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**“I am coming!”: Returning to the Womb in Elfriede Jelinek’s  
*Die Klavierspielerin* and Michael Haneke’s Film *La Pianiste***

Elfriede Jelinek’s *Die Klavierspielerin* (1983),<sup>1</sup> a novel about a piano teacher (Erika Kohut) at the Vienna conservatory in her late thirties who still lives with her mother in a small flat, deconstructs and anatomises myths of maternity very radically and successfully, perhaps better than any other German-language literary text. Erika’s short moments of escape from her possessive mother are made up of little secrets, such as going to peep shows and porn cinemas or hurting herself in the bathroom as well as playing sadistic mind games with her students.

But Erika’s sadism in relation to her students and her sexual masochism are in fact addressed to her mother, who is simultaneously her penetrator, her object of hate and desire, and her accomplice. In this article, I will explore this complex sexual drive between mother and daughter.

*Die Klavierspielerin* was published within the context of an ongoing debate over the abjection of women in pornography.<sup>2</sup> In this context, heterosexual penetration as such has often already been described as real or symbolic aggression and thus as sadism. Feminists opposed to pornography describe it as the representative instance of the sadism that is essential to and embodied in patriarchy’s dominant power.<sup>3</sup> I will argue, however, that this text demonstrates that homosexual penetration or even masturbation is also infiltrated by the same hostile forces and can be passed on from woman to woman, and thus that this text does not see lesbian sex as a resort or escape from the powerful heterosexual paradigm.

Numerous commentators have noted that Elfriede Jelinek’s characters in *Die Klavierspielerin* are paradigmatic representations of Freud’s theory of sexuality and

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<sup>1</sup> Elfriede Jelinek: *Die Klavierspielerin*. Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2001; Elfriede Jelinek: *The Piano Teacher*. Translated by Joachim Neugroschel. London: Serpent’s Tail, 2001. Page references to this edition will be given directly in the text. In the case of references to Michael Haneke’s film adaptation, the timestamp of the scene will also be provided in the text in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup> This debate first came to a head in Germany and Austria in 1978, when Alice Schwarzer, editor of the feminist magazine *Emma*, took the weekly magazine *Stern* to court for its cover photographs. Schwarzer later launched the PorNO campaign against pornography in the 1980s.

<sup>3</sup> See Andrea Dworkin: *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. New York: Putnam, 1979, esp. p. 63. This early stage of the debate on pornography does not distinguish clearly enough between patriarchal violence and the position of the sadist in sadomasochistic practices (which is not exclusively chosen by men at all). The latter can be controlled play between consensual partners, while Dworkin refers to a complete victimisation and subordination of women. Erika Kohut must, however, repress or be repressed.

womanhood,<sup>4</sup> and that through Erika and her mother, Jelinek exposes those theories in a figurative manner. The psychodynamics of their relationship present, therefore, no longer much of a challenge for literary analysis, as they are now almost self-explanatory. Nevertheless, interpretations that have focused on such dynamics provide valuable insight.<sup>5</sup> Of course, one could say that Jelinek's text explores the pathologies and deformations of its characters (and one could describe – again – how they are deformed and pathological). However, I will not see them as patients but instead as systematised and delusional constellations, which Jelinek presents to her readers much like the figures created by Kafka or Elias Canetti,<sup>6</sup> that is, as personalised representatives of a *déformation humaine*. As such, they do not require empathy but instead attentiveness much like an exhibit in a gallery or an experimental installation.<sup>7</sup>

The small flat in Vienna can therefore be seen as a laboratory, where Jelinek carries trivial myths of maternity (such as 'a child belongs to his mother' or 'a mother works her fingers to the bones for her child') to extremes. By taking them literally, Jelinek exposes their violent subtext. The mother's suffocating presence uncovers the emphasis placed on motherhood in Catholic surroundings, especially those of Germany and Austria.<sup>8</sup> Jelinek reveals how the most oppressive aspects of motherly love – for example trying to control a daughter's psychological development from age three – lead to the obsession of a daughter with her mother

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<sup>4</sup> See Marlies Janz: Elfriede Jelinek. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995; but also Erika Swales: Pathography as Metaphor. Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Klavierspielerin*. In: *The Modern Language Review* 95/2 (2000), p. 437-449.

<sup>5</sup> Sigrid Weigel was the first to observe how the tyranny of the mother and Erika's alienation from her own body, her voyeurism and sado-masochistic fantasies are related. See also Maria-Regina Kecht: In the Name of Obedience, Reason and Fear. Mother-Daughter Relations in W.A. Mitgutsch and E. Jelinek. In: *The German Quarterly* 62 (1989), p. 357-372; Allyson Fiddler: *Rewriting Reality. An Introduction to Elfriede Jelinek*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994; Heidi Schlipphacke: *The Daughter's Symptom. Female Masochism in Literary Works by G.E. Lessing, Sophie von La Roche, Ingeborg Bachmann and Elfriede Jelinek*. Diss. University of Washington, 1999; Sheila Dickson: *Her Mother's Daughter. Elfriede Jelinek's Die Klavierspielerin as a Study in Self Disgust*. In: *Germanistik in Ireland* 2 (2007), p. 5-27. For a general study on psychodynamics between mothers and daughters see: Nancy Chodorow: *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989. For insight into the pathology of the relationship of mothers and daughters in German language literature, see Irmgard Röbling und Wolfram Mauser (eds.): *Mutter und Mütterlichkeit. Wandel und Wirksamkeit einer Phantasie in der deutschen Literatur*. Festschrift für Verena Ehrlich-Häfel. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Here I am following Claudia Liebrand: *Traditionsbezüge. Canetti, Kafka und Elfriede Jelineks Roman Die Klavierspielerin*. In: *Gegenwartsliteratur* 5 (2006), p. 24-49.

