Reciting Erika's letter, Walter asks,

Not as you imagined? Is this really what you had imagined?  
*As for my mother, pay no attention to her. Yes? Am I quoting you exactly?*  
*Give me lots of slaps, darling. Hit me hard...*

Erika shakes her head, seemingly unprepared. In addition to doubting Erika's imagination, Walter's words also ask the audience about our own imagination—how did we interpret the letter? Is this what we imagined? Thus, Walter attacks Erika, both with physical and verbal violence. Punishing her body, he also repeats the letter back to her, taking the words from her mouth. Again, Walter's position as inquisitor, is, in some sense, the spectator's position. Up until now, we have been attempting to make sense of what we see, hoping for some sort of resolution for the relationship between Walter and Erika. Instead of being "met halfway" by the Other, we are left at a loss. One subject quotes another exactly, but despite this precision, something has obviously been lost in translation. Reminiscent of Erika's warning to her student at the beginning of the film, a wrong note is worse than bad interpretation. Walter is equipped with all of Erika's language; she is effectively speechless, and can only say, "no." The opacity of enjoyment not only wreaks havoc on the subject who tries to fulfill the desire of another, but also renders the other's enjoyment impenetrable to herself. Walter, then, holds Erika responsible not for what she knows but for what she does not know. In Seminar XX, Lacan, locates non-knowledge at the core of language. Getting what we say that we want puts us face to face with our own capacity to be mistaken about the nature of our desires:

"I ask you to refuse what I offer you because that's not it" ... "That's not it" is the very cry by which the jouissance obtained is distinguished from the jouissance expected. It is here that what can be said in language is specified.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Fink, *Encore*, p. 111

On one level, upon receiving a message from another, the subject misunderstands. On another, built into the message itself is the sender's ambivalence: a desire for the message not to be received. Speaking desire fails, but, this is Lacan's key point, we enjoy this failure nonetheless and obtain jouissance insofar as our desires are never understood or fulfilled, which sets the "encore" core of being into motion.

Performance meets misfire as Walter goes through the motions of the next blow. Erika flinches, recoiling from his hand, and Walter stops, turning his action into a mime. Frustrated, he authorizes his actions based on Erika's letter, thereby reserving his right to take her at her word: "*Hit me around the face and bit me hard,*" he repeats. Since the camera remains fixed on Walter at these words, there is no way to interpret Erika's reaction. All of Walter's courtly tactics and politeness return with a vengeance. When Walter hits Erika for real, her face is forced towards the camera, but there is nothing in her eyes to reassure us that this is in line with her script:

Walter: At your service, dear lady. Is that what you want?

Erika: Stop, please.

Walter: What then?

Erika: Not that. Stop, I beg you.

Mama: What are you doing?

Walter: Shut it or I kill her!

Framed as a service, the fulfillment of a most difficult and trying task, Walter knocks Erika to the floor and kicks her once she is down. Walter's death threat is the ultimate interpretation of the otherness of Erika's masochistic desires. As her mother yells "murderer" from the bedroom, Erika rises from the ground, her white nightgown starkly contrasting against the dark, depthless background.

She holds her bloody nose, and wipes it with her nightgown, exposing a breast. The only nude image of Erika in the film, Walter seizes the opportunity to take advantage of the irony:

Walter: Don't think you'll get me going by flashing your pathetic body... You know, I do realize that all this isn't very nice of me. But if you're honest, you'll admit you're partly responsible. I mean, it's true... Yes or no?

Erika: Yes.

Walter: Am I right?

Erika: Yes, Walter.

Walter: You can't get a guy going, then take refuge on the ice.

