

Sade's Piano

Control and Abjection in the Films
of Michael Haneke

Marta Figlerowicz



Flug
Schrift
A

FlugSchriften▲

SADE'S PIANO: CONTROL AND ABJECTION IN THE FILMS OF MICHAEL HANEKE

© 2020 Marta Figlerowicz



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License, which means that you are free to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format, and you may also remix, transform and build upon the material, as long as you clearly attribute the work to the authors (but not in a way that suggests the authors or *Flugschriften* endorses you and your work), you do not use this work for commercial gain in any form whatsoever, and that for any remixing and transformation, you distribute your rebuild under the same license.

First Published in 2020 by Flugschriften

Pittsburgh and New York

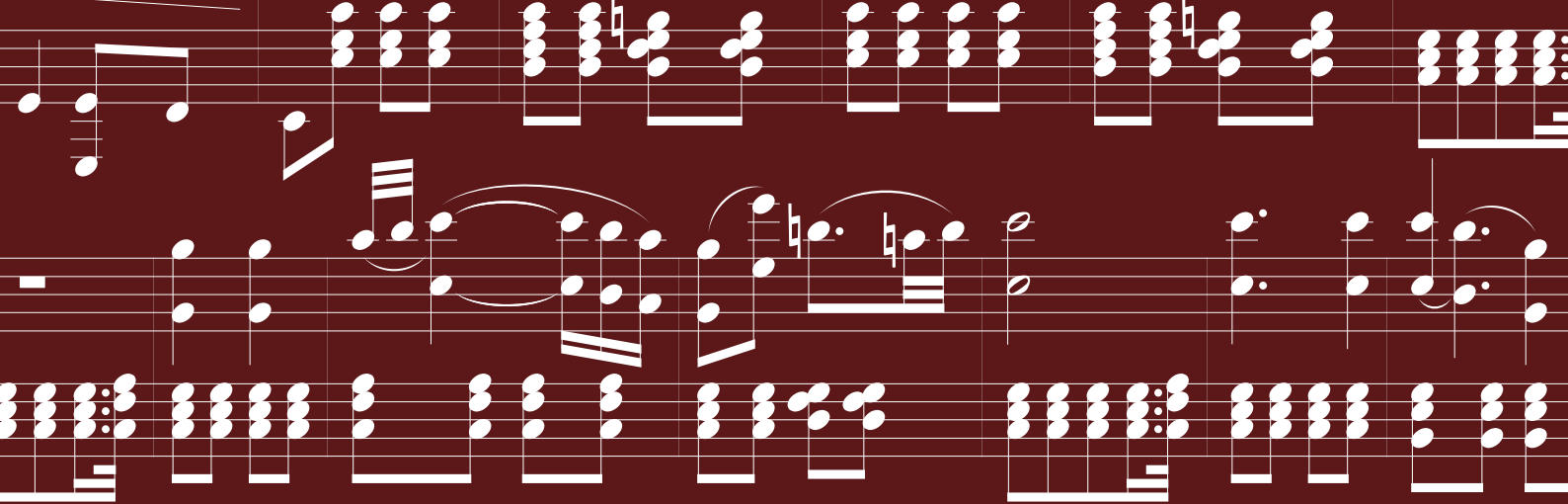
<https://flugschriften.com/>

Flugschriften rekindles the long tradition of 16th-century pamphlets –or ‘flying writings’–giving heterodox, experimental, challenging writings a pair of wings with which to find like-minded readers. *Flugschriften* publishes short, sharp shocks to the system–whether this be the political system, literary system, academic system, or human nervous system.

ISBN: 978-1-7335365-8-5

Front cover: “Stroke of a String” by Felipe Mancheno. Adapted from “Model D-274” Photo: © Copyright Steinway & Sons; “Gitanandasana” by Mr. Yoga.

Back cover: Adaptation from Schubert's “Piano Trio No. 2” music sheet.
Layout design: Felipe Mancheno.





When Erika Kohut (Isabelle Huppert) first meets Walter Klemmer (Benoit Magimel) in *The Piano Teacher* (2001), they talk about Theodor Adorno's reading of a piano sonata by Robert Schumann. The sonata, Erika says, expresses Schumann at his "crepuscule." "He is a hair's breadth from losing himself." Her words seem to presage what soon happens between her and Walter. Falling in love with him, the viewer is led to expect, will send the high-strung, repressed Erika over the edge. But as the film progresses, it reverses this expectation. Rather than break Erika's life apart — as the Schumann metaphor would suggest — her affair with Walter shows that her body has never been as open to channeling sensation and affect as she hoped.