<sup>7</sup> Liebrand: *Traditionsbezüge*, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> See Barbara Vinken: *Die deutsche Mutter. Der lange Schatten eines Mythos*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2001; Albrecht Koschorke: *Die heilige Familie und ihre Folgen*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2000.

that culminates in a symbolic but nevertheless lethal return to her mother’s womb. The flat can even be seen as symbolic of a womb: it is a narrow cave from which the mother is never absent. Everything that Erika eats, sees or listens to is controlled by her mother, who cooks and chooses the TV programme as well as the furniture. Moreover, the mother’s reactions every time Erika brings something or somebody into the flat without her agreement can be compared to the defences of a body’s immune system against an undesirable invader.<sup>9</sup>

One of those invaders is Erika’s student Walter Klemmer. When he starts to fancy her, it is most of all the relationship with her *mother* that becomes increasingly more sexualised, whereas Erika’s very few heterosexual encounters with Klemmer are anything but satisfactory. While at the beginning of the novel the spheres of home and sex are strictly separated (Erika and her mother live together like an elderly platonic couple), Walter Klemmer’s insertion into the relationship serves as a catalyst or a copula, that lets both of them react to each other in a very explosive way and reveals their incestuous desire. Michael Haneke’s film adaptation *La Pianiste* from 2001 enforces and illuminates this dimension of Jelinek’s text. When mother Kohut constantly calls her daughter Erika on her phone to tell her which clothes she has to wear or when she has to come home, we can read these acts as motherly acts of control; however the very same acts can also be interpreted as those of a jealous, pathologically dominant partner. Sadomasochistic constellations play a prominent role in all of Erika’s relationships. Erika first tries to play the dominant role in her relationship with Walter Klemmer. This relationship changes when she writes a submissive letter to offer herself to Walter as his slave.<sup>10</sup> With her mother, this sadomasochistic relationship is already in place and completely internalised. When the characters are introduced, the dynamics of control, rebellion, punishment, submission and finally touch (but only as a reward for complete submission) are introduced as well. Erika and her mother react to one another physically – but initially only by hurting each other and dressing the wounds they afflicted upon each other. The interference, in the form of Walter Klemmer, reveals that those dynamics and fights between mother and daughter also have a sexual dimension.

Sexuality in this text (but also in Haneke’s filmic adaptation) is only thinkable as an act of extreme aggression, as the occupation of the body by a hostile force. This hostile force does not need a direct male aggressor, for the aggression can be passed

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<sup>9</sup> Every time Erika leaves the cave, she experiences traumatic separation for her mother that has to be compensated for by phone contact and preparations for her return – the phone line serves as an extended umbilical cord. Even Erika’s money has to be saved only for joint projects (a house of their own, in opposition to the rented flat) and not for individual purposes.

<sup>10</sup> This switch is constructed in accordance with Freud’s article *Triebe und Triebchicksale* (1915). In this article, Freud describes how it is the ‘destiny’ of drives to be turned into their opposite (see p. 296). Freud’s primary examples are the inversion from sadism to masochism and from voyeurism to exhibitionism – both of which Jelinek’s protagonist Erika Kohut performs equally.

on from woman to woman. When we see or read the dark sex scene between mother and daughter, it is quite clear that it is infiltrated by the violent language and the images that are constantly present in this household via the noise of the TV (where women are threatened by men in crime series and ridiculed in talk shows),<sup>11</sup> found also as an echo in Erika's consumption of pornography. The mass culture that is consumed predominantly by Erika's mother and the pornography that Erika consumes abjects women. Even if individual men (such as the father and Walter Klemmer) are excluded from their bedroom, the background noise of their home is the sound of patriarchal violence – the sound of raped, ridiculed and humiliated women – that has, in reaction, turned into matriarchal violence that is an explosive composite of fixation and self hatred.

Jelinek does not provide us with an alternative language or a way out of the binary of gender dichotomies. Instead, she demonstrates the hell they produce, even as these dichotomies are taken to the extreme. This forms, in fact, a strong antithesis to Michel Foucault's concept of the dependency between subjectivation and subjection that motivated Judith Butler's study *The Psychic Life of Power*.<sup>12</sup>

According to both Foucault and Butler, the receipt of sexual gratification that is derived from repression would not be a bad thing as such: Butler challenges Foucault's concept of "subjectivation as subjection",<sup>13</sup> the relation between desire and forbiddance, which is seen by Foucault as necessarily dependent on one another. It is discipline, or the law in and of itself, that *constitutes* and *creates* the subject while at the same time repressing it. There is no resistance without power and there is no real power without resistance – each pole in this opposition keeps the other pole alive.

Butler even goes one step further than Foucault. Where he believes that prohibition and discipline will make the object of desire grow, she shows how repression is not only the condition of this desire, but that there is also a shift from the former object of desire on to the repressive power, the law itself. Discipline *itself* becomes sexualised.

Note that in the *History of Sexuality*, the repressive function of the law is undermined precisely through becoming itself the object of erotic investment and excitation. Disciplinary apparatus fails to repress sexuality precisely because the apparatus is itself eroticized, becoming the occasion for the *incitement of sexuality* and, therefore, undoing its own repressive aims.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Patriarchal violence in this text occurs as constant background noise, a backdrop for the togetherness of mother and daughter: "Von Draußen das gedämpfte Donnern des Fernsehers, in welchem eine männliche Person einer weiblichen droht." (Jelinek, *Klavierspielerin*, p. 223); "from beyond the door, the muffled thunder of the TV, in which a male is threatening a female" (Jelinek, *Piano Teacher*, p. 220).

<sup>12</sup> Judith Butler: *The Psychic Life of Power*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Butler: *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 83.

<sup>14</sup> Butler: *The Psychic Life of Power*, p.101.

The law has to be cited to be seen – and to be cited it has to be broken again and again. In this concept of the law that must be cited, Butler connects the Lacanian law of the father and Foucault’s investigations of the way in which juridical discourses generate and shape the subject. In doing so, Butler dismantles the former a-historic, principal validity of the law.<sup>15</sup> In its need for repetition and its need for transgression, the law can now be seen as unstable: it can be rephrased or possibly even renounced by misleading citations and undermined by ‘false’ motives.

