

*“...hatred for old people. The question of domination between men and women is relatively important but still secondary-compared to what I tried to capture in this novel, which is that we are now trapped in a world of kids. Old kids. The disappearance of patrimonial transmission means that an old guy today is just a useless old ruin. The thing we value most of all is youth, which means that life automatically becomes depressing, because life consists, on the whole, of getting old.”<sup>1</sup>*

Legally defined ages of consent (e.g. to sex or military enlistment) are conceivably the only boundary the globalized world has left to formally acknowledge that inscrutable border between childhood and adulthood. They account not only for the observable differences in physical, mental and emotional development between children and adults, but for a common revulsion elicited upon violation of said boundary. Passage of this border has become increasingly obscure as those born in the West at the end of the 20th century (who came “of-age” in the 21st) have abandoned corrupted organized religions and their respective ceremonies en masse. Meanwhile, a collusion of geopolitical, social, and technological forces combined with economic austerity preclude the majority of people from fulfilling pre-existing signifiers of adulthood such as forming couples, detaching themselves from their parents, owning property and bearing children of their own. The ageing child beholden only to the unrestrained desires of their id is undoubtedly a more pliable, voracious consumer than the adult of sound ego and superego who is beholden to people, things and Causes beyond themselves.

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1                    Houellebecq, Michel. “Michel Houellebecq, The Art of Fiction No. 206.” Interview by Susannah Hunnewell. *The Paris Review Fall* 2010: p.158.

When traditional signifiers of adulthood are dismissed as archaic or even impossible for most people, childhood ceases to be a period of one's life but instead becomes the whole of one's life. The result is the grotesque proliferation of Puer aeternus (Latin for eternal boy aka Peter-Pan Syndrome). Ironically, when life becomes a never-ending period of self-absorption motivated by fear of obligation, freedom can become an oppressive limit in itself. Eventually one must reconcile their protracted adolescence (or, in some cases, paraphilic infantilism) with the inevitable and irreversible decay of their mind and body. The dissonance experienced by the ageing person who has failed or neglected to cross the border from childhood to adulthood is profound, and, from the vantage point of the norm, highly perverse.

The perversity of one who has failed to successfully traverse the child/adult border is fundamental to the novel "The Piano Teacher" (1983). In the book's 2001 filmic adaptation, directed by Michael Haneke, the viewer is confronted with the psyche of protagonist Erika Kohut (Isabelle Huppert). Erika is an attractive, accomplished pianist at a prestigious Vienna music conservatory who lives in a small apartment with her ageing, tyrannical mother. Her maternal relations, already a point of immense turmoil and shame for her, comes to a head when she unwittingly attracts the romantic pursuit of the handsome, younger student Walter. The prospect of a male suitor bears threatening yet transcendent possibilities for Erika: threatening insofar as he is seemingly intent on trespassing the absolute physical boundary she has imposed between herself and all others like a child wary of strangers; transcendent insofar as he could be the catalyst for her to complete the transition from childhood to adulthood by partnering up with her (which partnership implicitly excludes her mother), even giving her children.

Throughout the film, Walter's sincere romantic advances are repeatedly rebuffed by the increasingly strange and insecure Erika. His vision of her beauty and talent is rapidly perforated by her inability to leave her role as child under the thumb of her domineering mother. Erika's confusion of boundaries is transmuted into her sexual proclivities, which are largely sadomasochistic and voyeuristic in nature. Her sadomasochism complicates an implicit boundary between pleasure and pain, between dominant and subservient. This interplay of dominance and subservience is evidenced by the scene in which she withholds sex from Walter until he agrees to perform egregious acts of sexual dominance on her. Her obsession with voyeurism meanwhile violates the socially constructed boundary between what is deemed acceptable for public spectacle versus what is supposedly private in nature. Her compulsion to not only violate boundaries but to also obligate Walter to be her accomplice in said violations ultimately repulses him, leaving her to contend with the dissonance of her cataclysmic desires on her own.

The tension elicited from Erika's contradictory desires to achieve intimacy by antisocial means thus becomes illustrative of broader, contemporary phenomenon. The aforementioned geopolitical, social, economic and technological forces of the last century promise, for better or for worse, that the boundaries foundational to life as we know it will be dismantled, replaced or moved. When possibilities are presented as limitless, the impotence of finite humans before infinite options is revealed, and a means of mediation becomes appealing. For Erika, this mediation is likely her classical piano playing, wherein she engages with the underlying themes of Romanticism absent from her own life by way of Robert Schumann and Franz Peter Schubert's compositions. Elfriede Jelinek, the author of *The Piano Teacher*,

herself uses writing and acting a means of mediation. For Michael Haneke, this mediation can be felt in the magic of picture-making, wherein formless worlds become reified into manageable scenes, demarcated by the hard edges of the frame.

The notions of boundaries can feel unsurprisingly antithetical to the ethos of a generation raised in the flow state of infinite hyperlinks, but the alienation that proliferates in the absence of limits is cause for reconsideration of their virtues. Freud may have long since gone out of fashion, but the id by any other name is still the id, and the ego and superego's critical limitations upon it remain a useful concept. From Antigone to Erika, there exist innumerable observable instances wherein appealing solely to the id leads one to obliteration, or at the very least a paralysis on par with that imposed by an overly ambitious superego and ego.

Life need not be only observed in its extremes. An appreciation for the utility of boundaries does not negate the opportunities borne of a boundary moved or traversed, so long as one is not in denial of the ultimate existence of said boundary. A Rottweiler may make for a thrilling companion so long as one does not lose sight of the domesticated animal's natural capacity for lethal assault. Likewise, the childless adult need not be perverse if they are willing and able to repress desire just enough to engage with people, things and Causes beyond themselves.

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