

Erika's Self-Defence Mechanisms in *La Pianiste*

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Abstract—Since the beginning of psychoanalysis, the discipline has a close relation to any form of literature. Psychoanalysis can be used to analyze literature, and literature also often provides examples of psychoanalysis theories. Within time, the emergence of films makes it easier to do both. This article analyses the usage of one of the very well-known psychoanalysis theories, the self-defence mechanisms, by Erika, the main character of *La Pianiste*. The film plot is driven by an inner conflict within Erika as she faced two choices, whether to express her sexual fetishes or continue to repress it. This article aims to explain the self-defence mechanisms in the film, which is shown through the narrative and cinematographic aspects, also correlates it with other Freudian psychoanalysis theories such as the structural model of psyche (id, ego, superego) and dream. Those three theories also relate to Erika's sexual fetishes and her relations with her mother and lover. The self-defence mechanisms are used to defend the ego from moral anxiety caused by the unbalance between Erika's id and superego. This article finally measures the effectiveness of self-defence mechanisms used by Erika and whether her structural model of the psyche is in balance.

Keywords: *film studies, masochism, psychoanalysis, self-defence mechanisms*

I. INTRODUCTION

Psychoanalysis and film were first introduced at the end of the 19th century. They implied similarity in socio-cultural background. In its development, psychoanalysis affected film, and the other way around. A specific field of film analysis was introduced by focusing on the psychoanalysis aspect of the film, known as psychoanalytic film theory. Creed (1998) explained the relation of film and psychoanalysis in two time periods: before the 1970s and the following decades. Before the 1970s, the pioneer of surrealism, André Breton, considered film as a media to visualize dreams which is mainly conceptualized in Freud's psychoanalysis theory. Other theories by Freud such as the unconscious and Oedipus complex can also be found in the film analysis field; together with Jung's concept of the archetype, but relatively less familiar than Freud's psychoanalysis theory.

Between the 1970s and 1990s, four theories of psychoanalysis in the film were developed. Among them were apparatus theory by Baudry and Metz, a theory by Mulvey, and a film psychoanalysis theory related to the cultural studies theories.

Despite the significant development, the relation between psychoanalysis and film around the 1970s was not without

critics. There were at least four points of critics delivered by Creed (1998). According to Creed, (a) film is continuously watched as a media which reinforced male domination over women; (b) film should be analyzed to discover its relationship with history and the people instead of subjective matters such as unconscious and other related things; (c) theory about spectator (spectatorship) which developed from the relation between psychoanalysis and film has failed to address the spectators with different social class, skin colour, race, age, and sexual orientation; (d) some parties stated that psychoanalysis is not the branch of science, thus irrelevant for film analysis.

Critics toward film psychoanalysis did not halt the development and implementation of psychoanalysis in film analysis. In fact, other theories such as postcolonial, which focused on the impact of colonialism to the colonized group, and queer theory which focused on gender, women, and sexuality, also utilized psychoanalysis theories in order to gain deeper analysis. This article analyses *La Pianiste* (2001), a film by Michael Haneke which conveys women's sexuality of the main character. *La Pianiste* tells the story of the main character, Erika Kohut (Isabelle Huppert), a 40-year-old piano teacher at Vienna Conservatory whom sexually interested in masochism and voyeurism. Erika lives with her dominated mother (Annie Girardot). One day, Erika met a young man named Walter Klemmer (Benoît Magimel), who later enrolled as her student. They eventually engaged in a sexual and romantic relationship.

La Pianiste has attracted some scholars in the field of film analysis. In her article, Landwehr, M. J. (2017) discusses voyeurism, violence, and the power of media which can be found on *Jelinek's the Piano Teacher* and various Haneke's film, such as *La Pianiste*, *Caché* (2005), and *The White Ribbon* (2009). Wigmore's (2007) study, investigated the relation between *Die Klavierspielerin* by Elfriede Jelinek with the film adaptation, *La Pianiste*, by Michael Haneke. Wigmore analysed and compared the constructions of characters and plot in the two works. According to Wigmore, the most important and stand out element in the film is the use of music illustration and unexpected scenes. Those aspects are used in the film to underline the main story and explain Erika's masochist interest. Meanwhile, Wrye (2007) explained about perversion and destruction in *La Pianiste*. Jennings (2017) described the relationship between female masochism and spectatorship. In her work, she analyzed those aspects using the psychoanalysis theory. She concluded that from the perspectives of psychoanalysis and history, female masochism is always seen as a male subject. It challenged the spectators when they watch

the mediation of violence in the film. The four articles mentioned above are just a few among the other studies on *La Pianiste*. Based on literature review, masochism and voyeurism are the most common subjects. In order to enrich the discussion, this article focused on analyzing the self-defence mechanisms of Erika, the main character in *La Pianiste*, to cope with her personal anxiety. This article is aimed to discover the self-defence mechanisms and its impact to Erika's personality.