For example, a rigorous Catholic may still have forbidden sexual wishes while and after confessing them – but far more important is that the confession itself becomes the only place where these desires can be articulated. For this reason, one starts yearning for the act of confession or even the act of punishment as much as one before yearned for forbidden sexual encounters. The lust that has formerly been attached to the object of desire is now attached to the apparatus that has been installed to suppress this very same desire. In this shift or transference lies a striking moment of freedom: a subject that would be able to abuse or to enjoy the very same law that tries to keep it away from everything enjoyable would be invulnerable. Each new sanction, each new form of repression would, in the end, mean a new pleasure to him or her.

The problem with Erika Kohut is that she is no such invulnerable subject and she appears to be almost unable to enjoy anything at all. Instead her character features the typical paralysation of a traumatised person.<sup>16</sup>

Trauma exists within the survivor as that which cannot be told. When survivors re-tell a traumatic event, they need to consult an external memory, which is constructed intellectually and which can never adequately transmit the experience of violence. In the moment trauma sets in, the object of traumatisation is

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<sup>15</sup> See Butler’s and Žižek’s debate on the priority of the law of the father in: Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (eds.): *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London and New York: Verso Press, 2000; see esp. p. 140. “The law” is, here again, a universal term for classifications meant as fixed codes of behaviour (like the heterosexual matrix), religious rituals, et cetera.

<sup>16</sup> I am referring here mainly to trauma theory, which Elisabeth Bronfen introduces in *The Knotted Subject* (and in doing so, she challenges Freud and Lacan by identifying another traumatic setting than the castration complex). Elisabeth Bronfen: *The Knotted Subject. Hysteria and its Discontents*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. She refers to the navel – or omphalos – as a knotted wound common to both men and women, which is a trace of the first traumatic experience of being born. The navel is at once “a worthless body part and a cipher for obscene fantasies of erotic or horrific nature involving penetration into the body interior or extracting something from this intimate, unknown site” (p. 7). Also very important is Slavoj Žižek’s thinking of trauma as a destabilising intrusion of the Real into a symbolic order. A rip appears in the wholeness of the symbolic order, which cannot be accounted for – and this rip (or wound, as Bronfen would name it) can be both: a particular traumatic event, but also a structural inevitability. See: Slavoj Žižek: *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London and New York: Verso Press, 1989, esp. p. 50-51.

simultaneously catapulted from body, consciousness and culture. While being cast out of time and body, the victim experiences the body as completely given over to the aggressor – in such powerless moments, the safe position from which an individual can articulate and assert itself is lost, and along with this position, the individual's story disappears as well.

The absence of *the* traumatic scene in this text and in Haneke's *La Pianiste*, therefore, reflects the dictum of trauma theory that the traumatic experience *as such* does not exist and the traumatic kernel is inaccessible. We see that Erika Kohut is a traumatised character in Jelinek's novel and in Haneke's film; because we see the manner in which she acts out her symptoms (such as self-mutilation or paralysis in threatening moments or repetition compulsions), we see the incestuous abusive dimension of her relationship with her mother, but we do not see or read about *the* traumatic event. However, we do know that an event has traumatic consequences if it is so intense and happens so suddenly and unexpectedly that the subject is unable to grasp it psychically at the moment of occurrence but can merely register it physically. Only belatedly does the traumatic impact of the event become palpable through somatic symptoms, anxiety dreams, or flashbacks, which cause the traumatised subject to relive the traumatic scene repeatedly. And Erika, for example, has flashbacks of being beaten as a child for pressing the wrong keys on her piano, or of being locked in her room. The narrative voice informs us that Erika shared her mother's sleeping room ever since her father's hospitalisation. But the main traumatic event, according to Bronfen, would be having been *born* into such a hostile world, with no caring authority available to make this event less frightening. I would describe Erika Kohut in accordance with Bronfen's study as a character that has been provided with an umbilical cord that was never nutrient-rich enough but also never really severed at 'birth' (if we allow ourselves to reconstruct her fictional biography with the material that the text offers us). Thus, she lacks both the security that comes with dependence and also the freedom that comes with separation from the caregiver, from becoming an independent being of one's own. This insecurity combined with the unacknowledged wish for freedom allows her to oscillate constantly from one extreme (complete control over everyone else) to the other (being completely given over to the other person), with the consequence of feeling immediate desire for that option diametrically opposed to her decision. Moreover, there might be a fragile intertextual reference to father-daughter incest. When the father is mentioned, the narrator states that he gradually became first blind, then mad, before dying (and had to be replaced by Erika in her mother's bedroom). The blindness in combination with the castration complex points to an incestuous event in our cultural repertoire – blindness as punishment for incest is similar to castration. In this context, Erika's and her mother's extreme awareness of control over the gaze as well as the narrator's obsession with eyes (eyes or even eye sockets are actually named more often in Jelinek's novel than any other part of the body) must be considered. We can therefore claim that, both with regard to Erika's symptoms and

with regard to the fragmented information given by the narrator about her family, Erika is a character in whose ‘past’ traumatic events have occurred.

