

On the Relation Between the Writer and the Speaker, or A Commentary on *The Piano Teacher*

(2001)

Some Remarks on Approaching Film Commentary

I have little precedent for writing commentary on film. I am disinterested in thorough discussions of cinematic technique—camera angles, framings, notes on an actor’s performance, etc.—perhaps this is unfair to the medium if I do not speak about these aspects at all. Nonetheless I will inappropriately bypass this kind of technical talk (with little guilt). I am in favor of avoiding digressions into these technical aspects to allow for a kind of full viewing of the (dys)synchronicity of the movie’s elements and a skimming out of theoretical ornaments from observing this (dys)synchronicity; it as though one is concentrating or pooling together the lubricating fluid of the film which allows its movement. I intend to figure *The Piano Teacher* as a moving, captured text; a small diorama with figures wound up and set in motion, wound up and set in motion again—seven times I have watched these figures perform their act. I have come away from these viewings with a few thematic packages or theses on what I take the film to consist of. In the largest sense, I believe the film to be an argument which presents the immediate vocal aspect—the speaker—as the vanquisher, subduer, and real scandalizer of the writer and the written; in other words it presents the voice as an assaulting dominant force against the emergent passions of the written, against the fulfillment of the writer. My reflections on this follow after a reconstruction of the argument by way of these theses.

The Womb and the Stillborn's Eye

It is apparent that Erika resides in the womb of Mother in a peculiar way. It is in the sense of an almost total envelopment aside from her head which dangles from outside of Mother. Erika is a miscarriage, a characteristic which forms part of her experience of an overall interrupted life. This restrictive position only allows Erika to *stare* at things. From her body comportment, her glare is performed in the way of a stillborn, stiffly in a kind of half-petrification; she cannot extend herself forward as her shoulders have remained locked within Mother. Thus, she glares at desired things which she cannot take hold of, unable to bring them close to her heart. It is significant that when Erika launches into these staring fits the textures of her mouth begin to shift, revealing a certain stringency and restriction: when eyeing Walter at the Klemmer family recital she cannot help but tremble or twitch in anticipation around the mouth, it is an intense desire for her release and the other's capture, it is the feverishness of the *mute*, the unexpressed. The *writer* begins to cluster within this quiet stillborn figure. A figure with a kind of eye which cannot fasten the reigns securely around what is desired, too deadened by the stink of a poisoning, rotted placenta; "I am not a baby," insists Erika.

On the other hand, Walter's gaze is somewhat cockeyed, invigorated, and jittering; he exhibits a kind of comportment that comes from the stomach or core, a pulse forward towards a full-body action. He is anxious anticipation embodied, active. The implication is that Walter has a full range of physicality, and in fact, is able to produce *voice*: take his excessive shouts of 'bravo! bravo!' after Erika's performance at the Klemmer's recital. Thus, Walter clusters together as the speaker, that which Erika cannot propel outward yet what comes out of Walter is rash and inexperienced.

The Dull Vulgarly of a Pornographic Routine

It is only by viewing semblances of sex, outside-herself sexual encounters (again that is sex only *in view*) does Erika approach anything that might bring a hint of orgasmic satisfaction—never actually achieved of course. It is an attachment to pleasure long past or unfulfilled, semen already spilt or prevented from spilling, that leads her to form an observer's bond to the *post-orgasmic* and the *interruption of pleasure*. Thus, the dullness of her pornographic routine, the dull vigor of writhing in nothing but remnants, scraps, and dreaming, a sexual life in used tissues produced without her involvement. Thus, it is a sexual life lived entirely in vulgar-image expression. She is never actually at the site of pleasure or the point of pleasure. More on the latter point of an attachment to pleasure-interruption, launching prying eyes on a couple having sex through a car window at a drive-in movie theater—which is to say, through a screen, in a sense a kind of pornographic movie—and interrupting the young man before reaching orgasm carries through in how Erika is to later do the same to Walter in the concert hall bathroom.

The writer and their production, the written, skates around the point of pleasure, dreams it as it seems to occur 'on the outside.' Even when *at hand*, when Erika holds a literal point of pleasure, Walter's penis, it appears that the writer would prefer to put off any possibility of culmination. They would prefer to continue to *dream* it in the form of a letter, in the form of passionate instructions, perfect articulations of an orgasmic full-throated scenario; Erika: "I'll write down what you can do to me. All my desires on paper for you to peruse at will." These emergent desires upon their very mention—at this stage they have not even been read by Walter—are dashed by the speaker's voice as he completely ignores Erika vocally overwriting her in his need for completion. The speaker seeks immediate pleasure, physicality, the immediate recognition of his aims, the speaker is portrayed as the writer's shallow counterpart.