In the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, and in its many afterlives, the body's capacity for pleasure daunts the imagination. So many positions and orifices are explored, so much control is had over another body's minutiae, so much pain is absorbed and inflicted, then re-inflicted and reabsorbed from a new angle. The Sadean body brims with potential pleasures that ordinary humans seem merely insufficiently inventive to awaken. And while Sade's sexual actors often underscore their sexual athleticism, the dimensions of the body which

Sade's writings glorify are ultimately affective. We are "concerned" here, Georges Bataille argues, "with a sovereign and indestructible element of mankind, yet one that evades conscious appraisal ... concerned, in short, with the heart of man, not the muscular organ, but the surge of feelings, the intimate reality that it symbolizes."¹

But what if, sometimes, this internal "surge of feelings" was not as majestic as we assume it to be; what if our bodies were outstripped by our sexual expectations? To entertain this thought in a Sadean context is deeply troubling. It suggests that some of our fantasies of pleasure have no objective correlatives; that in enacting them, much as it might tempt us, we would not actually awaken any new part of ourselves.

This tension between enacted and projected pleasures is inscribed into the marrow of Sade's writing. Bataille sees it, in particular, as stemming from an impossible balance between the sadist's need for control and other people's imperfect controllability — indeed, these other people's capacity to disempower the sadist in his own turn:

De Sade's language is that of a victim. He invented it in the Bastille when he wrote the *Cent Vingt Journées*. At that time he had with other men the relationship of a man cruelly punished with those who were inflicting the punishment. I said that violence had no tongue. But the man punished for a reason he believes unfair cannot resign himself to silence — silence would imply acceptance. ...

He spoke out, as violence itself never does.²

Had Sade not been imprisoned, Bataille argues, he would never have put his fantasies down on paper; he would have merely acted on them. The

sadist needs writing, in this schema, as a Derridean supplement; a space in which to exercise control over an outside world that does not always consistently yield to his wishes.

Sometimes, however, the asymptote that prevents one from achieving such sexual ideals in practice is created not by other people's bodies, but by one's own body — and not even by this body's imperfect agility, but by its less-than-sublime capacity for achieving and sustaining arousal. To raise this possibility within a Sadean context is vaguely comical; it makes sexual self-discovery seem not just like a discovery of our sexual powers, but also as a confrontation with our bodies' affective and sensory limits.

Michael Haneke's films engage in an extended aesthetic and philosophical consideration of such sadistic anticlimaxes. They represent their characters' capacity for physical responsiveness and pleasure as deeply limited, and inward fantasy as the revelation of these limits. The point of this reversal is, for Haneke, not simply to glorify the imagination, but to draw attention to our bodies' materiality in a somewhat unusual way. Contemporary theorists often speak of materiality — both organic and inorganic — to highlight the surprising agency and responsiveness of our bodies and even of the seemingly inanimate physical objects around us. Haneke's films deploy disappointed acts of sadism to make the opposite point: that there is an inertia both to our bodies and to our surrounding physical world, a huge part of our lived environments that we cannot quite sense, arouse, or innervate. This inertia comes through most starkly when contrasted against the extreme acts of self-discovery and pleasure about which Haneke's characters fantasize. Taking



his approach to sadism seriously might thus productively complement and counterweigh our current critical insistence on animacy, showing this insistence to be shadowed by fantasies about our bodies' hidden mysteries and depths not unlike those by which Sade was both riveted and frustrated.

Scholars including Jean Ma, Jean Wyatt, and Moira Weigel have persuasively shown that Haneke's films are sadistic in their representations of self-control and control over others.³ I argue that *The Piano Teacher* — and Haneke's other films, to which I turn more briefly — are preoccupied not simply with sadism, but with characters' *failures* to be as consistently and successfully sadistic as they aspire to be. The result of this loss of control is a horror that Julia Kristeva describes as the essence of encounters with the abject: "the shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery."⁴ Through these deflations, Haneke suggests that his characters' need for sadistic control stems from an aggrandized sense of the depth and complexity of their bodies. These bodies turn out to require far less than the complicated disciplinary systems into which his characters insert them, in order for their desires and urges to be managed from one moment to the next.

The definition of sadism which best brings out the reversals in Haneke's films comes from Gilles Deleuze's "Coldness and Cruelty."⁵ This definition hinges on a strict distinction between the sadist and the masochist. "As soon as we read Masoch," Deleuze argues, "we become aware that his universe has nothing to do with that of Sade. . . . Their problems, their concerns, and their intentions are entirely dissimilar."⁶ The difference on which Deleuze insists can, most basically, be put as follows: the masochist knows that his

pleasures are fantasies made possible by a contingent agreement with his dominatrix. The sadist, on the other hand, insists that the practices she follows are necessary and rational, and broadly generalizable. The masochist thus takes pleasure in persuading another person to join him in an intimate “contract” that establishes between them a relationship of dominance.⁷ With his partner, he enjoys the “aesthetic and dramatic suspense” these interactions produce. As Deleuze puts it, this is a case of “fantasy experienced for its own sake.”⁸ The sadist, by contrast, takes pleasure from identifying with an abstract, depersonalized “superior power” whose absolute control supposedly precedes and extends over both her own body and the body of any other person.⁹ She sees herself as inspired by “an internal necessity ... an exorbitance specific to reason.”¹⁰