Hence, the paradoxical time structure of traumatising implies that for the traumatised individual, the trauma happened in a past that has never been fully present. However, it also has never been completely absent. There are silenced elements of the experience that cannot be integrated into a meaningful, coherent context, and they become disturbances, resistances in each attempt to interpret the past event, which then leads to a repetition compulsion, to the inner necessity to reactivate those elements again and again.<sup>17</sup> Intellectualisations, or what Freud called ‘deferred action’ of the trauma, which tries to heal the rupture in the symbolic order, make it even less accessible:

[T]he logic of Freud’s notion of the ‘deferred action’ does not consist in the subsequent ‘gentrification’ of a traumatic encounter by means of its transformation into a normal component of our symbolic universe, but in almost the exact opposite of it – something which was at first perceived as a meaningless, neutral event changes retroactively, after the advent of a new symbolic network [...] into a trauma that cannot be integrated.<sup>18</sup>

Since the world existing before the traumatic event took place is no longer accessible due to the irreversible rupture that has occurred, the symbolic order that is built up again around a kernel must have the character of a simulacrum. According to Elisabeth Bronfen, this knot or traumatic kernel, which cannot be integrated into the symbolic order, starts producing blockages and images, which cover and hide the trauma while at the same time represent it.<sup>19</sup>

Many scholars state that, for example, the suffering that results from post-traumatic stress disorder following child abuse signifies the power imbalance between male perpetrators and female victims, and hence it exposes the violence implicated in the heterosexual matrix – this simple connection between the male perpetrator and the female victim is questioned by Jelinek’s *Klavierspielerin*. The text shows that the heterosexual matrix is by far more complex; patriarchal violence does not necessarily need a male aggressor or a female victim. Instead, there exists a blurred zone between patriarchal and matriarchal violence. It can, of course, be argued that mothers transmit patterns of inferiority and submission to their children

<sup>17</sup> See Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis: *Das Vokabular der Psychoanalyse*. Frankfurt a.M.: suhrkamp 1989, p. 314.

<sup>18</sup> Slavoj Žižek: *For They Do Not Know What They Do*. London: Verso 1992, p. 221-222.

<sup>19</sup> Bronfen refers to Freud, when she describes “memories as protective fictions/blockages (Schutzdichtungen), which the subject produces so as to cover over the remains of the traumatic knowledge [...], incessantly reworking a memory of distress into liveable stories. At the same time these personal narratives [...] are haunted by and indeed feed off the very traumatic material they also seek to block out”. Elisabeth Bronfen: *The Language of Hysteria. A Misappropriation of the Master Narratives*. In: *Women. A Cultural Review* 11/1,2 (2000), p. 8-18, here p. 9.

they themselves formerly internalised<sup>20</sup> – and were there no male characters in this text, I would perhaps agree. But there are male figures and they are anything but powerful. The text displays how the suppression of the heterosexual matrix *and* the inherent suppression of a mother-child dyad that has not been triangulated have a forceful impact on one another and finally collide.

Haneke's film presents us with a dialogue between Erika and her younger student that encapsulates precisely this interpretation of gender and violence. After Erika catches Walter Klemmer in a sex shop, he apologises during the next lesson. She responds by sadistically interrogating him: "You apologise for being a pig? Or for your friends being pigs? Or for women being pigs, who turn you into a pig?"<sup>21</sup> At first glance, this last question is reminiscent of a typical chauvinistic excuse in that it refers to women who offer easy access to sex – but it could also be a reference to a female caregiver (i.e. his mother), as the female caregiver is the person who first influences the son's developmental mindset. As if underscoring this interpretation, only seconds later Erika says to him: "I suppose a chat with your mother might shed light onto this darkness."<sup>22</sup> The signifier "mother" ("Mutter") is repeated even in the following scene, during which Walter Klemmer arrives for his first piano lesson. He says to Erika: "You are sitting in my head like a screw in a nut" – the German word for "nut" is "Mutter", and is identical to the word for "mother".<sup>23</sup> This might be a very common phallic image, and metaphors relating handcraft/tools with sex are indeed very common – but in the *Klavierspielerin* these images or metaphors are used in excess. Nevertheless, in this image, it must be noted that Erika is the screw, the phallic object, while Walter is the nut, the object that is penetrated by the screw. He also suggests, here, that he could replace the "mother" – a bold innuendo that ultimately has no bearing, for he soon shares the fate of all men trying to break into the dyad: castration and humiliation.

The perverse union of mother and daughter excluded the father and reduced him to an object of contempt and ridicule, but it also castrates Walter Klemmer:

The man is still stuffing himself into the woman's mouth. She still wants and he still can't. He remains small and loose instead of solid and compact. He has little chance of discharging into her mouth, which is located in her upper part, the better region. Erika chokes although she doesn't have much in her mouth. But it's enough for her. Her gorge rises and she struggles for air. She forcefully pulls

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<sup>20</sup> Kecht: *In the Name of Obedience*, p. 358.

<sup>21</sup> "Dass du ein Schwein bist, tut dir das leid? Oder dass deine Freunde Schweine sind? Oder dass Frauen Schweine sind, die dich dazu bringen ein Schwein zu sein?" (00:39:40-00:40:50; All translations from the film are my own.).

<sup>22</sup> "Ich schlage vor, du schickst mir einmal deine Mutter vorbei. Vielleicht kann sie Licht in dieses Dunkel bringen."

<sup>23</sup> "Sie sitzen in meinem Kopf wie die Schraube in einer Mutter" (00:42:00).

away and throws up into an old metal pail, which stands there, pleased to be available. (p. 243-245)<sup>24</sup>

Not only is Walter Klemmer impotent in Erika’s presence, but Erika is also put into the position of the penetrator. Moreover, the text describes Erika’s inability to avoid vomiting as if *she*, and not the male, would discharge (ejaculate) eruptively. Walter Klemmer’s failure to reach any genital final goal of achieving pleasure (or even the beginnings of pleasure) is more visible when he is confronted by the unleashing of Erika’s disgust in reaction. At the same time, this paragraph (and the corresponding scene in Haneke’s adaptation) can be read as a writing out or filming out of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. When Klemmer penetrates Erika’s mouth, he threatens the connection with her ‘nourishing’ mother that has never before been interrupted. Her disgust when she experiences this transgression is an eruption of the Real into her life. Kristeva explains the horror of the abject as a disappointed desire or as desire diverted from its first object; here, Erika’s uncontrollable reaction is an expression of disappointment about the fact that the object in her mouth is *not* her mother’s breast.<sup>25</sup>

One of many disturbing scenes in Michael Haneke’s film can be read in support of this interpretation, but also as an ironic objection to Freud’s castration complex: Erika sits on the edge of a bath, lifts up her skirt and points a mirror between her legs. She then takes a razor blade and starts to cut herself. A trickle of blood runs down the side of the bath. It is easy to read this scene as an act of self-mutilation; however, it also can be read as masturbation. Listening to the noises of her mother preparing their dinner, she breathes heavily – this reaction is completely understandable, when we consider that she is driven by the desire to go back into a preobjectal relationship, or rather, to be fed by her mother. Just when her mother shouts “Dinner’s ready!” she sighs one last time and yells “I’m coming!”