This article implements the film analysis method by Boggs and Petrie (2008). They argued that film consists of two aspects, narrative (plot, character, and setting) and cinematographic (visual and audio). It would be then combined with the concept of self-defence mechanism and personality structure found in Freud's works which later explained in detail by his youngest daughter, Anna Freud, in her book *The Ego and The Mechanisms of Defence* (1992). Freud stated that human personality is divided into three elements: id, ego, and superego. The imbalance between id and superego will cause anxiety in ego. Ego will eventually react to the anxiety by working the self-defence mechanisms. Anna Freud mentioned ten key concepts of self-defence mechanisms that can be used to secure ego: denial, projection, turning against the self, sublimation, regression, rationalisation, intellectualisation, reaction formation, displacement, and fantasy. Another form of self-defence mechanism is repression, which can be found on Andri and Dewi, Yenny's (2007) work.

II. NARRATIVE STRATEGY: ERIKA AS A RESERVED CHARACTER

There are three main characters in *La Pianiste*: Erika Kohut, Erika's mother, and Walter Klemmer. Plot and sequence of the film are moved by Erika's attempt to get away from her mother's domination, her relationship with Walter since their first meeting, and the end of their relationship. The film shows long dialogue only happened between Erika and her mother and Erika and Walter. Erika is relatively close to her mother. However, they are not engaged in a healthy and equal relationship, since her mother was dominant, as depicted in several scenes. In the opening scene, Erika's mother asked Erika why she came home late angrily. In other scenes, she intervened Erika's personal life such as the classes she was teaching, her clothing, and called Erika's colleagues to ask for her whereabouts. Erika's mother repressive domination is peaked in one scene where she was angry and slapped Erika because she came home late. The domination and aggression showed by her mother caused Erika to grow up as a reserved person with low confidence.

Erika also showed romantic and sexual interests toward Walter, her student in piano class. As a 40-year-old woman, she is supposed to have friends. However, the film shows she has no friends to interact and communicate. The relationship between Erika with Walter indicates a contrast compared to her relationship with her other students. Erika tends to distance herself and never sit with her students on piano bench when teaching. Meanwhile, she would sit with Walter and teach him Schubert's work in the right way, even though Walter is a new student compared to the others. It indicates Erika's personal interests toward Walter.

The story takes place in Vienna, Austria, both at indoor and outdoor settings. The outdoor settings in the film include walking path in front of Vienna Conservatory, rink, and drive-in. Erika is rarely seen in outdoor places. The indoor setting includes Erika's apartment, Vienna Conservatory, art performance building, Blonsky's apartment, Margot's apartment, and sex shop. The film presents Erika's psychological dynamics in the indoor setting. Her psychological dynamics is closely related to her sexual drive. In public spaces, Erika is a respected and behaved piano teacher. However, at some other moments, Erika expressed her sexual drive with voyeuristic and masochistic behaviour. Erika regularly visited sex shop to look at sexual scenes and hurt her sensitive body part in the bathroom.

La Pianiste also shows a repetitive scene which should be taken into account, since repetition implies certain meanings. It is the scene that depicted Erika looking out from the window. In relation to her reserved character, the scene can be seen as her attempts to free herself from her mother's dominance. The scene of piano and music also appeared several times. Piano and music are the tools used by Erika to escape from her mother's dominance and her sexual drive. It was no longer worked when Walter came into her life.

Music in *La Pianiste* is a unique aspect with close relation with mise-en-scène. Music illustration in *La Pianiste* is mostly taken from the works of Franz Schubert, an Austrian classical-music composer. *Im Dorfe* is one of Schubert's works used in the film. The first meeting of Erika and Walter Klemmer shows Klemmer's strong interest towards Erika which is responded in a cold manner. Despite this, the camera captured Erika holding her smile while watching Walter playing Schubert's song with *Im Dorfe* as background music. The following song lyrics describe Erika's deepest feelings. Erika is entertained by Walter's performance, yet her reserved personality avoided her to express it. Walter is 'something that people don't have', someone whom Erika had been dreaming of.