In Deleuze’s terms, one could describe the reversals to which Haneke’s characters succumb as discoveries that what they fantasize about as sadism is in fact only masochism. These characters apprentice themselves to a system of total control that they expect will give them insight into their environments, as well as into their own minds and bodies. What they discover, anticlimactically, is that their bodies are never quite compatible with these supposedly necessary, complex systems. The forms of control they desire seem to be merely subjective fantasies about the intensity and sophistication of their inward urges in whose reality no one besides their bearer actually believes.

The lynchpin of Haneke’s engagements with disappointed fantasies of sadism is music. Haneke represents musical performances as crossroads

at which the violence of his characters' sadistic impulses and the idealized aspirations they associate with sadism are simultaneously visible. In virtually every one of Haneke's films, a character plays a classical piece. As the family depicted in *Funny Games* (2000) travels to their summer house, they challenge each other to name arias from minor Mozart and Handel operas. In *Time of the Wolf* (2003), the characters huddle in a post-apocalyptic shed to listen to a violin suite played on a dying radio. In *The White Ribbon* (2009), the narrator, a village schoolteacher, performs Bach on a small piano for the woman with whom he is falling in love. In *Amour* (2012) and *The Piano Teacher*, central characters play the piano for each other in salons, concert halls, and classrooms. In these two latter films, the central characters are also not just pianists, but piano *teachers*: this instrument, and their skills in engaging with it, are, from the start, presented as a major dimension of who they are to themselves and to others.

A desire for control and dominance undergirds these pianists' musical performances. Haneke's major characters, like Erika in *The Piano Teacher*, derive a sense of power from the virtuosic precision with which they play a complicated passage, exceeding the kinesthetic and auditory capacities of those around them. "Have you ever been cold," Erika asks her student Anna in *The Piano Teacher*, and replays a passage of Schubert in a way that brings out the shivers she claims to sense within Schubert's notation. "This is the bourgeoisie, bored with their empty lives," she shouts and makes Anna strike monotonous, rapidly dying D notes. Erika seems impossibly well attuned to her instrument, easily adjusting the tone of each note she strikes. Haneke's



camera frames Erika's hands as perfectly parallel to the piano; her bent head mirrors the piano's own curves. Then the camera hovers over the student's hands moving across the keyboard; it surveys the whole scene from above in a way that appears to embody Erika's control over the practice room.

Christopher Sharrett aptly describes music as both a form of temporary “sustenance” for Haneke's characters — a glimpse of redemption within their otherwise disappointing lives — and a practice that is “deeply implicated” in the rigid social structures his films represent.¹¹ Indeed, as Haneke's camera follows his characters from the classroom and the concert hall into their homes and bedrooms, it draws ties between these more publicly acceptable performances of intense control and ones that are more transgressive and private. At home, Erika and her mother tear each other's hair out, search each other's closets, and violate each other's sexual boundaries. Erika also mutilates herself in apparent

punishment for her emergent desires for her student Walter. During these physically violent acts of mutual dominance and self-domination, the characters' faces take on the look of intense concentration and purpose they have while playing the piano. They also often yell out to each other rules of behavior whose absoluteness mirrors Erika's harsh commands as a music teacher. As Haneke juxtaposes these domestic and public behaviors and blends them together, he makes it seem that such urges toward mastery govern Erika's entire life. Even her most conventionally beautiful and sensitive actions — such as a heartfelt interpretation of Schumann — seem to be thinly veiled, barely sublimated instances of a relentless controlling impulse. When her fingers hit the piano keys, a different kind of hitting is heavily implied beneath it.

These musical performances, and their conventional success, also highlight that Erika treats these forms of control not as temporary experiences of release, but as expressions of some more general insight into herself and her environments. In a way that quite precisely embodies Deleuze's definition of sadistic practices, Haneke's characters engage in forms of sadism not only because they enjoy them, but also because they strive to understand and to express themselves through them. One good example of these supposed insights is the song by Schubert that Erika and Anna continue to practice throughout *The Piano Teacher*. The full text of this song — quoted below — has long been read by critics as a window onto Erika's mental states, of whose appropriateness Erika seems perfectly aware:

The hounds are barking, their chains are rattling;
Men are asleep in their beds,
They dream of the things they do not have,
Find refreshment in good and bad things.

And tomorrow morning everything is vanished.
Yet still, they have enjoyed their share,
And hope that what remains to them,
Might still be found on their pillows.

