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A comparative study between Elfriede Jelinek's book and Michale Haneke's film of "The piano teacher"

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ABSTRACT

In 1983, Elfriede Jelinek published the novel "The Piano Teacher" narrating the story of Erika, a Viennese piano teacher in her forties, who lives in the same apartment with her dominative mother. Erika, although residing in a strict environment engages frequently in watching porn movies, in voyeurism and in self injuring. When a love affair begins between Erika and a young student at the Conservatory, Erika asks him to develop with her a sadomasochistic affair. In 2001, Michael Haneke, chose to adapt Jelinek's novel into a movie. In this paper we will explore both the resemblances and the differences between the two versions in order to determine the means and the goal of the distinct artists.

Keywords: Elfriede Jelinek, Michael Haneke, Piano Teacher, comparative film studies

Introduction

Since their appearance in the history of mankind, the arts are often intertwined, with results which are often full of artistic "curves" to results devoid of aesthetics and beauty. In 2001 Michael Haneke's meeting with Elfriede Jelinek was set to rekindle our faith in cinematic versions of literary works.

One of the greatest directors of our entire generation, Michael Haneke, is fascinated, in this case, irreparably by the writing and imagination of the -since then- Nobel Prize winner, Elfriede Jelinek. And with his directing virtuosity, he delivered "The piano teacher" to the screen.

The story revolves around a middle-aged woman, a piano teacher, who lives her life in Vienna, a city portrayed as if deriving from the sets of our most perverted nightmares. The city seems to be constantly shed by gray light and filled with beige and grey identical buildings. In this horror movie scene, Erika lives with her mother. Erika kisses and hits her mother. The mother kisses and hits Erika. Erika carves her flesh and thinks she is carving love pleasures. Erika experiences love through pain. Young Walter Klemmer considers Erika as love. And we watch a triangle being born as if being created by love. A triangle that came out of the womb of a pain -by definition- fatal which will not avoid its' own destiny, this of a tragic end.

Plot

Erika, the protagonist of both works, the book and the film, is a piano teacher around her forties, who lives with her mother with whom she shares the same apartment but also the same bedroom. Her mother seems to control every aspect of Erika's life. However, when Erika escapes from her mother she watches porn films, indulges in acts of voyeurism and cuts herself. Although, she seems not to have had a variety of sexual experiences, she feels a sexual desire for a new young student of the Conservatory. When Walter Klemmer, the young student approaches Erika, she will deliver him a letter declaring her sadomasochistic erotic desires. The student will try to approach her showing affection, however Erika will deny any act of love, demanding abidance to her rules. Deckha (2007) in his analysis of the book states: "Toward the end of the narrative, the student more or less enacts the sexual encounter the professor had earlier described, including the violent entry into her apartment, the locking up of her mother with whom she lives, and the shoving, punching, and beating that she had detailed.

Throughout, he asks her menacingly if this is not, in fact, what she wanted, what she had instructed him to do. She has no response to this. Instead, she cries and repeatedly begs him to stop. He then begins to have sex with/rape her. He proceeds without hitting at first, but then receiving no indicators of desire from her, the student resumes the beatings while she begs him to stop. Once the sex/rape is complete, he leaves her battered and bloodied”.

Similarities Between The Book And The Film

In the movie, Haneke seems to have been completely struck by the arrows of the literary goddess Jelinek and follows, consequently, - almost - faithfully her narration. A narration that takes - in both cases - place in a city personifying the absence of beauty and the absolute cold terror. In this set, a heroine is created in a relationship of overwhelming hatred with her mother. A mother who loves the piano and imposes to her daughter music as the ultimate career choice. In both cases, the mother's eye is vigilant to guard against the "sins" of the daughter which give her pleasure and pain, at the same time, in an uninterrupted carousel of passion, anger and self-pity. In both versions of this work of art, the pianist cuts her vagina with a razor, sees porn and indulges in voyeurism. It is crucial to understand that in both artistic oeuvres, Erika seems completely detached from sexual pleasures concerning her body. As Bandhauer (2006) states “Erika Kohut's utter loneliness and her complete disengagement with her own body become apparent here”. Moreover, according to Lebeau (2007), “Erika looks, she looks hard—as if eyes can strike—but she does not feel and she does not touch, herself or anyone else”. However, even though she seems detached, as Petersen (2007) has noted, “cutting herself is then not just an act of self-mutilation, but a sexual act, similar to masturbation, in which Erika tries to create the sexual act for herself. Erika does not hate her body; she is instead an active participant, a voyeur of herself, watching with clinical detachment. In this manner Erika has been estranged from her sexuality and this estrangement from her sexual identity is manifested not only in the marking of her body, but also in her clandestine visits to peepshows and her trips to the park to spy on the sexual activities of couples” (Petersen, 2007). Furthermore, we observe that in both cases art does not correspond to the cliché of the free artistic spirit, but seems to be “a symptom” of high society which carries its own stereotypes that only lead to oppression. As Bandhauer (2006) states “Erika's artistic existence by no means reflects the bourgeois myth of the 'artist as genius' generated by the industry propagating the city of music, Vienna”.