'Träumen sich Manches, was sie nicht haben; Thun sich im Guten und Argen erlaben (Nombre d'entre eux rêvent à ce qu'ils n'ont pas; se délectent de bonnes et de mauvaises choses / They are dreaming of the things they don't have; finding joy in the evil and good things)'

The dynamics in Erika and Walter's relationship is the main story of the film's narrative structure which provided chances for Erika to open herself up. Her desire to be together with Walter changed her personality to be more open and braver to fight against her mother's dominance.

III. ERIKA'S PERSONALITY STRUCTURE: CONFLICT BETWEEN ID AND SUPEREGO

According to Sigmund Freud (1989), human personality structure consists of id, ego, and superego. Id is related to biological aspect including sexuality and works based on the satisfaction principle that must be fulfilled immediately. Each individual has different id drive. Erika's id is constituted with uncommon sexual behavior, such as masochism and voyeurism. Superego in Erika's personality includes the morality standard influenced by the domination of her mother who controlled all aspects of her life and the general ethics

regarding her profession as a teacher. The morality and ethical standard are the antithesis of Erika's uncommon, or even immoral, sexual interests. Superego in Erika's personality is reinforced with her mother's existence who lived with her and became the main source of Erika's superego standard. Ego is the counterweight for id and superego. According to Freud, an individual is considered having a balanced personality if ego is able to balance id and superego.

La Pianiste shows the scenes which indicates the reinforcement of Erika's superego – including her mother's dominance over her – quite often, even from the very beginning. Meanwhile, the scenes which indicate the expressions of id rarely appear: 00:24:10–00:27:21, 00:35:21–00:39:35, and 00:47:25–00:54:30. It implies the imbalance between id and superego in Erika's personality. The imbalance will cause anxiety. In this case, Erika's anxiety is resulted from the conflict between id and superego (moral anxiety). The anxiety appears when the motivation to express instinctual impulses, in this case is sexual impulses, it is strongly against the moral value which substituted Erika's superego. Ego will then react to the anxiety in the form of self-defence mechanisms.

IV. ERIKA'S SELF-DEFENCE MECHANISMS: REPRESSION, SUBLIMATION, NEGATION, AND PROJECTION

This article will explain four self-defence mechanisms strategies conducted by Erika in accordance to the application phase.

As explained previously, Erika applied self-defence mechanisms to guard her ego which suffered from anxiety due to her inability to balance her impulse to express her sexual interest (id) with the public norms implanted and reinforced by her mother (superego).

The first self-defence mechanism of Erika is repression. Repression is the attempt of ego to repress id so it will turn back to unconsciousness. In *La Pianiste*, Erika is depicted as repressing her sexual interests for years. At the same time, she was unable to express it effectively because she got engaged in self-hurt behavior (masochism) and found satisfaction from watching couples having sex in the drive-in (voyeurism).

The second dominant self-defence mechanism is sublimation, or the attempt to turn the unacceptable impulses according to the norms into socially acceptable behaviour. In the film, Erika expressed her unusual sexual interest into something acceptable by society, that is music. She learns music by playing piano with expertise in Franz Schubert's works. There are some of his works which appeared repeatedly in the film, including *Im dorfe*, op. 89 no. 17, D. 911 no. 17 (1827), from *Winterreise*, no. 17, Haslinger (In the Village), and *Der Wegweiser*. Staier (Piano), Pregardien (Voix).

Im Dorfe and *Der Wegweiser* illustrate loneliness, questions about the self (asking the decision that had been taken in the past, asking why one ended up like this), and psychological conflict. Both works function as narration and explanation of the psychological condition and issues experienced by Erika which are closely related to her inability to express her repressed sexual interests for years. Those songs

are the way to turn her sexual interests into something socially acceptable while maintaining her initial impulses. Therefore, music is Erika's self-defence mechanisms in the form of sublimation.