First, Walter mocks Erika's exposure of her body, as if the visible breast could only be an invitation for intercourse. Next, he concludes that she must be partly responsible for whatever he does to her. By this patriarchal logic, Erika's provocation of Walter's desire indicates that she is bound to fulfill it. He *cannot* be left unsatisfied and refuses Erika's logic of incompleteness and indeterminacy. Evoking the rhetoric of victim-blaming and body-shaming, what would be a clear-cut case of misogyny cannot be isolated from the presence of Erika's letter. Any attempt to judge this scene of violence runs up against the wall of Erika's admission of her desires. The dialogue reflects this tension, as Erika accepts responsibility, but only "in part." Once Walter leaves the room, Erika attempts to free her mother from the bedroom, only to be beaten again when he returns. Her rule in the letter, to be hit in the face, is now an exception: "Not my face! Not my hands!" she cries.

Walter: Why do you do that?

I calm down and you try to cross me.

Be a little cooperative, fuck it.

I'd be happy to learn to play.

But not if we only ever play by your rules.

You can't delve around inside people, then reject them.

Be nice to me, please. You can't let me go just like that.

The potential feminine masochistic dynamic of the scene is overshadowed by this masculine rage, rooted in the fact that Walter continues to identify himself as the justified victim. He can't but punish Erika for her betrayal—everything he does and will do is her fault. Switching from such explosive, explicit violence to a more nuanced form of intimidation, he crawls towards her and gently touches her neck. A brutal combination of violence and intimacy, this scene follows a similar structure to Erika and her mother's struggle, but reconciliation is nowhere in sight. He gets on top of Erika, kisses her face and lips, caresses her, strokes her hair, and penetrates her, while Erika appears to have vacated her body. The beating becomes a placeholder for foreplay, instead of an end in-itself, so that Walter

can force the moment to a conclusion, and his climax. Limp and lifeless, Erika tells him again to stop, but Walter asks that she “give a bit” and love him. In his final half-hearted attempt at interpretation he asks, “are you telling me I should go?”, but finishes before he gets up to leave. Requesting that this event remain secret, Walter speaks over a shot of Erika’s silent, corpse-like body:

I'd appreciate it if you tell no one.  
Anyhow, it's for your own good.  
You can't humiliate a man that way and...  
It's not possible.  
Will you be alright?  
Do you need anything? Okay?  
You know, love isn't everything.  
See you, then.

In Walter’s view, his actions are for Erika’s benefit. Emptying love of its content, since love is not everything, Erika has lost nothing in this exchange. To teach her a lesson about how men can and cannot be treated, he puts her in her place. A woman’s place, it seems, is a void. The object of fantasy appears in the form of a beaten, de-subjectivized body, which also takes the shape of the masochist’s fantasy position. We cannot forget that Erika specified that she wanted to be reminded of her powerlessness in the letter. In her analysis of the “rape” scene, Restuccia also delineates this ambivalence: it is neither the “frivolous enjoyment” that it could have been, had Walter consented to the masochistic contract from the start, nor an instance of “unadulterated male violence against an unconsenting woman.”<sup>68</sup> Claiming that the scene serves an important purpose for Erika, by “cutting her lose” from her mother, Restuccia concludes that “here the daughter uses fantasy to cancel the mother by staging her relation with the father, so she can access her femininity.”<sup>69</sup> Reading this scene as a traumatic liberation, Restuccia moves too quickly in ascribing purpose to the purposelessness of the scene. While Erika’s mother has indeed witnessed her daughter’s violent triangulation with a male figure, there is nothing to suggest this spectacle was successful in propelling Erika from an

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<sup>68</sup> Restuccia, p. 10

<sup>69</sup> Restuccia, pp. 10-11

identifiably perverse subject position towards a more normative, hysterical neurotic one. Erika's position as a female masochist blurs the borders between the two. After Walter leaves, Erika's first move is to weakly unlock the door, freeing her mother. Her mother kneels down, asking "Oh, my god child. What did the bastard do to you?" Visually, Erika is positioned in the middle of screen. She remains caught between the dark, empty space where the sexual relation failed and the white, unlocked door, where the sexual act, translated as rape, has succeeded.