At this point, we should note that in both works there seems to exist a cryptosexual relationship between Erika and her mother. There is a scene in which Erika hugs passionately her mother on her bed, “in one of the climactic scenes of the book, Erika attempts to make a form of love to her mother. The aim is cryptosexual; not orgasm” (Lebeau, 2007). The ultimate symbol of this scene seems, in both works to be that the house is a space completely dominated by the power of the mother, a power that, however, the daughter seeks to break free from. As far as the different powers dominating the house are concerned, Wyatt (2005) notes that “In this domestic interior, no third figure, no representative of the social/symbolic order, no law exists that would afford protection against jouissance. It is a space of maternal jouissance, where there are no limits on the mother’s love and violence, no obstacle to the maternal drive to make her offspring her own, to control her will, mind, and actions”. Erika – in both the book and the film – seems to be vain and care about her feminine appearance and attire. Erika is looking for new dresses and an attractive feminine self. Moreover, she seems to know that the juices of youth belong to the utopias of the past and that -perhaps- a feminine appearance is her last weapon in order to bring them back to surface. However, the new dresses Erika buys for the mother are a waste of money. Their common future seems bright, only, in a new, big house that will be acquired only if the daughter's smugness and vanity are reduced. We should, also, note the fact that in both versions of Erika, there is a close link between her seemingly organized and strict lifestyle and the strictness she implores on her lessons at the Conservatory. Bandhauer (2006) in his analysis of the book writes “Her students seem to be, also, a part of the rules to which she is restricted to abide. Erika is shown in the world she inhabits in her role as a piano player and teacher, in which she displays a strong sense of implicit discipline and authority, which she inflicts on her students”. In addition, Petersen (2007) adds “Erika actively seeks to deny her students any expression of what could very likely be a sincere and promising career calling. She denies them their growth and development as artists in the same way she was denied growth and development as (a child and) a woman”. When the young Walter Klemmer makes his sudden appearance in the life of the piano teacher, eroticism, in Jelinek’s work, will be expressed in words and phrases which, in the cinematic images of Haneke, will turn into glances and discreet touches that struggle to tear taboos, prejudices and clothes with their urge, in a continuous exchange of artistic passions and musical desires.

In both the works, we observe that there are moments focusing on the liaison between music and eroticism, linking the relationship of Erika and Walter to their common passion for music. At the Conservatory, correcting one of her students, “Erika feels the prickling between her legs, which is only felt by the one chosen by art and for art. Jelinek brings together the domains of sexuality and aesthetics in *Die Klavierspielerin*, the propping of one on the other in their shared commitment to the discipline and demands of another” (Lebeau, 2007). Meanwhile, Erika's jealousy of the young man which is expressed explicitly with the purity of Jelinek's language, in Haneke's hands, becomes obsessive looks and moments that equilibrate between the distance between the two lovers and the intensity of desire. In both versions, the green monster of jealousy will lead Erika to a rash injury of a young schoolgirl and "victim" of young Klemmer's charm. More precisely, Erika will observe Klemmer discussing with the girl in a manner which, in her eyes, conceals eroticism and will carelessly decide to hide a knife in her coat's pocket. When the girl will leave the observatory and will try wearing her coat, her hand will be wounded and she won't be able to play the piano for a long time. Considering at this point the texture of Walter and Erika's feelings between each other, we observe that Walter's feelings consist of sexual but tender impulses, whereas Erika's love demands will turn tenderness into disgust and imposition of absolute power. An imposition of power that will mean with its conquest the tragic end of a fatal love that was never born. As far as Klemmer's feelings are concerned, “Klemmer wants a conventional romantic heterosexual liaison with Erika with its attendant albeit culturally unacknowledged moments of aggression and violence” (Deckha, 2007). Whereas, Erika “wants a relationship, too, but one marked by S/M as well as, and perhaps as the route to, love” (Deckha, 2007). When their two distinct desires collide and stumble upon each other, Erika “cannot have a normal relationship with Klemmer. because she is unable to feel joy, orgasm, and love like normal people – or we can even say like Klemmer – do. As a consequence, she self-harms” (Yucel, 2018).