Again, this scene illustrates a theory of masochism that is taken literally: Gilles Deleuze diverges from Freud’s assumption that masochism is the flipside of sadism (what is deflected onto the self as death instinct in masochism is directed onto others in sadism).<sup>26</sup> He argues that masochism, instead, has its origins in the child’s alliance with the nurturing and powerful oral mother of the pregenital stage.

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<sup>24</sup> “Noch immer stopft der Mann sich der Frau in den Mund und hält sie dabei an Haaren und Ohren fest. Sie will immer noch und er kann immer noch nicht. Er bleibt klein und locker anstatt kompakt und fest zu werden. Der Schüler kreischt jetzt vor Wut, er knirscht mit den Zähnen, weil er heute sein Bestes nicht geben kann. Er wird sich heute bestimmt nicht in das Loch ihre Mundes, der an ihrem besseren Teil, dem Oberteil, gelegen ist, entladen können. Erika denkt nicht, sie würgt, obwohl sie kaum etwas im Mund hat. Aber für sie reicht es, es steigt in ihr hoch [...] es steigt in Erika auf. Mit Kraft reißt sie sich los und erbricht in einen alten Blechkübel.” (p. 249-251).

<sup>25</sup> Julia Kristeva: *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 4 and p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> Gilles Deleuze: *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty*. New York: Braziller, 1971, see p. 28-29.

Therefore, genital pleasures must be punished (by the expelled superego)<sup>27</sup> and orgasmic gratifications must be suspended or at least tempered by pain. Erika, who masturbates and in doing so mutilates her genitals while listening to her mother's preparations for 'feeding her', appears to be an extreme aggregation of Deleuze's argument. And although Erika occasionally leaves her mother to pursue her genital desires, she is far more loyal when it comes to food. Not even once, not in Jelinek's text and not in Haneke's film, does Erika eat anything that is not prepared by her mother. Indeed, she does not even shop for food. Every aspect of 'nurturing Erika' is exclusively in the hands of her mother. When we, therefore, see Erika vomiting after her unsatisfying attempt of having oral sex, we can interpret this expulsion as the result of her intolerance for being 'fed' by someone other than her mother.<sup>28</sup>

Unable to experience conventional sexuality in a first-hand manner, due to her paralysed traumatic state,<sup>29</sup> Erika is shown to be a collector of the experiences of others. During her hunter-gatherer journeys through Vienna's red light districts, she collects evidences of sex: here, the smell of a used handkerchief in the rubbish bin of a porn cinema, there, the noises of a copulating couple in a car. Erika's student Walter Klemmer appears at first glance to be another exhibit in her collection of second-hand sexual experiences. When she gives him orders to masturbate in front of her, her aim is not to engage, but to observe the expression on his face (whereas he is not even allowed to look at her).<sup>30</sup> In the case of pornography, Erika Kohut is an observer to utmost. When she goes to the Prater, it is not so much for the show on *screen* but rather to watch the show in the audience. She is not only obsessed with pornography in itself but even more with watching people as they watch it. According to Laura Mulvey's classic essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*,<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> The expelled superego is also found in another instance in Jelinek's text. There are not many interpretations of the narrating authority of the novel. Claudia Liebrand, for example, reads the disdainful voice as a "Sprachmaske" (a mask made of language) using a strategy perfected by Elias Canetti, who built a vocabulary of about 500 words to assess the specific language of a character's pathology (Liebrand: *Traditionsbezüge*, p. 29). This narrator however appears not to be attached to different persons, but instead follows Erika almost constantly. The narrative voice can be read as the disembodied voice of her mother, enriched by Erika's intelligence, a monstrous Erika-Mother superego, that cannot be silenced – unless by suicide. Only suicide will bring Erika back to a state of all-engulfing plenitude, first felt in the maternal body. Therefore, suicide will remove the trauma of being born.

<sup>28</sup> Even in the 'slave contract' she offers to Walter Klemmer, aspects of eating are not mentioned (although they are a common topic in this 'genre'). This monopoly is never transferred from her mother to him, not even in her fantasies.

<sup>29</sup> Kristeva's concept of the abject is allied with trauma theory, as something untold and untellable, that exists within the individual: "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be". Kristeva: *Powers of Horror*, p.10.

<sup>30</sup> Already here ("Erika orders Klemmer not to look at her [...]"; p.169) we can see that control over the gaze is most important to her.

<sup>31</sup> Laura Mulvey: *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, In: *Screen* 16/3 (1975), p. 6-18.

