

The Pianists

A Possible Approach to Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler's "House with Pool"

by Iris Dressler

"The piano teacher Erika Kohut rushes like a whirlwind into the apartment she shares with her mother. Her mother likes to call Erika her little whirlwind, because the child does sometimes move so terribly fast. She is trying to escape from her mother." Elfriede Jelinek, *The Pianist*

"House with Pool" is a concatenation of many potential encounters that moves with irresistible momentum, and at the same time it is a narrative about non-encounters, of persons, of past and present, inside and outside, conscious and unconscious, hearing and seeing. All of these parallel presences, precisely because they continually bypass one another, are interlocked as if in a *perpetuum mobile*. They orbit around each other like planets. This is a story from which there is no escape. It will repeat itself over and over in the same way until the end of days. What actually happens, or happened, in the story depends on the point of view from which we observe its constellations, which, however, continually elude our grasp. "House with Pool" is not a film with a beginning, middle and end, but one in which introduction, exposition and transitions mutually affect each other, while continually drifting towards and away from one another. Our viewing perspective is essentially determined by the point in time at which we enter the story. So let us enter – or at least attempt to.

The protagonists are a woman in her mid-forties, another woman not yet twenty, a gardener in his early thirties, and two deer. The two women are white, and the younger closely resembles the older. The gardener is dark-skinned. He is different from the two women. But in this house, everyone is a stranger.

The events unfold inside a fenced lot with house, pool and garden. They take place wordlessly. Why should anyone speak when no meetings occur? It is objects, actions, sounds and noises that impel the plot onwards, like circumstantial evidence.

A number of photographs distributed around the house, for instance, suggest that the two women are mother and daughter. The camera devotes much time to scanning the home's stylish furnishings, which give an indication of its owner's prosperity. Yet, somehow or other, she has lost her daughter. Nor is there apparently any husband in this comfortable

home. Glasses, tableware and leftovers of a meal suggest that guests were recently here. Now they have left. One wonders whether this home once saw happier days. If so, they must lie long in the past.

The woman, a mother without a child, is immersed in worried thought. It is night-time. The world outside, beyond the apparent protection of the four walls, is not her world. Out there a carful of teenagers cruises around the block, making a great deal of noise for this late hour. We can hear them, but not see them. Perhaps the mother, looking out the window in the direction of the noise, can see them? In "House with Pool" we rarely see what the protagonists can see.

The woman sits down at the piano and begins to play a piece – the piece that will be played in the film in two different interpretations, as if to mirror the states of mind of the two women around whom the story – if it is a story at all – inconclusively revolves. The way the mother plays suggests a suppressed inner tension, sadness, perhaps even despair. It reflects a depressed mood, from which not even a mistake – the mother soon strikes a wrong note – can provide much relief.

In parallel to the first bar of the music, the young woman, the daughter, appears outside. She is running headlong into the garden as if fleeing from something and hoping to find shelter in the house. Has she just escaped from the carousing teenagers' car? Had she previously run away from home? From outside, she watches her mother playing the piano – one of the few situations in which we as viewers see what a protagonist sees. Is the daughter peering through the same wall of glass through which her mother might have watched the car before?

The mother, immersed in her playing, does not notice her daughter's presence. Instead, she misses a note, corrects herself, and finally brings the piece to an end, just as she will end this day and all those that went before. Between the time she strikes the wrong key and finds her way back into the piece, the camera focuses on her elegant shoes, which she has taken off to play barefoot. The shoes are like fetish objects, fixed by the camera, destined never to find their redemption. As the music comes to an end, the camera pans along the objects that attest to the absent guests, then briefly halts on the portrait photograph of a little girl, shyly smiling. Is this the daughter who is about to rush into the house?

The despondent mother, shoes in hand, arrives in her bedroom. She puts on the shoes, as if deriving a certain comfort from the act. She takes a cardigan from an armchair and puts it on. Unlike her, the jacket seems to have survived times long past undamaged. It

keeps off a chill whose source is not outside. The mother has been crying, but has managed to pull herself together. She steps out briefly onto the balcony. Except for crickets, there is apparently no one outside any more. She goes back into the room, folds the cardigan carefully and lays it on the chair, then disappears into the bathroom. In the meantime, someone enters the bedroom and takes the cardigan. The chair is now empty, but the mother will not notice, despite the fact that the camera clearly emphasizes its absence.