The third self-defence mechanisms performed by Erika is negation (denial). Negation is considered as the most basic self-defence mechanisms worked out by ego when id implied strong impulses. Ego will negate the impulse to stay in the unconsciousness. The negation is expressed verbally in the film by Erika as her response to Walter's attention to her health. Erika answered « Je n'ai pas de sentiments, Walter. *Vous feriez bien que vous mettiez ça dans la tête. Et même si j'en ai un jour, ils ne triompheront jamais mon intelligence.* ». "I don't feelings for you, Walter. You should have known it. And if someday, I get that feeling, it won't defeat my intelligence." That statement is the example of negation self-defence mechanism as it is not in accordance to her behaviour. She ran after Walter following the piano lesson session – something that she wouldn't do to her other students – and attack Anna, her student because she was jealous of Anna's friendship with Walter and was afraid of losing him.

The fourth self-defence mechanism performed by Erika is projection. Projection occurs when ego alleviates anxiety by attributing the unwanted impulses to other people. An individual who shows projection self-defence mechanisms has certain unwanted feelings or tendencies regardless of the fact that the feelings or tendencies belonged to her unconsciousness. In the film, Erika expressed the projection by imagination. She imagined being raped by Walter. In her imagination, Walter hated her and violently hurts and raped her which caused her to lose the feelings. Erika blamed Walter for the end of their relationship. Erika started to have the imagination after Walter left Erika because he read Erika's letter which mentioned Erika's masochistic sexual tendencies. While in fact, Walter ended the relationship because he wanted to stop interacting with Erika due to her uncommon sexual tendencies shown by herself. Erika could not accept the fact that Walter ended up their relationship because he knew her masochistic sexual tendencies and she attributed her unwanted impulse by projecting the end of their relationship is caused by Walter's violent behaviour and that he raped her. She built the imagination that Walter was to blame for the end of their relationship.

The imagination mentioned here should be taken differently from the depiction of Erika's dream in the previous scene. Human being is unable to control the dream, but are able to construct and control the imagination. Sigmund Freud conducted investigation on dream in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2013) and argued that dream is the visualization of the deepest desire and anxiety in an individual's unconsciousness. Something kept in the unconscious for a long period of time will be visualized in the form of dreams. Erika's desire to engage in sexual relationship is kept inside her unconsciousness for a long time, so it appeared in the form of a dream after she sexually attacked her mother in 01:38:40–01:43:47. The scene in 01:43:48–01:50:31 can also be read as a dream because it shows Erika walking on the rink with white as the dominant colour which is not being depicted in the other scenes.

Anxiety, in this case, is moral anxiety, eventually causes personal pressure that should be handled. If self-defence mechanisms work well, they will keep any threat to stay out of an individual's consciousness. In *La Pianiste*, Erika's self-defence mechanisms—repression and sublimation—were shown to be successful since superego stayed outside her consciousness. However, her meeting with Walter—which causes her to attribute her id impulses—destroyed it all. Anxiety, in this case, is moral anxiety, will eventually cause personal pressure that should be addressed. If self-defence mechanisms work well, it will keep the threat outside an individual's consciousness. In *La Pianiste*, Erika's self-defence mechanisms – repression and sublimation – can be considered successful since it keeps superego outside her consciousness. However, her meeting with Walter – which drove her to attribute her id impulses – changed everything. The threat of anxiety got inside her consciousness since she was unable to attribute the id impulses and reinforce the superego in her consciousness.

V. CONCLUSION

Film is one of the most suitable media used to show the dynamics of personality structure in the field of psychoanalysis. An unbalanced personality structure can cause anxiety. Self-defence mechanism is something that is normally done to overcome that anxiety. In *La Pianiste*, Erika's character suffers from anxiety because of her inability to balance her unconscious impulses (id) and social norms (superego).

The reading of the narrative aspect of the film reveals that Erika has done two types of self-defence mechanisms for a long time, namely repression (by holding her sexual expression) and sublimation (through music that serves as an explanation of her mental condition), although not yet functioning optimally, but it is considered as the most successful because Erika has been using it for quite a long time. The meeting with Walter made the desire to channel the id increases so that she performed two additional types of mechanisms, negation (through dialogue with Walter) and projection (through imagination as justification for the end of the relationship with Walter). In the end, a balance has not yet been reached between Erika's id and superego, which means that Erika's self-defence mechanism failed.

Looking from a wider perspective, *La Pianiste* still hold the stigma that a woman who expresses her deepest desire would still be regarded as a freak and therefore would face challenges from society.

The study in this article is expected to enrich the psychoanalytic study of *La Pianiste*. In addition, this film can also be studied further with psychoanalytic film theory, one of which is the female gaze proposed by Laura Mulvey. Female gaze can be seen through Erika's focalization which is shown through cinematographic aspects in several film scenes.

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