the traditional narrative film provides visual pleasure through scopophilia, and through identification with the on-screen male actor. She asserts that women in their traditional exhibitionist role were simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact; and as a result she states that in film, a woman is the ‘bearer’, not the maker, of meaning. Mulvey refers to Freud’s theory of voyeurism and sees the cinema as a room that perfectly satisfies the primordial wish for pleasurable looking. The screen also works like a frame or a mirror, which is reminiscent of the pre-subjective mode of the Lacanian ‘mirror stage’, and as such it is a loss and stimulus for the ego at the same time. One of the cinematic relations she describes is the gaze on a female character, especially in close-ups, that allows the male audience to adopt her as his own personal sex object (as an invisible observer)<sup>32</sup> – the female audience, then, had either to identify with this male perspective, or to endure re-traumatisation. Erika Kohut sabotages this act of pleasure when she urinates beside a car in an open air cinema in Vienna’s Prater district, and in doing so interrupting the copulating couple inside.<sup>33</sup> The narrating authority of Haneke’s film even goes one step further: it catches and sabotages us (the audience), too, in our intention of watching her performance from the safe distance of the dark cinema. Erika appears to enjoy spoiling the voyeuristic pleasure of others while at the same time watching their reaction to the disturbance. As someone who is constantly controlled and observed by her mother (she does not even have a key to her room), she is experienced in feeling impotent, but it is also her mother (who learned it from her mother) who passes the skills and tricks of observing others on to her. Erika is the youngest link in a chain of spies and voyeurs.<sup>34</sup> Well equipped with telescopes, it is one of her mother’s and her grandmother’s biggest pleasures to sit in the windowsill and to spy on the habits of others.<sup>35</sup>

Haneke’s probably most powerfully telling scene with respect to Erika’s obsession occurs when we see her going into a sex shop, entering one of the film booths. We only get a short glance at the film she is watching. Instead, what we see is that she puts on her gloves and takes one of the used handkerchiefs out of the

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<sup>32</sup> See also: “Voyeurismus ist Ausdruck von Machtlust, und er schafft tatsächlich Macht, indem er die beobachtete Person in einen Zustand der Unwissenheit, mithin der Unterlegenheit, hineinzwängt und sie so zu einem Opfer macht.” Ulrich Stadler: Schaulust und Voyeurismus. Ein Abgrenzungsversuch. Mit einer Skizze zur Geschichte des verpönten Blicks in Literatur und Kunst. In: Ulrich Stadler and Karl Wagner (eds.): Schaulust. Munich: Fink, 2005, p. 9-38, here p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> I am indebted to Carrie Smith-Prei for the idea that urination is not only an interruption and indication of disgust directed at the copulating couple inside, but also is an expression of her wish to join them and to add a ‘golden shower’ to their sexual repertoire.

<sup>34</sup> In the cultural tradition, her character refers to E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Des Vettters Eckfenster* or Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*.

<sup>35</sup> In the film, her mother’s scopophilia is represented by the omnipresence of the TV in her flat.

rubbish bin. She then sniffs at it and looks directly at the camera, that is, directly at the spectator (00:25:30).

In doing so, she inverts the standard cinematic relationship between spectator and actor, suggesting that we are the actors and she the spectator, and that we, the spectators, are pornographic material to her. We see the porn clip only when she settles into the seat. Thereafter, her gaze is trained on us. The spectators have now taken the place of the pornographic film, which should be scrolling in front of Erika's face.

A second reason for the confusing effect of this scene might be that the audience is actually familiar with seeing actors picking up handkerchiefs while wearing gloves. However, this action would be found in the context of a detective thriller, where the handkerchiefs would be put in an evidence bag. Therefore, whenever we see a figure acting in this manner, we know that (in the detective genre) a crime has taken place and that he or she does not want to contaminate any genetic traces leading to the perpetrator. We are confused by the contradiction between the extreme hygienic awareness (wearing gloves), and the simultaneous extreme lack of awareness or even disregard for hygiene that is communicated as Erika presses the handkerchief to her face. Erika manages to categorise and to experience sexuality with *all* of her senses – not only with her sense of touch.

Erika's mother is unaware of her little secret excursions, but, as we already have seen, these journeys are still related to her and are just a transformation of the peeping Erika learned at home. She is accustomed to being observed and has also learned how to observe others. In fact, even in those secret moments of inner rebellion, she acts as an extension of her mother's self. The symbiotic dyad is never superseded, not even when she does what her mother presumably would dislike. In those snatched moments of freedom, during which she attempts to leave her mother for a little while (either locked into the bathroom, the only room with a key, to mutilate herself, or watching pornography at the Prater), Erika leaves her only at the cost of *becoming* like her: she does what her mother would do or has done on other occasions.

Her sadomasochistic fantasies are perfect representations of the relationship with her mother. Body contact between her mother and herself is only possible when apologising and comforting one another after moments of pain inflicted by the other person. Jessica Benjamin sees the reason for 'master and slave' scenarios in adult sexual relationships to lie in failed differentiation, that is, failed Oedipal separation from the main caregiver. The subject, unable to recognise their own separate needs, finds the strict roles of sadomasochism very appealing, for they seem to provide the subject with a means of remaining in a state of primary identification.<sup>36</sup> I do not

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<sup>36</sup> See Jessica Benjamin: *Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination*. In: Ann Snitow, Christine Stanstell and Sharon Thompson (eds.): *Desire. The Politics of Sexuality*. London: Virago, 1984, p. 292-311, here p. 297. See also Sheila Dickson: *Her Mother's Daughter*, p.12.

fully agree with this thesis.<sup>37</sup> In light of Foucault and Butler as read above, I would argue that repression and sexuality always go hand in hand, but pleasure lies in the instability of the law and the possibilities available for transgressing that law, even if only for a short while. There might be a fundamental Lacanian lack or deficit in oneself that one hopes to find in the other person – but there is, however minimal, a possibility for the successful exchange of power (or, as Freud would call it, ‘Übertragung’). However, the masochist’s position in this setting, and definitely in Jelinek’s novel, is not the *passive* one. Erika does not wish to ‘accept’ the rules; instead, she wishes to create them – and further, she does not intend to adhere to those rules. Instead, she only wants them to be read out loud. Even as a ‘lover’ Erika is mainly worried about how to arrange her body.<sup>38</sup> This, of course, is completely misunderstood by Walter Klemmer, who comes to her flat to literally fulfil the wishes of her letter:

Walter Klemmer overcomes the woman violently, even though she says she’s changed her mind. Please don’t hit me. My ideal is shared feelings again. Erika revises her opinion too late. She expresses the opinion that she, as a woman, needs lots of warmth and affection. She holds her hand over her mouth, which is bleeding at one corner. (p. 266)<sup>39</sup>

Klemmer’s inability to understand her letter is due to gaps found in his knowledge. He probably just does not know that in Western cultural repertoire, and even more so in Vienna, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s home town, each sadomasochist relationship has to start with a letter.<sup>40</sup> The complete narcissism of Erika’s desire prevents her from having any real satisfying contact with another person. Walter Klemmer is Erika’s imaginary ‘other’ – occupying merely a position that has to be filled, or even acting as a surface for projection. However, all of her expressions of desire are, as we have already seen, actually addressed to her mother. Haneke’s filmic interpretation supports this argument: While Klemmer reads Erika’s letter,

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<sup>37</sup> Benjamin’s theory implicitly distinguishes between good, normal relationships and ‘master and slave’ scenarios (which are seen as somehow unhealthy).