In the next shot, we watch as Erika, whose black-eye is now faded but still visible, grabs a knife from the kitchen and places it in her purse. What once concealed Erika's allegedly frivolous feminine garment now contains a weapon. Her mother reminds her twice that her upcoming performance is meaningless because she is filling in for another. First, as if to calm her she says, "don't be so nervous, it's only to replace someone." Then, at the conservatory, Anna's mother says "You must be proud of your daughter" and Erika's mother corrects her, "Why? She's standing in for a pupil." As a stand-in, a replacement, Erika's body is instrumentalized, but the emphasis on interpretation in the beginning of the film is no longer a part of the conversation. Erika, however, pays no attention to these words, because she is scanning the room for Walter. She moves toward the edge of the room, where she can get a better view. Walter's aunt greets Erika, that is, until she is told by her husband to hurry up. Assuming a common ground, she shares her position with Erika: "Men! Always rushing you. You know how it is." But we are unsure what exactly Erika knows or learns about men at the end of the film. Walter's father, in turn, kisses Erika's hand like his son did at the beginning of their masochistic courtship. Erika clutches the purse to her body. The scene is charged with an air of suspense, since we do not know the intended victim, if any, of Erika's blade. Once Walter notices her, he smiles and says "My respects, Professor. I can't wait to hear you play!" in passing, before darting up the stairs among a group of people. With less than eight minutes left before her performance, which is just filler anyway, Erika is left gazing up at the empty staircase.

From there, the film cuts to Erika standing alone in the middle of the conservatory lobby. As tears well in her eyes and her face contorts into a deep grimace, she takes out the knife and stabs herself beneath the left clavicle. She holds her hand over the wound, and over her heart, the same place where her mother indicated “a real hole” had been made in the opening scene, in order to conceal the cut, and glances around to make sure she was not seen before exiting. The film cuts to the all-too-familiar static shot of the closed glass doors, returning to the logic of its beginning. Finally, it cuts to a wide shot of the conservatory façade as Erika leaves the building and walks along a gate that visually bars us from her. From a distance, she is not perceptibly wounded. As she walks off-screen and completely out of sight, the film cuts to credits.

*La Pianiste*'s final scene lacks the two vital pieces of knowledge that close Jelinek's novel. First, in terms of content, as mentioned in the introduction, Erika's destination is unknown. There is no allusion to “home” or indication of Erika's stasis or change, one way or the other. Second, in terms of form, the spectator's relationship to the film is altered by the absence of the uncaring bystanders who notice Erika's wound and do nothing to help her in the novel. The ethical repercussions of Haneke's film center on this failure of interpretation. As Copjec indicates, the stakes of failure are high:

When you encounter the gaze of the Other, you meet not a seeing eye, but a blind one. . . . [T]he subject instituted by the Lacanian gaze does not come into being as the realization of a possibility opened up by the law of the Other. It is rather an impossibility that is crucial to the constitution of the subject—the impossibility, precisely of any ultimate confirmation from the Other.<sup>70</sup>

*La Pianiste* warns us against casting off the role that mediation must play in our relation to the other. Both within the film and through the spectator's relationship to it, the impossibility of knowledge is understood only through consistent misunderstandings. Erika's desire, inscribed by her final act of

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<sup>70</sup> Copjec, p. 36

masochism, does nothing to seal her fate. As a consequence, we can take up our position as spectators by resisting the temptation to have or know it all when it comes to the other—and ourselves.

To offer conclusions about the broader repercussions of the film's indeterminacy, I turn to Eric Santner's work on the ethics of otherness in *The Psychotheology of Everyday Life*. Santner aims to reconcile two problems: how to simultaneously, and seemingly paradoxically, be genuinely open to another human being or culture while nonetheless taking responsibility for one's implication in difference and the violence these differences often produce. Following the logic of the problem posed by masochistic spectatorship, Santner calls for us to "think the difference between holding ourselves responsible for knowing other minds and accepting responsibility for acknowledging other minds in all their insistent and uncanny impenetrability."<sup>71</sup> Haneke's film draws this distinction between knowledge and acknowledgement. Rather than calling for a reconciliation, the ending of the film remains perpetually inconclusive. *La Pianiste* prompts the spectator to occupy Santner's meta-ethical position of an "answerability to my neighbor-with-an-unconscious."<sup>72</sup> Far from aiming towards the universal good, the meta-ethical self is meta-ethical precisely because it is "good for nothing."<sup>73</sup> Aligning the good-for-nothing dimension of female masochism and jouissance with a different kind of ethics, we are able to reach an understanding about the structural impossibility of understanding the whole of the other.