Bark me away, you waking dogs!
Let me not find rest in the hours of slumber!
I am finished with all dreaming
Why should I linger among sleepers?¹²

Like the speaker of this poem, Erika is torn between an intense wish to fulfill her fantasies, and an equally intense fear of making them present in the real world. Like the sleepers with whom this speaker identifies, she is only able to taste her pleasures in solitary, brief, frequently interrupted intervals. By repeating this song insistently with a student — and eventually claiming ownership over it after she mutilates the student during a practice session — Erika moves toward an ever deeper identification with this piece of music. One could argue that, in her increasing openness to Walter, she also slowly begins to apply the pessimistic insights of this song to herself.

Erika's attempts to identify with such intense, local and generalized performances of control are undone by intense experiences of abjection. The contradiction between sadism and abjection is already remarked on

by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*. “The orgy in Sade,” Kristeva writes, “... had nothing abject about it.” Instead, “Sade’s scene integrates: it allows for no other, no unthinkable, nothing heterogeneous.”¹³ In sadism, human bodies are represented as essentially controllable — if not by one person, then by another. But abjection arises, according to Kristeva, as one discovers that one has miscalculated one’s capacity for control and awareness. The fragility of the boundaries lifted by abjection comes as an intense shock to their bearer because these boundaries are essential to her sense of self. Indeed, they are so intrinsic to this person’s self-understanding that their breaking creates a sense not only of shame, but of epistemic confusion. “There,” says Kristeva, “I am at the border of my condition as a living being.”¹⁴

Kristeva’s general observation aptly captures the role that tensions between sadism and abjection play in Haneke’s films. Erika’s experiences of abjection stem from a loss not simply of control, but of *controllability*. She discovers aspects of her body that she cannot explain or contain within her narratives of



self-management. The abjection she feels comes not from the discovery that she is sadistic, but from her realization that she fails to be sadistic in the ways she had hoped to be. Her grandiose air of control over herself and others shrinks to the level of what Deleuze would call masochistic fantasies. These fantasies start to seem like merely local, temporary defenses against an overwhelming sense of confusion about what kinds of laws her body actually obeys. The sadistic impulse transforms itself — or reveals itself to always already have been — an apparent desire for her body to be cared for, externally shielded from its own unpredictability.

The first, oblique indications Haneke gives of these eventual abject reversals again come from the musical performances he represents. At the start of most of his films, the main characters are depicted as musical virtuosos. In *Amour*, the main female character is applauded as a stunning teacher and critic. In *Funny Games*, characters who challenge each other to a musical guessing game succeed in naming rare arias. In *The White Ribbon*, the opening shots — which show a moving performance by the parish children's choir — represent the village teacher's skills as a conductor at their very best. In *The Piano Teacher*, Erika plays the piano in a crowded salon as audience members cheer and fall in love with her.

However, one does not get far into these films before this notion of Haneke's characters as unchallenged virtuosos begins to crumble. Sometimes it crumbles quite dramatically — as in *The White Ribbon*, when the village teacher delivers a shaky, stuttering performance of an easy Bach piece, or in *Amour*, where the elderly pianist's body is suddenly paralyzed. In *The*

Piano Teacher, the viewer's admiration for Erika is made to decrease in subtler ways. Haneke slowly lets one see that the conservatory in which she teaches is not particularly large or famous. He also gradually begins to remind his audience — in part through the rants of Erika's mother, and in part simply by showing how Erika passes her days — that her job as a piano teacher, rather than a professional concert pianist, is not one Erika herself has chosen, but one into which she was forced by an inability to pursue the latter career. After a cellist corrects Erika's trill, the viewer is finally made to suspect that the piano teacher's talent might only seem remarkable to the small number of local musicians and young students among whom she lives. These scenes start to suggest that there is something wishful about Erika's performances of intense, hyper-focused self-control. Perhaps, the film suggests, she does not actually have in her a spark of talent urgent and acute enough to warrant her aura of perfectly attuned, infinitely sensitive mastery. Something inflexible or imperfectly responsive about Erika's body remains unaffected by the systems of dominance and submission she tries to create. Invoking a conventional metaphoric connection between professional and sexual conquests, Haneke undermines the significance of Erika's achievements on both fronts — in a way that is all the more charged and vulnerable, given her overwhelming focus and intensity.

Indeed, the abject disenchantments Erika soon faces stem from her mind and body falling short of her grand expectations. As she begins a relationship with Walter, a variety of her body's apparently rigid, instinctive forms of unresponsiveness stand in her way. These bodily instincts cannot, it seems,

be reined back into the erotic narratives Erika tries to enact. They can be steered neither by her own effort of will nor by Walter, to whom she tries to subdue herself.