The Speaker and the Writer

Indeed, Walter is the stand-in for the flatly technical, the engineering student turned pianist by the most forward-facing desire, the most obvious, perhaps vulgar sentimentality. Of note is Erika's inability to speak to Walter, to really divulge, an oral block confronts her as Walter's penis, and on another occasion exemplified as she strains her voice and coughs away the desire in her throat; Walter: "you cough because you are so uptight." Walter is the mouth that is extended, Erika on the other hand is the subtle, the written, the understated, the *private* "intelligence;" the force of infatuation is far stronger in the writer who cannot reach the point of pleasure, the fullness of an orgasm. It is perhaps as a sword stabbing directly at its viewed object but the sword warps around the viewed. Walter has no interest in such privations, he defiles and hand waves away the enclosure of the private, he wishes its immediate exposure; indeed he remarks: "I'm not interested in letters. I want us to talk," or on another occasion "I said I wasn't interested in reading letters. I'm here, you're here. *We're made of flesh and blood*. Don't be so scared." The technical physicality, the shallow voice and its force to will itself immediately, it appears targeted, but the voice will always under its surface be a *rambling* from the speaker despite its apparent definitiveness. Yet it is in this apparent definitiveness, in the speaker's outgoing attitude, his straightforward appearance—I love you, is it not obvious? Should we not just have sex, be lovers? Should we not just end this silly, roundabout performance?—that the writer and what they produce is made to appear as obtuse, to be unnecessarily emotional, and in fact becomes an *obstruction* to the desires of the speaker. The written becomes the thing which causes the interruption of the voice's pleasure, to be able to hear itself.

Walter forcibly speaks the written for Erika, he embodies *the voice of the letter* and exposes all of its privations to the writer and the open air. Indeed, he turns privations back onto

the dreamer. He chastises her: “Am I supposed to take this seriously?” and “Maybe you could open up that cultured mouth of yours and comment on this shit!” Yet, what is revealed in the letter is *the writer’s desire to be controlled*, to be bound, arrested, and put away; to put an end to one’s pleasure seeking in the post-orgasmic and interrupted, one must do away with themselves, to lose any thought of controlling and willing a perfect scenario while at the same time *crafting* the perfect scenario for this to occur in writing. The writer wishes the written to be arrested in a certain way by the voice, the immediate. The writer wishes to be scandalized, exposed and brought to light, to experience an orgasm by way of this vulnerable exposure to the world. On the other hand, since the writer is stillborn within the mother, this will never be at their behest. They *cannot bring on* scandalization, actualize it. It is the role of the speaker, the immediate, the dream-breaker, the wrecker of fantasies, to actually bind the written, to say ‘what you wrote will not become true, cannot be true.’ It is in the speaker’s act however, from outside the written, from outside the writer, that the writer finds themselves in *real* scandalization.

Once the speaker reads the letter, projects it in voice, Erika retracts and attempts to bury herself deeper into Mother, to put her head fully in the womb again, attempting to undo her development by thrusting herself sexually upon Mother; Erika is wracked with suffering, she cannot cope with her desire, again finding herself writhing in interruption. The letter writer resigns herself, makes herself small and begs for forgiveness: “Come on. I love you. *I’ll never write anything you don’t want,*” she holds herself over to the immediate and the direct, Walter. “You tell me what you want, okay?” she pleads, the writer succumbs to *saying* ‘I love you,’ they relent, even throws it up as the voice gags the written with its penis.

Ripped from the Womb, or Real Scandalization

It is past this point where Walter, the force of voice, physicality, and control, asserts himself without remorse. Walter regards the written as a kind of fantastically crafted illness, corruption, or poison from the part of the writer: “That’s what you want huh? Other people, you want to—Is that it? You’re a perverted bitch. You want to give everyone your sickness, don’t you? Not me!” The writer confronts its difference, all that was not intended when they wrote out their desire for self-control by way of vulnerability. Walter forces Erika out of the womb and fully exposes the stillborn to the world, assaulting the petrified body of what cannot control anything due to the reverence put on the voice, its commandeering, so-called ‘direct communication;’ Erika experiences real scandalization in dead-paralysis. What was written, the desire to be bound and to be at the site of pleasure, becomes in a certain way real, but not by her own hand; Walter: “I am willing to learn to play, Professor... but it can’t always be your rules. You can’t dig around deep inside people and then push them away.” It appears that fulfilment is self-destruction, exposure, two forces colliding resulting in the denigration of the written. The voice and the speaker appear to win out as true action, as physicality, directness. Technicality triumphs over the obscure quietude of the written, the private inner world. Yet is this not what the writer prophesized for herself? A loss of control? To be consumed by the pleasures of the immediate out of the womb? To have her thoughts arrested and finally exposed to the air, orgasmic fulfilment in the *real*? Perhaps to seek a kind of relief from the burden of thinking things out? Certainly, but it was imagined to be not in *his* way but in *her* way, to be able to control what cannot be controlled, to have control in an uncontrollable scenario. As it was written, *so it should have been*. All Erika can do is stare at the speaker, the world, and lash against herself for dreaming, stabbing herself while shuddering away a cry of pain.

