Impossible Closeness: Intimacies and Transgressive Desire in Park Chan-Wook's *Stoker* and *The Handmaiden*

Rasmika Naidu

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School of Arts,

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Contents

List of Figures

Declaration

I, Rasmika Naidu (214515287), declare that

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Signed: 

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the representation of intimacies and transgressive desires in Park Chan-wook's films *Stoker* (2013) and *The Handmaiden* (2016). I argue that these queer coming-of-age films represent women as active agents in their quests toward self-awakening and emancipation from patriarchal control (Mulvey 1989; Dworkin 2000). Indeed, transgression and taboo are two primary tropes in these narratives of queer sexual awakening. The films are compelling in their depiction of queer intimacies and the quest for an impossible closeness. Both plots play upon gendered expectations by presenting female protagonists who seemingly conform to patriarchal norms, only to dupe male characters (and the audience) and overturn these expectations with dramatic effect. I approach these films through the lens of queer and feminist theory, along with feminist film theory (Laura Mulvey and Kaja Silverman). My analysis of the representation of eroticism and intimacy in the films is informed by a critical lexicon provided by Georges Bataille, Karmen MacKendrick and Michel Foucault. This study considers Park's role as a hybrid auteur and his capacity to occupy a liminal zone between art and commercial cinema, allowing him to access a wide and diverse audience. In my analysis of *The Handmaiden*, I explore the film's self-reflexive interrogation of pornography's objectifying power and the difficulty of representing women's desires in cinema. Moreover, I explore how the inversion of gender power dynamics in the film highlights the illusory nature of phallic power, thus exposing the fantasy of male subjectivity, with its assumptions of mastery, authority, and sufficiency. Furthermore, I also explore how eroticism and intimacy are used as tools for liberation by the female protagonists. In my analysis of *Stoker*, I situate the film as a neo-noir thriller that co-opts elements of the *bildungsroman* to tell the coming-of-age tale of a *fille fatale*. I analyse scenes in the film that highlight the awakening of the protagonist's killer/sexual awakening, the fluidity of sadomasochistic attractions and the quest for limit experiences that reveal the interconnectedness of violence, pleasure, and power. Reading through the lens of Silverman's critique of the Oedipus complex, I outline how India rejects Oedipalisation. Focussing on the *leitmotif* of shoes, I discuss the film's subversive rewriting of two traditional fairy tales, imagining an unrestrained feminine desire. In conclusion, I consider the transformative ethics of Park's films, and how through vicariously sharing in the rebellious boundary-breaking of Park's female protagonists, queer cinema encourages viewers to question heteronormative views on sexuality, intimacy and desire, inviting us to "to take a fresh look at our gaze (and our gays)" (Boyle 2012: 67).

Introduction

> [D]esire's fundamental ruthlessness is a source of creativity that produces new optimism, new narratives of possibility, even erotic experimentality.
>
> (Berlant 2012: 43)

This dissertation aims to examine the representation of intimacy and transgressive desire in Park Chan-wook's[1] films *Stoker* (2013) and *The Handmaiden* (2016)[2]. While both films can be read as Gothic narratives which rely on exaggeration and elements of the fantastical, they are also compelling in their depiction of queer[3] intimacies and the quest for an impossible closeness. Through their journeys of self and sexual awakening, Park's protagonists recognise their erotic desires as a source of creativity that can engender new possibilities, thus echoing Berlant's contention that desire is fundamentally ruthless through their own ruthlessness in their quests for freedom.

I argue that both films deviate from traditional coming-of-age (*Stoker*) and romance (*The Handmaiden*) narratives which represent women as passive and sexless, rather than active agents in their quests toward self-awakening and emancipation from patriarchal control (Mulvey 1989; Dworkin 2000). Indeed, transgression and taboo are two primary tropes in these narratives of queer sexual awakenings. In *Stoker,* India uses her seemingly demure girlishness as a masquerade to disguise her more malign intentions. Similarly, Hideko and Sook-hee in *The Handmaiden* capitalise on the male characters' assumptions of feminine subservience, dependence, and naïveté. Hideko is good at capitalising on these assumptions as she initially fools even Sook-hee, a known pickpocket. Both films, to varying degrees, set up gendered expectations (which dupe the male characters and the viewer), and then overturn them with dramatic effect. After all, no one would suspect the stoic niece of an art collector or the quiet girl in high school to be cunning, ruthless, and deviant. It is through their narrative journeys that the women can evade and even topple the patriarchy.