In all the sexual fantasies Erika writes and speaks about, there prevails the imagined notion of her body as a seat of great, if dormant, desires and intensities. But as the film progresses, Erika's body continues to resist the sexual encounters in which she involves herself, in ways that are also vulnerably, disarmingly passive. She freezes, tenses up, responds with shock and fear to Walter's increasingly insistent advances. When she gives Walter oral sex, she throws up. When Walter starts to enact her expressed wish of being beaten and roughly forced into intercourse, he sends Erika into panic. Wyatt describes Erika as finding "joy" both in the vomiting and in this subsequent withdrawal.¹⁵ But that interpretation sells short the insistence with which those scenes deflate the sexual acts about which Erika fantasized. She seems blindsided by her confusion about what she is supposed to do in response to them. When scenarios like the ones she used to dream about come true, she cannot accept their presence; nor does her body suggest to her a satisfying, alternative course of action. She wanted "something else, something else," she cries out to Walter, without being able to articulate what it is.

Even as these reversals do not make Erika's sexuality seem normative, they do make it seem masochistic, rather than sadistic, in Deleuze's terms. Instead of obliterating the distinction between fantasy and reality, her pleasures reveal themselves to depend on a carefully managed balance between imagination and enactment — a balance Erika apparently did not know her



body and mind would require. It turns out that the range of urges Erika can act on, rather than merely fantasize about, is very limited. This limitation takes shape as a physical rigidity and passivity that overwhelm Erika's body at the moment when she expected it to be most aroused.

Haneke represents these forms of rigidity and passivity in a way that makes Erika seem ever more like an object or a simple automaton. To use Kristeva's language, the "other" from which Erika tries to separate herself — and into which she now abjectly falls — is the world of machines and of inanimate objects; material presences that make sadism seem inappropriate, or not fully applicable to them, because of the unresponsive, disengaged inertia with which they respond to external agents and forces. By exaggerating her sudden resemblances to the inanimate objects around her, Haneke emphasizes that part of what she loses, in her falls from sadism, is the aura of self-knowing complexity that at first surrounds her. Perhaps Erika knows less about herself, and others, than she pretended — and perhaps there is little to be known about her to begin with.

These parallels between characters and the inanimately rigid material world around them pervade Haneke's film from the very beginning. As Walter and Erika court each other, Haneke's camera likens their growing sexual intimacy to the opening and closing of stalls, closets, and drawers. Their acquaintance begins when Erika and her mother shut the elevator door in Walter's face on their way to the recital held by Walter's aunt. To get to know Erika, Walter knocks on and opens doors that are supposed to remain locked — like the door to the practice room in which she gives her

lessons. To kiss her for the first time, he walks into the women's bathroom and then hoists himself up into Erika's stall. When she admits she wants him, Erika follows Walter out to the hockey rink and the men's locker room; to demonstrate her openness to him, she unexpectedly pulls the box where she keeps her never-before-used bondage gear out from under her bed.

These parallels between Erika's attempts to open up her closets and her inner self superficially seem to be mere outward metaphors for Erika's changing inward states. Yet as the film progresses, Haneke's shots literalize these apparent metaphors with increasing insistence. The camerawork highlights the physical resemblance between these surrounding walls, drawers, doors, and boxes, and the shape and movement of Erika's body. Whether resisting or accepting Walter, Erika seems made of sharp, stiff, rapidly drawn angles. In the bathroom scene, when he tries to kiss her, she bends away, stiffening her whole body from the waist upward. When she decides to kiss him back, she bends her upper chest forward at a similarly



artificial angle. When she lies down to let him touch her, she fades into the floor: her clothes are the same, nondescript tone of beige as the tiles beneath her. As Walter climbs onto her body to hold and kiss her, his movements echo the way he clambered over the bathroom stall.

These shots begin to suggest that the female body whose movements Haneke's camera tracks might not be much more responsive or flexible than the surrounding floors, tables, and chairs. To say this is not, of course, to suggest that the increasingly violent interactions between these characters lose any ethical valence. But these scenes do begin to decouple their potential ethical resonance from the apparent urgency or vigor of these characters' responses to each other, as well as from their bodies' capacity for pleasure or their minds' openness to new knowledge. *The Piano Teacher* reaches toward the possibility of perceiving human beings, and relating to them, within — rather than against — such diminished, unstable forms of responsiveness or engagement.

Haneke's characters' abject relations to surrounding matter have often been obliquely noted in criticism but not reflected upon overtly. In his article about Haneke's use of Schubert in *The Piano Teacher*, Ma approvingly quotes Adorno's description of Schubert's music as creating "a series of crystalline metaphors — metal, mineral, stalagmites, magma, light" — to forge within these songs a space apart from, and resistant to, what Adorno calls "kitsch" sentimentalism.¹⁶ Invoking Adorno helps Ma suggest that Erika holds in herself depths of repressed emotional intensity: an intensity that shines through her cold exterior in the way that light seems to radiate from a crystal.¹⁷ But such references to inanimate matter also apply to Haneke's films more literally. His characters are not mineral-like

merely in the sense of being temporarily repressed or alienated. Nor do they confront death simply as a challenge to their current state of being. Instead, Haneke's films create the impression that this quality of responsiveness is always only partially present in, and maybe even epiphenomenal to, their characters' bodies, which otherwise blend into the textures of the chairs, blankets, walls, and glass panes around them. Even the most intense forms of these characters' sadistic self-management seem fabricated: they are not vigorous and flexible enough to require the intense control and scrutiny that surrounds them.