<sup>38</sup> In this context, bondage ropes or handcuffs are not tools to prove surrender, but rather tools to help fix the image, to disable further action and confusion.

<sup>39</sup> “Walter Klemmer bemächtigt sich der Frau gewaltsam, die vorgibt, es sich jetzt anders überlegt zu haben. Bitte nicht hauen. Mein Ideal ist jetzt wieder die Gegenseitigkeit der Gefühle, ändert Erika alte Meinungen zu spät. Sie gibt die neue Meinung von sich, dass sie als Frau viel Wärme und Zuwendung brauche, und hält sich die Hand vor den Mund, der aus einer Ecke blutet.” (p. 271).

<sup>40</sup> There are parallels between Jelinek’s protagonist Erika Kohut and Sacher-Masoch’s protagonist Severin in *Venus im Pelz*: she goes to adult cinemas, while he goes to art galleries to examine Greek and Roman statues. Both Severin and Erika feel the greatest pleasure by *planning* and *creating* their highly elaborate fantasies – only to feel disappointed again and again by the crucial fact that human beings tend not to act ‘exactly’ as they wish.

Erika does not look at him, but instead at the closed door (on the other side of which her mother presses her ear). For her, Klemmer clearly fulfils the function of a copula in this ménage à trois.<sup>41</sup> In his dizzy realization of this abuse, he is initially unable to find a way out of the situation, finally leaving in a violent outburst. His reaction is quite the same as Wanda's in *Venus im Pelz*. Turned by Severin into an ideal, inhuman piece of art, unable to act outside of Severin's rules, she finally whips him so severely that it temporarily cures his urge for punishment and makes him leave her.

Confronted by her orders that outline how he *has to* dominate her, the double bind and the cruelty of her description causes him to freeze in disgust. While he wants to undress her body, she wants to wrap it up even more.<sup>42</sup> But not only do they each want something different – she wants him to want it for himself and then even to claim it from her. What Erika actually does in her letter is to pass the traumatising she received from her mother on to Walter Klemmer in a compulsive repetition. Her letter retroactively identifies the tools of her repression – and not only does she mention these in her letter, she also keeps representations of them (ropes, chains, canes, whips, needles) in a little box inside her closet. Her “coming out of the closet” (as a masochist), however, does not set her free at all and even destroys her last remaining inner ability to escape (into sexual fantasies). Sigmund Freud claims that, when traumatised, a patient refuses to partake in the talking cure and retrieves from the arsenal of the past the weapons of resistance, which can only be taken from him step by step. When we read Erika's letter as a similar first ambivalent try to leave her mother's sphere, it is not surprising that she takes her weapons of resistance with her, which are at the same time the tools of her repression. One could even say that she actually *does* articulate her wishes – but only in negation. Although this negative form of desire would make no difference in a professional talking cure, Walter Klemmer cannot understand: “Slap me hard over and over. Ignore my protests. Ignore my cries. Ignore my begging. As for Mother: Pay no attention to her”! (p. 225).<sup>43</sup> While she feels suddenly overwhelmed and endangered by his presence, she remains trapped and paralysed by her past. Her mother had a “freezing” impact on her psychic development, and now it is Erika

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<sup>41</sup> Kaja Silverman's study *Masochism and Subjectivity* draws on Lacan's argument that the human experience of pleasure is based on the repetition of painful experiences, when the subject experienced moments of separation and loss through which her or his subjectivity had been constituted in the first place. (She refers to Freud's 'Fort/Da' game.) In this context it is quite understandable why Erika, for the most part, lacks the ability to experience pleasure. Her mother simply has never been away for long enough to make her create transitional objects of pleasure. See: Kaja Silverman: *Masochism and Subjectivity*. In: *Framework* 12 (1980), p. 2-9.

<sup>42</sup> The problem of the ambivalence of her sexual wishes could also be described as one of the impossibility of being both a voyeur and an object of the same peeping act at the same time.

<sup>43</sup> “Viele saftige Ohrfeigen haue mir herunter. Auf ein Nein höre nicht. Einem Ruf folge nicht. Auf eine Bitte achte nicht. Was meine Mutter betrifft: sieh nicht hin!” (p. 229).

who blocks her student at a safe distance.<sup>44</sup> Her unarticulated wish that Walter Klemmer should voluntarily ignore her letter would re-install her mother in that very same position. The manner in which Walter Klemmer and the mother can easily replace one another can be seen when Erika approaches her mother sexually after Walter Klemmer has left her.