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[1] I follow the Korean naming convention of providing family name (surname) first, followed by the given name (first name).
[2] Originally titled *Aghassi* in Korean which directly translates to "lady."
[3] I understand that the term "queer" is considered offensive to some; however, there is a groundswell of people in academia who do value the term, myself included. I use the term "queer" as my analysis of the films is couched in queer theory. I will also use the term as an umbrella term to encompass lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) identities.

Through vicariously sharing in the rebellious boundary-breaking of these female protagonists, I argue that Park's films encourage viewers to question societal norms on sexuality, intimacy, and desire. In his book titled *Transformational Ethics of Film: Rethinking the Cinemakeover in the Film-Philosophy Debate* Martin Rossouw contends:

> [Certain films count] on a cinematic thought experiment to do the transformational work of actively frustrating our assumptions, and thereby have them ushered into the viewer's critical awareness. What ultimately drives the self-examination of assumptions, therefore, is an experience of dissonance, a cognitive unease. (2022: 119)

Rossouw points to cinema's capacity to change a viewer's "thought, perception, and experience" (2021: xi). In other words, film creates a cognitive dissonance in the audience, which encourages them to examine their assumptions of social norms and ideals. Park's films fall into this cinematic thought experiment by challenging the audience's gendered assumptions of women and their capacity for liberation. The women in Park's films are portrayed as three-dimensional characters who actively question their positions in society. They openly defy heteropatriarchal norms, but as they are the primary focalisers, Park encourages the viewer to sympathise with them. In discussing the film *Ma vraie vie à Rouen* (2002)[4], Claire Boyle states that "it is through decidedly *queer* strategies that the film discomforts the position of (all) its spectators, and invites us to take a fresh look at our gaze (and our gays)" (2012: 67). In other words, queer films like *The Handmaiden* encourage its viewers to re-evaluate and reassess the way they view queer people, deviant behaviour, and transgressive desires. Boyle's caution or counsel that audiences "who have an appetite to look at others must also interrogate [their] ethics of looking" (2012: 67), is apposite to the effect of *Stoker* and *The Handmaiden*. Park's films act as a force for change and allow audiences to imagine possibilities that previously seemed unattainable. *The Handmaiden* imagines a lesbian relationship free from the voyeuristic gaze of men who wish to control and dictate women's sexuality and *Stoker* is a hyperbolic fantasy of a young woman taking back power from the heteropatriarchal society that fears her deviant behaviour. The films encourage the audience to challenge their notions of women's sexuality and what it means to be a woman in a heteronormative society.

The Handmaiden is a Japanese and Korean language film and the third feature-length film that Park has written, directed, and produced. Although based on Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*

[4] *Ma vraie vie à Rouen* is a French film that depicts a teen boy realising his homosexuality. The film is a queer coming-of-age narrative, much like *The Handmaiden* and even *Stoker*.

(2002), the film changes the setting from Victorian-era Britain to Korea under Japanese colonial rule (the rationale for this setting change will be discussed further in the chapter titled "*The Handmaiden*"). The film was also nominated for several awards and accolades, namely Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or, Queer Palm, and Vulcan Award. Production designer Ryu Seong-hee won the latter for Technical Artistry, making her the first Korean artist to do so. In 2018 *The Handmaiden* won the British Academy Film Award (BAFTA) for Best Film Not in the English Language. Not only this, but *The Handmaiden* has garnered a cult status among queer fans on popular social media sites like Tumblr and Twitter. Upon its release, the film drew comparisons to Abdellatif Kechiche's *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013) due to the sexually explicit sex scenes between the two leads; however, *The Handmaiden* is praised highly by queer audiences and not just mainstream Hollywood due to the way the film deals with the themes of same-sex desire. Following the journey of a lowly thief and pickpocket, Sook-hee, *The Handmaiden* is a winding Gothic fairy tale about love, intimacy, and desire. It begins when Sook-hee is chosen by a con man, Fujiwara, to be the handmaiden to a rich Japanese heiress, Hideko. Fujiwara plans to seduce Hideko and needs the help of Sook-hee to convince the heiress to marry him. However, Sook-hee and Hideko (who is confined to her uncle's mansion, like Rapunzel) soon fall in love with each other. They begin their journey into intimacy and use their ability as (invisible) women to go unnoticed and outsmart the men in their lives.