The climax of *The Piano Teacher* dramatically attributes this automatism both to Haneke's characters and to the implied viewer. Erika is shocked to discover how little her body responds to, and how stiffly and partly it enacts what seemed like its urgent desires. This sense of shock is represented as a clash between the experiences of which Erika dreams and the ones in which she is able to participate.¹⁸ At first, in response to her affair with Walter, Erika's expressivity intensifies. She mutilates the hand of her student Anna when Walter makes her feel jealous of this younger woman; she also gives Walter a letter detailing how she wants him to treat her. She wants him to tie her up and beat her and be unmoved by her protests or her crying; she wants him to sit on her face and punch her in the stomach. "I am a pianist, not a writer," she says to Walter, apparently abashed at how dramatic her prose sounds when he reads it out loud to her, but committed to the wishes she expressed therein. The analogy suggests that these wishes have been as present in her piano performances as they now are in this piece of writing.

But when Walter finally begins to enact Erika's fantasies, he reduces Erika to a state of rigidity and shock. As in prior scenes, Haneke represents Erika's shock by making her body start to resemble the material objects around her. Held tight by Walter as he moves them around, Erika and her mother (anticlimactically also present for the sexual encounter) flail ineffectively. As Walter proceeds to have sex with Erika, she stiffens. Blood slowly flows from her nose; she does not even wipe it off. Instead, after Walter lets go of her, she sinks against the wall. The shot that captures this movement highlights the similarity between Erika's pallor and the sharp, white folds of the nightgown she pulls back over herself. Entirely covered by this nightgown, her body is reduced to a vague, sharp-edged geometric shape. Captured off-center and from a considerable distance — the camera moves to the back of the room — Erika seems as contingent and passive as the pieces of furniture that fill this space.

In the last scene of the film, Erika grimaces and tries to commit suicide but stops the knife a half-inch into her breast. Instead of a great jet of blood, only a little round stain appears on her blouse. Her prior small acts of sexual curiosity or self-mutilation — voyeurism, or cutting her own genitals — seemed like small steps toward some grand act of sexual violation or liberation. This final, anti-climactic wound reminds one that all of the other wounds she inflicted on herself and on others — her mother, or her student — were, similarly, at most skin-deep. The camera zooms out of the concert hall into the empty street outside it, from which Erika's shape cannot be seen except as a shadow upon the outer windowpanes and then against the front wall of the building. She is quite readily assimilated into them. Perhaps, in the end — the last shots chillingly



suggest — Erika shares with the objects around her not just some analogous outward shapes, but also this unmovable core of indifference and silence.

One way to read these final juxtapositions is by returning not only to Erika's obsession with the piano, but also to the piece by Schubert that she trains Anna to perform. The speaker of the song is "dreaming," and hoping finally to escape his dream. The seemingly intense urges Erika harbored were perhaps, in the end, never anything more than dreamlike. The much more impassive reality of her body is not able to foster anything but an intermittent and aesthetically idealized expression of these urges. She had wanted others to help her convey something hidden within her body; as it turned out, what she might have needed from these others was a means of escape from herself. Walter and implicitly also we, as her observers (mediated by Haneke's merciless camera), have all failed her in this regard. We looked at her too closely, took her too literally, approached the whole matter with too much realism.

The purposiveness of these final shots — and the prevalence of such forms of abjection throughout Haneke's films — is well brought out by a comparison of the ending of *The Piano Teacher* with the last shots of *Amour*, a film whose themes otherwise might seem very different. *Amour* follows an elderly couple, Georges (Jean-Louis Trintignant) and Anne (Emmanuelle Riva). Georges tries to take care of Anne as she becomes increasingly paralyzed; this effort slowly erodes his own bodily and mental resilience and exposes the urgency with which he wants his body and Anne's to be more pliant and functional. Georges slowly loses his patience. He fantasizes that

