Sex, Violence and Schubert. Michael Haneke’s *La Pianiste* and Elfriede Jelinek’s *Die Klavierspielerin*

The article examines Michael Haneke’s film adaptation of Elfriede Jelinek’s novel, *Die Klavierspielerin*. It considers the treatment of characters and plot, as well as the different narrative strategies used in the film and the novel. Particularly important in the film are piano music and the use of some shocking visual images. Both elements have greater impact in the film than does the description of similar content in the novel, producing some difference of emphasis. It is argued that the film provides a valid representation of the main ideas and ethical content of the novel, and that it does so using means that are especially successful in the film medium.

Elfriede Jelinek’s novel *Die Klavierspielerin* (‘The Piano Player’), published in 1983, provides the basis for Michael Haneke’s French-language film, *La Pianiste* (2001), entitled in its dubbed German version *Die Klavierspielerin*. The novel brought Jelinek acclaim and notoriety, with its attack on taboos: on the one hand, it presented a sexual content with a strongly sadomasochistic current, whilst on the other it attacked the values of the Viennese bourgeoisie and specifically its sacrosanct musical culture, which the author presents as competitive and beset by social hierarchies. The novel juxtaposed the high culture of musical activities with lower pursuits, particularly the protagonist’s penchant for pornography and sadomasochism. The piano teacher of the title, Erika Kohut, earns her living as a teacher at the Vienna conservatoire; in her private life, by contrast, she has a rigidly controlled and sometimes abusive relationship with her mother, seeks an outlet in furtive vicarious sexual activity in the form of voyeurism and finally attempts a sadomasochistic relationship with a pupil, which ends, predictably, in frustration and disaster. The novel rapidly became a bestseller and was well known by repute, if not in detail, by the time it reached the cinema. This essay examines the relationship between the novel and the film, focussing particularly on the means by which the cinematographic approach addresses the content and message of the novel. It also assesses the effects of alterations to the emphasis of Jelinek’s text.

* All translations are my own.


2 To avoid confusion, in this article I shall refer to the film by its transparent French title, *La Pianiste*. 
The novel appears at first sight to offer excellent opportunities for translation into the filmic medium, especially because events in the text are presented largely from the perspective of an external observer and are lent a highly visual quality. However, the narrative also comprises a wide-ranging and highly intertextualised commentary on Erika’s behaviour that is often ironic, together with trenchant social criticism. Indirect speech and thoughts of the characters frequently merge with the perspective of the narrator. In this way, the narrative position constantly shifts, something which cannot easily be conveyed in the cinema, for, as Georg Seesslen has expressed it: “In a single one of Jelinek’s sentences, one would have to change the position of the camera at least three times”.

The film, by contrast, presents events entirely directly, without any intervening narrator: there are, for example, notably no voiceovers or explanatory flashbacks. As a result, information about Erika Kohut’s childhood and development in a household dominated by her mother and grandmother, for instance, is absent from the film. The protagonist, Erika, is seen entirely in the here and now and her exploits are presented unmediated with all the dramatic and confrontational means available to the cinema. Furthermore, in the novel the third person narrator imputes comments and thoughts to the characters, but there is no dialogue: the film’s dialogue is closely based on the reported speech and thoughts in the novel. The removal of the narrative commentary, which lends cohesion and places events in a social or psychological context, means that the filmic diegesis is concentrated on the dynamic action of the plot, especially the sexual and violent episodes in which Erika appears. In La Pianiste, these episodes make up most of the action; they demand that we, the spectators, construct explanations and psychological coherence from the events portrayed. Indeed, as in Haneke’s other films, notably Funny Games (1997), shock tactics are an important feature.

As in the novel, the action of the film revolves around the central protagonist, Erika. Yet, in the novel, Erika’s behaviour is contextualised and is presented as being at least in part symptomatic of the society in which she lives, specifically Viennese bourgeois society. In the film, by contrast, the socially subversive messages have a less specific social target. Despite having been filmed on location in Vienna, with, for instance, German road signs occasionally visible in the background, the film presents a more general context. Nevertheless, Elfriede Jelinek herself did not feel that the less specific settings altered the message of the novel, and, interviewed about the film, she stated: “My writing is strongly directed

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