Stoker is Park's English language debut which depicts the coming-of-age and sexual awakening of a young woman named India Stoker. The film begins with the death of her father and the arrival of her mysterious uncle Charlie who seems to fascinate both India and her mother, Evelyn. The script is written by actor and screenwriter Wentworth Miller and borrows elements from Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) with regards to characters and theme. This places the narrative as a neo-noir film with elements of a *bildungsroman*. The film also has a Gothic horror influence most notably in the name Stoker, a nod to Bram Stoker, author of the famous vampire novel, *Dracula* (1897). *Stoker* has been nominated for numerous awards for acting, screenplay and directing, winning the Fangoria Chainsaw Award for Best Supporting Actor (Matthew Goode). *The Guardian*'s Jeremy Kay describes the film as "a gorgeously mounted family mystery dressed up as a gothic fairy tale" (2013: n.p.) with literary allusions and symbolism scattered throughout.

Although my dissertation focuses mainly on issues of sexual desire and intimacy, the expression and fulfilment of desire is influenced by place. This is especially marked in *The*

Handmaiden which relocates Sarah Waters' novel, *Fingersmith* (2002) from Victorian England to colonial Korea. *Stoker*, set in an unnamed small town in America, has a distinctly 1960s feel to it due to India's conservative fashion; however, some elements point to the film being set in 2012 such as the use of cellphones and the reference to India's birth year being 1994. Although the year is not specified, *The Handmaiden* is shown to be definitively set in Japan-occupied Korea. For this reason, I will provide a cultural and historical background to contextualise it.

The Korean Context

Before entering an analysis of the films, particularly *The Handmaiden*, it is necessary to provide a summary of the Japanese colonisation of Korea between 1910 and 1945. This will provide a context for the film so that the nuances and motivations of characters like Kouzuki and Count Fujiwara are clear to the audience. According to Suk Koo Rhee, the colonisation of Korea also brought with it colonial gender relations, upholding patriarchal notions of masculinity (2013: 117). Although Korea was a patriarchal society prior to 1910, Japan's colonial rule in Korea exacerbated the crisis of masculinity because Korean men were viewed as less than their Japanese counterparts (Rhee 2023: 117).

After years of war, intimidation and political machinations, Korea was annexed by Japan in 1910 (Blakemore 2020: n.p.). The Empire of Japan attempted to combat and suppress Korean culture to establish control over the country. Most notably, Korean language was banned in schools and universities. In addition to these language restrictions, manual labour, and loyalty to the (Japanese) Emperor was emphasised (Blakemore 2020: n.p.). Park notes that during this period "Korea was going through modernisation, which made its way in through imperial Japanese culture in a very violent manner" (in Harkness 2017: n.p.). Furthermore, Japan's modernisation was a fusion (or hybrid) of traditional Japanese philosophy and Western knowledge (mostly from the Americas) in the Shinto state. Modernity, therefore, originated from both the European West and Imperial Japan for the Korean colonial subject. Consequently, when modernity is transplanted in such a way, hybridity and contradictions are created (Rhee 2020: 117).