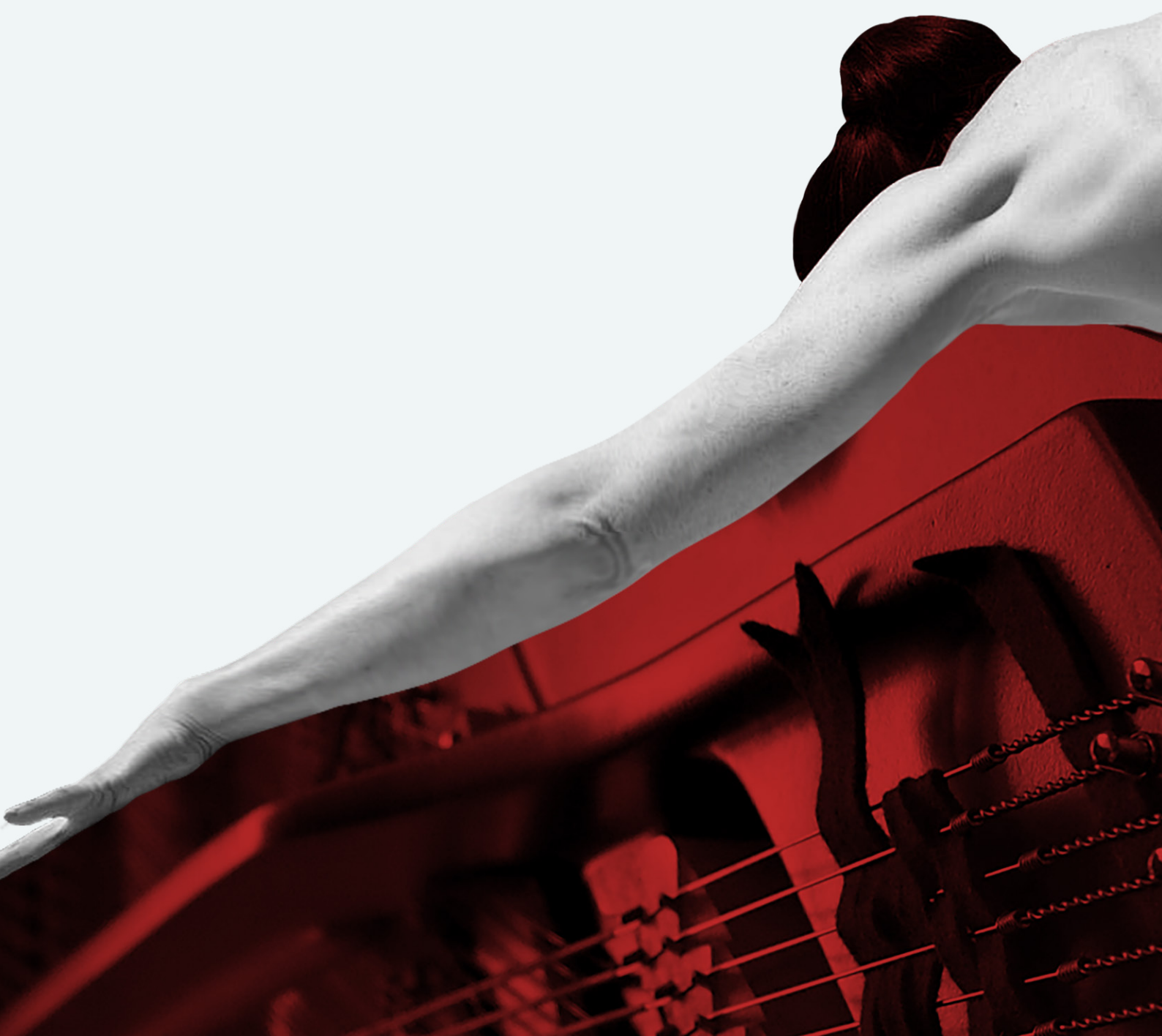
Anne is still as able-bodied and communicative as she was before her stroke. Eventually, this fantasy cannot be maintained except through extreme acts of violence that erase the reality first of her physicality, and then of his. Georges' attempts to care for his wife become violent and controlling, both of her body and of the entire environment they live in. He finally smothers Anne and starves himself to death.

The sense of shock that accompanies the ending of the film comes in great part out of how close both Georges' and Anne's exhausted bodies already were to expiration. To kill Anne, Georges presses her into the mattress until her whole self, except for a quivering leg, is folded into it. From the start, she is only visible as an apparent extension of this piece of furniture and of the blankets in which it is covered. Her attempts at resisting him are brief and ineffective; they seem less like acts of will than like remnants of her muscular reflexes. After the murder, it soon becomes apparent that Georges was barely strong enough to carry it out. As he walks around the apartment alone, succumbing to tiredness and starvation, his slow, uncertain steps resemble those of his wife at the beginning of the narrative. The rapidity of his decline foreshadows the ease with which, as Haneke shows in the last shots of the film, the entire apartment will be cleaned out after their deaths. Georges' body will be as easy to remove from it as the surrounding furniture.