Walter Klemmer will visit Erika's house in a desperate try to abide to her erotic rules. Erika will accept the visit in a desperate try to abide to Klemmer's selfless love. When Erika will attempt to transform her need for pain into a confirmed need for love, Klemmer will engage to acts of violence towards the piano teacher. “Erika thrives in a world of pure fantasy. The attractive student strikes her as a perfect candidate for her fantasies of being dominated, but the reality of it is not what she had expected” (Vicari, 2006). Erika will be finally transformed to an object of sexual detonation and her status of an ex-symbol of affectionate love will be lost once and forever, giving place to this of love as a feeling of deep perversion. As Bandhauer (2006) notes, “It is precisely this complex set of desires for total control and subjugation that in the end make her the victim of Klemmer, whose more direct and unheralded sadism she triggers”. We should also note that in both the oeuvres Erika seems to be considering pain as one of the basic parts of a heterosexual relationship. Finally, Lebeau (2007) considers that “Certainly, the idea of the man smashing into the woman, driving nails into the woman, as something like the truth of the heterosexual couple, emerges through the book. So far as the heterosexual woman is concerned, her wish to explore her powerlessness in relation to a man, comes too close to the real world, too close to the real thing”.

Differences Between The Book And The Film

Even though Michael Haneke seems to be following Jelinek's narrative, in the cinematic version of the book, he has perfectly preserved his artistic identity. Consequently, if Jelinek's writing describes a story of incapacity for love, with red and passionate confessions, Haneke chooses to focus on the gray of despair and unrecognized desires. Haneke, as in his own personal directorial style, creates a narration which he seems to follow more as an external observer than a human being truly engaged in this passionate love affair. “Haneke's film has an icy, hyper-realist aesthetic, largely dispensing with anything that might stimulate pleasure within the audience, such as camera movement, expressive colour palate, and point-of-view shots” (<https://brightlightsfilm.com/la-pianiste-michael-hanekes-aesthetic-of-disavowal/>). A narrative that, with its expressive means, the coldness of a heart, the intensity of a passion and the terror of a city, creates an Erika without references to her past and to the moments of her adolescence, as described in the book. In the book, we find an Erica of the here and now, of a now that knows only stretched ropes and acrobatics between love and hate. Whereas Jelinek, even though using the third person when recounting her story, seems to dispose of a true passionate urge towards both her heroes and the narration of their passions. While detailed reports of the past of Erika as a teenager which eventually lead to her character and life as an adult, are absent from the film and Haneke's narrative. More precisely, in the literary work, there are quite a few descriptions of Erika's adolescence and past years. In these narrations she is portrayed as a young girl thirsting for experiences, which is, however, grounded by her mother's requirements and needs.

As Petersen (2007) states “Erika reflects on her youth and remembers the visit of her cousin, a then young, good-looking medical student. Erika, governed by her (mother’s) strenuous timetable, was unable to interact with her cousin and the friends he had brought along until she had practiced her music. Her cousin is boisterous, charming, energetic and flirtatious”. In the literary work, there are also references to Erika’s father. In Jelinek’s version of “The Piano Teacher”, Erika’s father is simultaneously absent and present as a shadow. Erika demonstrates several masochistic actions which comprise the father as a symbol. For instance, Erika’s most brutal self-mutilation case is cutting her vagina with her father’s razor blade.” (Yucel, 2018). Keeping this in mind, one could argue that in the book, Erika is treated as the man of the house because of the absence of the father. She is the only one working and gaining money, roles which are traditionally meant to be attributed to men. “From the very beginning of her story, Jelinek shows a relationship between mother and daughter that has all the makings of a traditional marriage in which Erika is depicted as the man of the house, the breadwinner, who succeeds the missing husband in her mother’s life. Erika tells us that they are “together until death do us apart.” (Christian, 2009). “Erika is an enforcer of patriarchal law not merely through her pastimes but through her role as music instructor and pedagogue. She is an embodiment of the phallicized woman” whose pathology, created by this civilization, ensures her role in policing the codes of patriarchy” (Sharret, 2006). Moreover, one could say that Erika by injuring her vagina externalizes her disappointment and feelings of inferiority for not having a penis. She has not been loved by her father and she, therefore, links this absence to the absence of a penis. It is consequently, evident that she suffers of a confusion as far as her gender is concerned.