As part of the cultural manipulation of Korea, Japan introduced the erotic-grotesque into the Korean culture. Erotic grotesque (or ero guro) is an artistic genre that deals with eroticism, sexual corruption, and decadence. It is the interlinking of the erotic and the grotesque, or something horrific (Silverberg 2007: xv). In the film there are multiple depictions of the erotic grotesque, specifically the counterfeit version of Katsushika Hokusai's "The Dream of the

Fisherman's Wife" or *Tako to Ama* translated to "Octopus and the Shell Diver" (Figure 1). This painting by Hokusai is the forerunner of tentacle porn which is now considered a genre of its own that was popularised by Toshio Maeda (Briel 2010: 203). The introduction of the erotic-grotesque to Korean culture allowed the Korean population to create their own sense of global consumerist culture. By being exposed to products from Japan, the Korean population were able to see themselves not only as consumers, but also producers of new material. This introduction also allowed them to critically assess their position in that consumerist culture despite it being introduced by Japanese colonial rule (Rhee 2020: 127). Although the Japanese introduced erotica as a form of cultural manipulation, it also introduced the Korean people to foreign texts, making them aware of global interests during this period. The interplay between international (Japanese and American) and national (Korean) was necessary to the "discursive and imaginative construction of the nation" (Rhee 2020: 127). The construction of Korea as a nation was created through the intermingling of different cultural traditions and texts which is still relevant to South Korea in a modern context when you look at Korean dramas (Kdramas) and Korean pop music (Kpop). Modern South Korean media such as Kdramas and Kpop music are influenced by Western media and African-American hip-hop music (Khan-George 2022: n.p.).

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction outlines the focus of my study where I lay out my argument and thesis statement. This section also includes an outline of the dissertation's structure and the Korean context of the films.

The first chapter, "Literature Review," provides a brief overview of Park as a global cult auteur and how his films explore the themes of revenge, forgiveness, and female autonomy. I situate my study in the context of critical scholarship on, and reviews of, the films.

The second chapter, my theoretical framework, deals with the critical theory in which I will couch my analysis. I will outline Georges Bataille's theories on eroticism and intimacy. In addition to my discussion of intimacy, I utilise Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Cheryl Stobie, Adrienne Rich, and other queer theorists to examine how queer identities trouble essentialised notions of gender and identity. In this chapter, I will also outline contending feminist perspectives on pornography, along with feminist film theory, including Laura Mulvey's theory on the male gaze. These critical thinkers will define my theoretical approach when it comes to analysing the texts.

Chapter three focuses on *The Handmaiden*, presenting an analysis of selected scenes that explore how Park depicts women's intimacy and same-sex desire in the film. I discuss the extent to which the film subverts the male gaze and how pornography counter-intuitively (and contrary to expectations) plays a significant role in liberating the protagonists from the confines of the heteropatriarchal society that shrouds them. Employing the theories of Georges Bataille, I elucidate on how eroticism is used as a tool for emancipation by the two female protagonists. In addition, I explore Count Fujiwara's and Kouzuki's roles as antagonists to Sook-hee and Hideko. Finally, this chapter examines the how the film self-reflexively interrogates and subverts the objectifying power of pornography. I focus on how Hideko appropriates a pornographic tradition to explore her sexuality and free herself from her uncle's imprisonment.

The fourth chapter is a close analysis of key scenes from *Stoker* which employs elements of neo-noir and *bildungsroman*. My analysis begins with India's sexual awakening, her sadomasochistic tendencies, and how her uncle, Charlie, acts as a catalyst for her transgressive desires. I rely on Foucault's insights into the paradoxical and fluid nature of sadomasochistic attractions to examine uncle and niece's quest for limit experiences that reveal the interconnectedness of violence, pleasure, and power. India's relationships with her family define her character. Thus, my analysis will examine India's relationships with her uncle and mother and how it differs from Freud's archetypal Oedipal narrative. In addition, the film is a *bildungsroman* narrative strand within a neo-noir and, therefore, I will be examining how the film subverts both classic fairy tale and *noir* narratives that present deviant women as cautionary tales.

The conclusion to this dissertation will provide a final discussion on the two films and summarise my analysis of the texts. I will also provide a brief comparison of the texts and discuss their significance to the broader field of queer cinema. I contend that texts like *Stoker* and *The Handmaiden* create a space for open discussion of women's same-sex intimacy, in addition to women's sexuality and desires. Park's films redress the occlusion of queer women's desires from mainstream cinema, while straddling the fine line between art and 'Hollywood' cinema. This study seeks to foreground Park's contribution to increasing the discursive field of lesbian and bisexual women's desire and how women's transgressive desires are a form of growth rather than a hinderance.