Erika is carried away by her own amorous overture. She throws herself upon Mother, showering her with kisses. She kisses Mother in a way in which she has not even thought of kissing her for years. She clutches Mother’s shoulders, and Mother angrily waves her fists, not striking anyone. Erika kisses Mother between her shoulders, but doesn’t always hit her target, for Mother keeps jerking her head toward the side that is not being kissed [...]. She is flesh of this flesh. A crumb of this maternal cake [...]. It’s like a lovers’ struggle and the goal isn’t orgasm but Mother per se [...]. Erika sucks and gnaws on this big body as if she wanted to crawl back in and hide inside it [...]. Erika sinks her teeth into mother. Mother begins to beat Erika away. The more Erika kisses, the more Mother trashes away at her [...]. Like a blind mole, the daughter reaches towards Mother’s body, but Mother shovels Erika’s hands away. For a brief moment Erika managed to see Mother’s sparse pubic hair, which closes off the fat belly. The sight was unusual [...]. During the struggle, the daughter deliberately shoved around in her mother’s nightgown, so she could finally see this pubic hair, which she has always known was there. Unfortunately the light was very poor. (p. 233-234)<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ever since Freud’s *Trauer und Melancholie* (1916) (*Mourning and Melancholia*), melancholy has been understood as a state of frozen mourning. Contemporary psychology labels melancholy as neurotic depression, which can cause post-traumatic stress disorders.

<sup>45</sup> “Erika läßt sich von ihrem eigenen Liebesversuch mitreißen. Sie wirft sich über die Mutter und deckt diese mit Küssen vollauf ein. Sie küßt die Mutter, wie sie es seit Jahren nicht mehr in Erwägung gezogen hat. Erika drückt ihren nassen Mund der Mutter vielfach ins Antlitz und hält die Mutter eisern mit den Armen fest, damit sie sich nicht dagegen wehren kann. Die Mutter wirft ihren Kopf wild herum, um den Küssen entkommen zu können [...]. Aus diesem Fleisch ist sie entstanden. Aus diesem mürben Mutterkuchen [...]. Es ist wie bei einem Liebeskampf, und nicht Orgasmus ist das Ziel sondern die Mutter an sich [...]. Erika beißt sich in der Mutter fest, die Mutter beginnt, schlagend abzuwehren. Je mehr Erika küsst, desto mehr drischt die Mutter auf sie ein [...]. Die Tochter tastet noch einmal wie ein blinder Maulwurf nach dem Hauptkörper ihrer Mutter, doch die Mutter schaufelt der Tochter Hände fort. Die Tochter hat für ganz kurze Zeit das bereits schütter werdende Schamhaar der Mutter betrachten können, das den fett gewordenen Mutterbauch unten verschloß. Das hat einen ungewohnten Anblick geboten [...]. Die Tochter hat absichtlich während des Kampfes im Nachthemd der Mutter herumgestiert, damit sie dieses Haar endlich erblicken kann, von dem sie die ganze Zeit wußte: es muß doch dasein! Die Beleuchtung war leider höchst mangelhaft.” (p. 237-239).

Her obsession with her mother's vagina in this scene represents already the preparation for her symbolic journey back into the womb at the end of the novel. At first, this goal is only hypothetical "as if she wanted to crawl back in" ("als wolle sie [...] noch einmal hineinkriechen"); then, unable to do so, she tries one last time to receive oral satisfaction from her mother. After being disappointed twice by Walter Klemmer,<sup>46</sup> she decides that it is not enough only to return into her mother's arms (as she did earlier every time she had been disappointed by a heterosexual encounter).<sup>47</sup> Her aim is instead to find a complete unification with her mother's body. In an almost free-form adaptation of Kleists *Penthesilea*, in that kisses and bites appear to be same for Erika, her attempt at transgressing the borders of her mother's body can only be called cannibalistic. When her effort to 'eat' her mother, or to completely absorb her, fails because of her mother's strong defences, there is only one way out of the dilemma: when her mother cannot become part of her body, she must negate the fact of her birth and to return to where she came from.

This time her decision is final and lethal: she withdraws by passing through a displaced but similar wound of her own, inflicted on herself by her mother's kitchen knife. After having met Klemmer again in the conservatory, she stabs herself and replaces the 'little deaths' of orgasms, which she cannot experience, by real death.

A gap yawns in Erika's shoulder; tender tissue has divided unresistingly. The steel has entered, and Erika exists. [...] Her back is warmed by the ever more powerful sun. Erika walks and walks. [...] Blood oozes out of her. [...] Erika knows the direction she has to take. She *heads home*, gradually quickening her step. (p. 280; emphasis added)<sup>48</sup>

It must be said that this scene, the moment when her mother's kitchen knife divides her flesh, is described meticulously in Jelinek's novel not only as self-mutilation that resembles sexual penetration or childbirth, but also as a form of homecoming. In Haneke's adaptation, the moment happens rather suddenly. His film discloses instead an intermedial reference, where killing functions as the only alternative to sex resulting from unresolved Oedipal conflicts: Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*.<sup>49</sup> Again, the encounter with Walter Klemmer at the conservatory determines Erika's

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<sup>46</sup> In their first sexual encounter, he was not potent enough; in their second he was too violent and raped her.

<sup>47</sup> See Kecht: In the Name of Obedience, p. 363.

<sup>48</sup> "An Erikas Schulter klafft ein Riß , widerstandlos hat sich zartes Gewebe geteilt. Der Stahl ist hineingefahren und Erika geht davon [...]. Erikas Rücken [...], wird gewärmt. [...] Erika geht und geht [...]. Blut sickert aus ihr heraus [...]. Erika weiß die Richtung, in die sie gehen muß. *Sie geht nach Hause*. Sie geht und geht und beschleunigt langsam ihren Schritt." (p. 285, emphasis added).

<sup>49</sup> The character of Norman Bates is to a large extent Erika's double. As someone who lost her father early and has been shut away from those contacts threatening the mother/child dyad, she is – as much as he – unable to leave the 'trap' she was 'born into'. Alfred Hitchcock: *Psycho* (Paramount Pictures, Hollywood 1960).

decision – but unlike Norman Bates, who kills everybody who threatens the pre-Oedipal dyad with his (dead) mother in the name of his mother, Erika kills herself to be lethally united with her mother. When she takes her mother’s knife to open her body one last time (after numerous self-mutilations in the bathroom), she finally feels warm, safe and entirely existent. Her self-stabbing is a regression into the foetal state and the sought-after relief from the tensions of genital needs.