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Mrs. Schober's relationship with her daughter Anna is clearly an analogue for Mother and Erika. It appears to me that, either intentionally or not, in her jealous rage Erika performed a figurative emergency c-section to remove Anna from Mrs. Schober's womb when she rendered her unable to continue her musical practice. Perhaps one might read this as Erika preventing Anna from becoming yet another scandalized writer.

Reflections: The Medical Soap Opera, the French Dollhouse, and the 'She is so Me!' Affect

Thus, the film presents this argument: the collide of the writer and the speaker—perhaps two aspects *within a subject* or within *subjects* that clash between subjects—culminates with the violent triumph of the voice over the written and the denigration of the written as the speaker actualizes its scandalization; he dissolves the written's quiet, feverish passion by way of exposure. What the writer desired, to control and restrain herself and her wandering passions or to actually be at the site of pleasure by way of restraint and exposure to the world—in other words to be taken over and become in a certain way free to be *in* pleasure and not constantly in post-orgasmic or interrupted situations, to no longer be imagining it—is a wish that cannot actually be controlled and fulfilled by the writer themselves. It is a paradox, an aporia. The dream, the fantasy, will always be destroyed and scandalized by the physicality of the speaker, their technical, direct control. The writer's titanic love-passion, this oceanic feeling, is evaporated by the speaker blurting it all out in her presence, dissolving the letter into mere perversions of the mind by his interpretation. What should be prized, he says, is directness. Yes, what should be prized is direct communication—enough with the avoidance he says, enough

with crafting fantasy, we are but *flesh and blood*, let's conduct ourselves as such. This antagonistic relation is evidently the cause of much romantic suffering.

One might argue that perhaps this is all stated right at the beginning of the film, curiously by the only black woman in the entire film, and who in fact, does not exist within this film's world as such; she resides as a nurse in a medical soap opera *within* the film on a TV screen that Mother is watching—a screen inside a screen. She remarks: “that creep was saying that women should be treated as inferior,” while a man who was presumably beaten for these inciting comments is mended on an exam table. The nurse is entirely marginal here, that within this film's world such statements *spoken* so directly *against* the speaker may as well be treated as fiction. So far removed are we from the thought that the spoken may emerge as a different kind of force. Perhaps it is in this short moment where a glimpse of a different possibility is caught.

That being said, it is also in thinking this scene where one jumps out of paralleling oneself as Erika. One peels out of trying to relate to her, falling out of *wanting to become as defeated as her* as one faces their own perpetual defeats; when your privations are revealed and utilized against yourself. You realize that you are witnessing a kind of French dollhouse—“the little men and woman who are delivered into one's home become playthings for unconscious perception”—that really, I could never be this white Frenchwoman; the smack of difference staggers you out of place when you fixate on this marginal double-fictional black nurse.¹

This film's residues, scattered over the internet, have inadvertently engendered and cultivated a certain attitude within its viewers, it launches at them a '*she is so me!*' affect. It is the kind of movie which is often selectively clipped on Instagram—the most obvious scenes where Erika is being degraded are those constantly repeated and widely dispersed. These concentrated

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Prologue to Television,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (Columbia University Press, 1998), 51.

clips insist on encouraging this affect, producing the formation of a relatable one-note character. Erika becomes a stereotype, a model; the clips signal that one should *be* stillborn, urging complacency in this position. It becomes the writer's *destiny* to be a victim of assault by the speaker, that the speaker and the voice will always be constituted as an aggressive temperament. This clipping ultimately encourages one to be permanently *closed off*. We know from Erika's rescuing of Anna that this need not be the case but the nature of clipping obscures this possibility. Adorno: "By awakening and representing in the form of images what slumbers conceptually in people, it also shows them how they should behave. ... Disenchanted enchantment, they do not convey any mystery; rather they are models of behavior that corresponds to the gravitation of the total system as well as the will of the controllers."² This is where the film becomes somewhat of a complication for me, what to make of the strength of its argument if it is capable of being devolved into encouraging mere unconscious mimicry of the stillborn. Doubtless that no form of popular media can escape this fate when funneled through such dominant technocratic channels.

² Adorno, "Prologue to Television," 55.

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<https://www.criterionchannel.com/videos/the-piano-teacher>.