Literature Review

> As a director, […] make your audience smell, touch, taste, […] make the experience a very tactile one, that really elevates the experience for the audience.
>
> (Park in Hoffman-Han 2012: n.p.)

The existing literature on Park Chan-wook's films revolve around The Vengeance Trilogy—*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), *Oldboy* (2003) and *Lady Vengeance* (2004)—which deal with themes of revenge, violence, salvation, and ethics. These three films cemented Park's role as an auteur and allowed him, and other Korean directors like Bong Joon-ho and Kim Ji-woon, to introduce South Korean cinema to a global audience. Park's films have garnered a reputation of being psychologically disturbing and darkly humorous.

In recent years, Park has also turned his attention towards telling stories from the perspective of women, attempting to show them as complex, three-dimensional characters. The sensual and "tactile" qualities of Park's films lend them a greater degree of relatability on an emotional level for the audiences. In evoking all the senses, Park allows his audience to immerse themselves in the film, giving it a greater degree of verisimilitude. By elevating the movie watching experience for his audience, Park allows us to sympathise with the characters and understand their motivations.

Park Chan-wook and His Oeuvre

Park Chan-wook, born 23 August 1963, is a South Korean film director, screenwriter, and producer. To date, he has directed eleven feature films and ten short films. His fifth feature film, *Oldboy* (2003), catapulted him into international cult auteur status due to its success at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival and its endorsement by critically acclaimed filmmaker Quentin Tarantino (Lee 2008: 215). Park's most recent credit as a director is the feature length film *Decision to Leave* (2022) which was nominated for the *Palme d'Or* and won the award for best director at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival.

Many of Park's films revolve around deeply psychological issues such as revenge and transgressive desire. Furthermore, over recent years, Park has turned his attention towards positive representations of women in his films. Breaking from the traditional thriller and film *noir* plot that vilifies or punishes women who do not conform to patriarchal norms, *The Handmaiden* and *Stoker* encourage us to sympathise with female protagonists who are strong,

defiant, psychologically complex, and dangerous. In an interview with Alison Hoffman-Han, Park comments on the lack of three-dimensional women in his earlier films:

> After making *Oldboy* and having this moment of realisation about the gendered dynamics in my films, I reflected on this. I thought about how my female characters weren't as significant as the male characters, and also, how my female characters weren't very complex or sophisticated even when they deserved to be (2012: 189).

The shift towards emphasising the female perspective is evident in both *The Handmaiden* and *Stoker*. Park highlights this intentional shift by commenting in this interview (conducted after the production of *Stoker*), that that the women are at *Stoker*'s centre (2012: 190). Park continues his exploration of complex women in his latest feature length film, *Decision to Leave* (2022). Reviewer Valerie Complex calls the film's main character, Seo-rae, "chaos walking" and commends actress Tang Wei stating that she is a "valuable asset" to the film (2022: n.p.).

Jinhee Choi calls Park a "hybrid auteur" due to his ability to make artistic films that also appeal to a wider commercial audience (Choi 2010: 59). His films, therefore, hold a particular style unique to him and his vision. According to Choi, he adopts a modernist style in terms of how he frames his subjects and camera movements. Choi suggests that Park's present style follows his most successful film to date, *Oldboy* (2003). Keeping in line with Park's hybrid auteur status, Nikki J.Y. Lee refers to the director as a "transnational auteur" because he has received international acclaim from South Korean critics and mainstream Hollywood critics. According to Lee, new layers of meaning (and currencies) are attached to a film and its director when it passes through transnational places of reception like film festivals and award shows (Lee 2008: 212). Thus, a new sense of authorship emerges: a transnational authorship. Comparing Park to Quentin Tarantino, Lee states that Park's fame is constructed at the intersections of auteur status as defined by prestigious events like Cannes and the domain of cult and more mainstream Hollywood films.