Lacking a guarantee for the wholeness of the other, instead of making us whole, the other's difference is nothing but an empty promise. The metonymic chain of interpretation—our desire to make sense of the world and ourselves in terms of the other—is set into motion by this object-cause of desire. Our subjectivity is paradoxical; the world we inhabit does not exist for us as a possible

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<sup>71</sup> Santner, Eric L. *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001. p. 23

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 9

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p 75

object. The world appears at once “beyond the space of meaning” and yet a “possible object of experience.”<sup>74</sup> We desire to occupy an impossible gaze at the outermost limits of our own being-in-the-world, a position embodied by Erika and the cinematic spectator. As Santner puts it, we must grapple with a life that has “been thrown by the enigma of its own legitimacy.”<sup>75</sup> As subjects, we are captured by the question of meaning, and so easily seduced by the possibility of an exception. For Santner, this exception functions as a limit that would serve as our constituting frame or self-legitimizing ground. This excessive exception destabilizes any translation. For Santner, enigmatic signifiers are traumatic because our subjectivity hangs in the balance: “they bear fateful questions pertaining to my place and value in the desire of the other.”<sup>76</sup> In short, our own legitimacy is bound up in the other. Thus, we can’t help but attempt to make sense of otherness.

To unpack this pull towards the incommensurability of the other, Santner offers the example of Egyptomania. Our enjoyment of the undecipherability of hieroglyphs lies in the fact that they present validity without meaning. Something is undoubtedly being communicated *to* us, but the content of this address is unknowable. According to speech act theory, a performative utterance is propositional content produced via enunciation. Whatever the content may be, it is secondary, always already enchained to another and propped up by legitimizing institutions. As a result, meaning always “bottoms out.”<sup>77</sup> This signifier persists and we are spellbound by the real hole that grounds us to the world.

We find ourselves stuck and stunted in our attempts to make meaning despite the inconsistency of enigmatic remainders. We can either attach to or defend against the other’s lack. When we attempt to place this enigmatic excess into a whole, driven by our desire for legitimation, all

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 14

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 30

<sup>76</sup> Santner, p. 35

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 58

we are left with is drive. Unable to transcend the singularity of failure, the difference that I have identified as sexual difference, we can instead live with otherness through an event of “revelation.” By holding ourselves responsible for encountering the other as stranger, we reach not a cultural pluralism, but a singular universal, not an embodied ethos, but a meta-ethical remnant that takes the other not as part of a whole, but as a particular that we can relate to by identifying ourselves in terms of this particularity too.<sup>78</sup> In psychoanalytic terms, while there remain infinite, positive external differences, we are all bound to a single, negative, internal difference.

In his epilogue, aptly titled, “What Remains,” Santner takes his discussion of the meta-ethical subject and revelation to the aesthetic sphere. The reception of an artwork does not bring to light what was already at play in the artwork. Instead, a “rupture in the life of the work—a ‘strong misreading’ we might say—performed by one who feels singled out, addressed by it,”<sup>79</sup> brings forth an ethical encounter. In *La Pianiste*, the collision between the cold, calculated persistence of Erika’s masochism and the raging violence it unhinges dares us to find a place for her enjoyment without covering over its resolute inscrutability. Through my encounter with the film, opened up by my own singular misreadings, I hope to have revealed the way in which we are bound to each other by radical difference. Despite countless interpretations and optimized visibility, a blind enjoyment, or, a real hole, remains.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., pp. 124, 128

<sup>79</sup> Santner, p. 133

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