The daughter – who has evidently taken the cardigan – gets ready for bed, too. She washes herself at the edge of the swimming pool, at the precise spot where, later, the gardener will desperately try to fish something out of the water. "House with Pool" is rife with such asymmetrically mirrored actions, situations and objects that are taken up and continued by the persons involved in diverse ways: house, pool, water, piano playing, the opening and closing of doors, photographs, the sound of motors, washing, the act of putting on, taking off and folding articles of clothing, the cardigan, armchair, the act of bending over the pool... All of these things both link and separate the supposed protagonists from one another, like hinges. As surrogate objects and surrogate acts, they circulate like detached, aimlessly nomadic references among the characters, and slip out of their grasp again and again. These are objects of exchange, yet nothing is exchanged by them. They merely serve as vehicles to carry what is absent through the story.

In the meantime, the daughter has made herself comfortable on a chaise longue by the pool. She spreads her mother's cardigan, just used as a towel, over herself. Does she perform this action with memories, yearning, or indifferently? Out of too much love or too little hate? The girl does not notice two deer – a doe with its fawn? – that have appeared out of nowhere to graze by the pool. For a moment the young woman and the doe experience the greatest physical proximity granted to any two – living – characters in the film. We have the feeling – or rather, the camera focus suggests – that the two are about to touch each other. Yet soon we realize that the doe is standing behind the chaise longue the daughter is lying on. Mother and daughter were possibly never closer and never farther from each other than at this moment of sleep. The camera pans over to the pool. On its surface we see night giving way to day.

The new day begins as every new day will begin, with a lawn sprinkler starting up. It prompts the daughter to leave the poolside. She runs towards the house. She is continually on the run, always an intruder, and she will always find it difficult to open doors. And we will never know where she has come from.

As the mother swims her morning lengths in the pool – oblivious both to the proximity of her lost child and to what lost things the pool conceals – her daughter has already entered the house. She scans the interior, as the camera did previously. She concentrates her attention especially on the pictures of that strange little girl, perhaps herself at an early age. Only one of the photos elicits a spark of recognition. It is not the one showing mother and daughter in better days – if they really were better.

The daughter has reached her mother's room, where she stole the cardigan last night. She returns it to the chair, trying to fold it as carefully as her mother had done. But she doesn't succeed. She can't come up to her mother's expectations. She can't make amends for what has gone on before. She runs her hand across something brown, fur-like – her mother's blanket, which, appearing at this point, sets off a chain reaction of associations: fur with jacket, deer, mother, daughter, yearning, rejection, presence and absence.

As the mother floats face up in the water, her gaze loses itself in the sky obscured by trees. A noise startles her. It is not the lawn sprinkler, but the gardener arriving. Now the mother, too, leaves the pool, but more calmly than her daughter did. She takes a few steps in the direction of the sounds coming from the gardener, but before the two can encounter each other, she turns around and seeks the shelter of the house.

The introduction of the gardener is remarkable. Even before we see him, his presence has been announced by the running sprinkler and the sounds of his car and the garden gate opening. And finally by the lawnmower, whose motor he now starts up. The gardener is the key figure in the turning point of the story, whose meaning nevertheless remains covert. With the starting up of the lawnmower the plot begins to accelerate, as if it were driving the story towards an escalation we hardly believed would happen, despite – or because of – its underlying drama. When he first appears physically, the gardener is already bathed in sweat. He has triggered something that was inevitable, yet unpredictable.

The three scenes where events now begin precipitously to unfold are the bathroom, the pool, and the piano room. Suddenly everything goes very fast. In the bathroom, a faucet is turned, water flows out of a showerhead. The mother is showering, and will not be able to hear what is about to happen. At this moment the gardener notices something in the pool, something disturbing. Simultaneously the daughter enters the room where the grand piano stands. She immediately opens it and plays a few tentative notes. The gardener looks from the pool in the direction of the house – can he hear the daughter playing? –

then back to the pool. Finally the daughter begins the piece of music her mother had played before and will play over and over again still, just as she herself will. The daughter's playing is more dynamic and aggressive than her mother's. The gardener has apparently discovered something gruesome, and tries to fish whatever it is out of the water, at first keeping a respectful distance. Since a net would be of no help, he uses his arms. Finally – in a sort of desperate slapstick turn – he plunges his entire upper body into the pool, at exactly the same spot where the daughter had washed before. Half in the water, half out, the gardener cannot hear a thing. But the mother under the shower can, and she listens carefully. Like the gardener, she too has been disturbed by something. Is it her daughter's piano playing, which now reaches a climax of volume and rapidity? What secret is suddenly shared by mother and daughter? Might it be their absent husband and father? Has an accident occurred? An act of revenge? Or is it the mother whom the gardener will soon fish out of the pool? Is the bathroom scene a reprise of that famous scene under the shower that so frequently ends in murder? As the final chord sounds on the piano, the gardener pulls a dead deer – doe or fawn? – from the pool. Water drips from the bathroom faucet. The daughter rushes out of the house. She leaves as she had come, and will come again. The house stands there as if nothing had happened. It is day. Soon it will be dark again.

(Translation: John W. Gabriel)