In a 2016 interview Park is tentative about using the word auteur to describe himself. He states:

> When you think of the original definition of auteur, it is one who has a consistent body of work, or someone who creates a unified impression […] you could also say such an auteur would use a specific and particular way of expression. The auteur is repeating the world that the auteur is creating [...] I don't necessarily think that I fit in within that definition when it comes to the notion of consistency or repetition. (Park in Page 2016: n.p.)

It is undeniable, though, that all his films have similar running themes as well as stylistic choices. The term auteur was first used in the French film journal *Cahiers du cinema* in the 1950s to specifically designate directors who "infused their films with their distinctive personal

vision through the salient manipulation of film technique" (Nelms 2012: 147). With auteur theory the film becomes the product of one person; however, Park prides himself on the collaboration he has with others who work on the film like composer, Jo Yeong-wook, and cinematographer, Chung Chung-hoon, who are also his neighbours (Hoffman-Han 2012: 190).

It is important to note that Park is an autodidact, or a self-taught director, as Korea did not have many serious film schools when Park started to pursue a filmmaking career in the late 1980s (Chee 2017: 2). Park mentions that in America or France, for example, you would be taught the basics of film and what the different techniques are called; in contrast, "in Korea there was no systematic education I was exposed to. It was sporadic, haphazard. And maybe that's why my films have ended up this strange form, where it feels like it's a mishmash of everything" (in Chee 2017: 2). From a young age Park became a visual storyteller. Park reveals that he would conjure up his own James Bond film in his head: it was not just the narratives, but also how lighting, editing, and angles would enhance the storytelling experience (Chee 2017: 2).

Lee suggests that the themes dealt with in Park's films "transcend the stylish superficiality of [Quentin] Tarantino," to whom Park is most often compared (2008: 216). Although Park's films are violent and disturbing to viewers, they contain a depth that allows the audience to connect with the characters. Lee compares Park's narratives to that of Greek myths where the protagonist deals with moral, often philosophical dilemmas. This is evident in films such as *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance* (2002), *Lady Vengeance* (2005) and *Oldboy* (2003) which are often referred to as "The Vengeance Trilogy" despite not being connected narratively and not sharing similar characters.

In "Love Your Enemies: Revenge and Forgiveness in Films by Park Chan-wook" (2009), Steve Choe explores the themes of revenge and forgiveness in The Vengeance Trilogy stating that Park's interpretation of revenge revolves around the concept of forgiveness rather than punishment or payback. Choe suggests that Park depicts revenge as natural and human, but he does not allow it to be too easily justified or even celebrated. It is why his films always seem to make the viewer feel uneasy in the end, even if the ending is positive for the protagonist. This is evident in films such as *Lady Vengeance*, *Stoker*, and *The Handmaiden*. Many of Park's films explore the themes of revenge and forgiveness in some form or the other, making the viewer question the actions of the characters and even the meaning of the terms 'revenge' and 'forgiveness'.

Critical Literature on *The Handmaiden*

The Handmaiden deals with themes such as revenge, and women's sexuality and desires. Critical scholarship and reviews tend to focus on the relationship between Sook-hee and Hideko and how these women are depicted in the film.

In his article titled "The Erotic-grotesque Versus Female Agency in Colonial Korea in Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden*" (2020) Suk-Koo Rhee posits that Park utilises the erotic-grotesque to explore the characters' battle for agency from an imperial patriarchy and thus "the director helps illuminate the everyday dynamics of colonial relations" (116). Rhee's article details the origin of Japanese pornography and its significance to the colonial context which I draw on in my analysis of the film. Furthermore, Rhee uses Homi Bhabha's concept of "sly civility" to describe the behaviour of Hideko, noting that she complies with her uncle's exploitative demands while also allowing herself to be in a strategic position to counter her audience's voyeuristic gaze (2020: 122). The observers (Hideko's audience) become the observed, thus destabilising the power dynamics between them. Rhee observes that sexism and pornography is "reappropriated" by the female characters to subvert hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal expectations. This resonates with my argument that Sook-hee and Hideko use the erotic to liberate themselves from the confines of an oppressive heteropatriarchal society. While the postcolonial paradox of sly civility is useful in explaining the protagonists' strategy of resistance, my analysis extends Rhee's argument by focussing on liberatory potential of the erotic as theorised by Georges Bataille.