As Garrett Stewart observes, Haneke bookends this film with shots of paintings, or of people who look like paintings. These opening and closing shots highlight his characters' encounters with their own materiality at its most rigid and immobile — in a way that, as in *The Piano Teacher*, turns what

might initially seem like metaphor into a mode of mimesis. In the first frames, oil paintings fill the screen. They reduce humans, nature, and objects alike, to blobs of color that easily fade into each other. Soon afterward, a similar flattening effect is achieved as the camera pans over an audience gathered for a concert. Seated in row after row, apparently hovering over each other, these people seem to defy both gravity and perspective. The dimly lit depth of the concert hall is reduced to a mosaic of the greys, greens, reds, pinks, and whites of audience members' clothes, seats, and faces. In the film's final scene, aptly described by Stewart, Anne and Georges' daughter Eva (also played by Isabelle Huppert) re-enters their apartment and is made to seem like a painting herself. "Before Haneke cuts again to black and thus once more subtracts from the apartment all of its ambient light," recounts Stewart, "Eva is last caught seated stock still in a framed recess staring left toward the windows, unseen now, through which she had previously and repeatedly looked away from her father's pain and anger: evoking the painterly mode again as a reduced and underlit Vermeer."¹⁹ Rather than be deprived of some essential boundaries and qualities, these characters fall back into a dimension of their material existence that had partly defined them all along. Haneke exposes, within his characters' fascination with sadism, a hypertrophied faith in the potency and importance of their sensory and affective responsiveness. This faith obscures an actually much simpler relationship to these processes and to the inanimate environments in which their bodies strive to distinguish themselves.

There is a sense in which Erika's or Georges' failures to be as sadistic as they would like could be read as instances of failed neo-liberal expectations, along the lines of Lauren Berlant's cruel optimism.²⁰ However, for Berlant, cruel optimism is a condition that can be resolved through increased self-awareness, in a sort of affective awakening. For Haneke, this quest for self-awareness and self-awakening forms part of the vicious cycle the characters have locked themselves in. Haneke's films question not only their characters' self-knowledge, but also the insistence with which they cling to bodily and mental self-control as their main center of identity. Rather than as a continuation of critical practice of the kind in which Berlant engages, Haneke's films could thus — at their most ambitious — be seen as seeking out alternatives to objectification on the one hand, and new materialism on the other, as means of relating our bodies to the things with which we surround ourselves. By revealing the shallowness of our bodies' aliveness, they remind us that the stillness and inert compliance of matter is not just something we desire to master, but also something that we fear and deny in ourselves; that objects should not only affect us, but also help us see that we are not merely made of, or understandable through, affects. Haneke's vitalism, if any, is thus ultimately a dark, negative vitalism.



Notes

- 1 Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1957), 184.
- 2 Bataille, 190.
- 3 Jean Ma, "Discordant Desires, Violent Refrains: *La Pianiste*," *Grey Room* 28 (2007): 6-29; Jean Wyatt, "Jouissance and Desire in Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher*," *American Imago* 62.4 (2005): 453-482; Moira Weigl, "Sadomodernism: Haneke in Furs," *n+1* 16 (Spring 2013), accessed on 07/24/2020 at <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-16/essays/sadomodernism/>
- 4 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, NY: Columbia UP, 1999), 2.
- 5 Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," *Masochism* (New York, NY: Zone Books: 1991), 9-138.
- 6 Deleuze, 13.
- 7 Deleuze, 77.
- 8 Deleuze, 34; 74.
- 9 Deleuze, 77.
- 10 Deleuze, 27.
- 11 Christopher Sharrett, "Michael Haneke and the Discontents of European Culture," *The Journal of Cinema and Media* 47.2 (2006): 8.
- 12 "Im Dorfe," by Wilhelm Müller, trans. Arthur Rishi, accessed on 5/15/15 at http://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=11803.
- 13 Kristeva, 21.
- 14 Kristeva, 3.
- 15 Wyatt, 469.

16 Ma, 23. Quoting Theodor Adorno, “Schubert” (1928), trans. Jonathan Dunsby and Beate Perrey, *19th-Century Music* 29.1 (2005): 10.

17 Ma, 23.

18 Wyatt describes Erika as trying, and failing, to leave a *jouissance*-based model of her sexuality in favor of one based in interpersonal desire. Her reading captures the sense of confusion with which Erika realizes that the feelings and urges she has been acting on are not what she had apparently taken them to be. Wyatt, 453–455.

19 Garrett Stewart, “Haneke's Endgame,” *Film Quarterly*, 67.1 (2013): 21.

20 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

About the Author

Marta Figlerowicz teaches literature, film, and critical theory at Yale University. She is the author of two books, *Flat Protagonists* (Oxford, 2016) and *Spaces of Feeling* (Cornell, 2017). In addition to her academic work, she writes and comments on culture, politics, and the arts for popular venues such as *The Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Cabinet*, *n+1*, *Jacobin*, *Boston Review*, *The Yale Review*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, and the Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