A sense of masculinity is also observed at the scene in which Erika attacks her mother in bed. “We can see an implication of this masculinity and confusion in the text where Erika kisses her mother forcefully: She doesn’t know how to be a woman in a sense because her mother does not allow her to learn. She cannot wear even the dresses she buys because of her mother. She has lived under oppression all her life” (Yucel, 2018). In the book, the father –even as a ghost- does not exist. Consequently, Erika’s sexual confusion is basically attributed to strict social demands and her relationship with her mother. Moreover, the absence of adequate sexual relationships from Erika’s life is highlighted more intensely in the book than in the film. In addition, it becomes clear that pursuing the career of a piano teacher was her mother’s dream and was imposed on her as her only future choice. “Erika’s hands belong to Mother, who knows what hands are for, who lays claims to Erika’s hands as if they are her own, and turns them over to the discipline of the piano.” (Lebeau, 2007). In Jelinek’s work, the piano teacher’s personality and sexual identity seems as an adult resulting from past experiences, frustrations and repressions. Whereas, Haneke’s narrative portrays Erika as an adult without past and focuses only on her present, reducing her that way to a feminist symbol of social oppression, but deducting parts of her uncontested individuality. Jelinek seems to desire to recount a personal story of passion and repression, while Haneke seems to be creating a feminist film full of universal symbols. In the film Erika represents the woman which is universally residing in an unwelcoming world which expects modesty as part of a universal feminine identity and, in the same context, demands the pursue of a “proper” career. In Haneke, woman is treated as the victim of prejudices and stereotypes from which she can never evade. However, even though Jelinek’s narrative seems more passionate and personal, it was the intention of both artists to make an oeuvre focusing on the social oppression of woman. “Responding to discussion generated by Michael Haneke’s acclaimed, but controversial, filming of *Die Klavierspielerin* Jelinek situates her fiction as a pure and critical gaze at the woman, as well as an exploration of what she describes as the “unlived sexuality expressed in voyeurism,” as a woman’s appropriation of the “male right to watch.” “The woman is always the one who is watched,” Jelinek contends, “never the one who watches” (Lebeau, 2007). “But if *Die Klavierspielerin* responds to a question that has haunted feminist theories of looking—“What about the female spectator?”—it does so by binding the domains of sexuality and vision to the woman’s desire for her own destruction” (Lebeau, 2007).

To sum up, we observe that Jelinek, with her work, tries to talk about feminist discourses by creating a solid character and a melodramatic family story with past and present. Whereas, Haneke with his movie seems to believe that the best way to address women’s social oppression is by creating a universal symbol and a character, Erika, appropriate for multiple identifications. Moreover, Haneke, once more, deals with the results of fascism and its remains in Austrian and European societies, while Jelinek is not preoccupied with the subject.

Conclusion

Haneke in his work, at first glance, follows Jelinek's narration faithfully and does not introduce new or different elements in the cinematic version of the book. He recounts the writer's story without needing to differentiate essentially from it. However, he is an artist with a distinct artistic identity. Consequently, he delivers to the story his own personality and -eventually- problematics. When, looking at the two works, with an in-depth manner we observe that the artistic means of them seem different. Jelinek uses a language full of passion and urge, creating an individual story of a woman with a character build entirely and solidly by frequent references to her past. On the contrary, Haneke, does not engage in references to Erika's past, but only to her present, creating that way a woman which is offered for identification of the modern woman. Although both artists are concerned about a society oppressing woman and, always, awaiting for her to submit to precise rules and stereotypes, they choose different means to approach their problematic.

Without doubt, in the case of the "Piano Teacher" we are in front of one of the most fruitful artistic intersections of the 21st century. A literary masterpiece was "touched" by the virtuosity of Michael Haneke and gave its place to a preeminent film. And, even though, the artistic methods of the two authors seem to be different we are in the rare case of observing two geniuses beginning from the same starting point and resulting in two distinct but wonderful works of art.

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