Francesco Sticchi's essay entitled "Undoing Male Fantasies and Narrative Reliability in Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden*" (2018) analyses how the film enacts a creative and transformative experience through the subversion of power dynamics. Sticchi explores the plot of the film and how the plot twists add to the subversion of the power dynamics in the film. Although I will not be employing Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope that Sticchi uses, I will be exploring how the aesthetics (the visual and aural elements) of the film enhance the narrative and how this furthers the two women's trajectories towards freedom.

Although *The Handmaiden* garnered positive reviews from critics with some calling it an entertaining thriller (Lee 2016: n.p.), other reviewers felt like it was too sexually explicit. *Slate*'s Laura Miller admonishes the film for its "disappointingly boilerplate" scenes featuring "visual clichés of pornographic lesbianism, [the actresses'] bodies offered up for the camera's delectation" (2016: n.p.). In Miller's view it is a shallow film that lacks the depth that

Fingersmith (2002) has; however, I contend that the film depicts Sook-hee and Hideko finding sorority with one another, and the sex scenes serve to enhance their quests for self-awakening through sexual awakening. My sentiments are echoed by Jia Tolentino who says that "the women know what they look like, it seems—they are consciously performing for each other—and Park is deft at extracting the particular sense of silly freedom that can be found in enacting a sexual cliché" (2016: n.p.). Furthermore, reviewers have perceived the film as depicting sexual liberation for Sook-hee and Hideko (Kermode 2017; Bradshaw 2017).

Critical Literature on *Stoker*

In critical articles and reviews on *Stoker*, writers tend to focus on the character of India and her growth from seeming innocence to cold-blooded killer (Murphy 2016; Lindop 2016; Brody 2013). Most note the psychological aspects of the film and the Hitchcock-inspired elements.

Bernice Murphy's "Girl Anachronism: *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and The Depiction of Adolescent Psychosis in *Excision* (2012) and *Stoker* (2013)" (2016) is a study of Shirley Jackson's novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), Richard Bates Jr's *Excision* (2012) and Park Chan-wook's *Stoker* (2013). In her study, Murphy compares *Stoker* to psychological horrors and thrillers that have come before it like *Carrie* (1976) and *Jennifer's Body* (2009) which depict a "monstruous feminine"—showing adolescent girls seeking revenge through violence. She notes:

> Female adolescence has, of course, been depicted frequently in horror cinema as a time during which monstrous deviations from the "norm" take place, but it also has often been the case that teenage girls are permitted to express rage, disobedience, and homicidal impulses only when their actions are related to a supernatural force connected to the perceived "otherness" of the female body. (2016: 183)

In film and literature, female adolescence is often portrayed as monstrous and even mysterious as the female body is widely held as something other and unknown. During this time, girls go through puberty and have their first period (as depicted in *Carrie*). It is often also the time when girls are evaluating their sexual identity like their male counterparts; however, due to societal expectations girls are taught to abstain from sex and that their sexual thoughts are considered deviant. In horror films this suppressed sexuality is shown through violence and the female protagonists' enacting revenge on the people around them. Murphy's insights into *Stoker* complement my analysis of India's character and how she can liberate herself through her transgressive desires. In contradistinction to Murphy, I explore India's eroticism and

sadomasochism through a Bataillian and Foucauldian lens, focussing also on her relationship with her uncle Charlie.

A noticeable contribution to the literature on *Stoker* is Samantha Lindop's *Postfeminism and the* Fatale *Figure in* Neo-noir *Cinema* (2016), specifically the chapter "Playtime is Over" where she determines how the *fille fatale* (fatal girl) is constructed in postmillennial *noir*. Lindop points out the horror influences in *Stoker*, limning the monstrous elements of India and Charlie. She identifies the patriarchal crisis in the film and Charlie's role as India's substitute father. I augment this argument by discussing how the film subverts the traditional Oedipal narrative, employing Kaja Silverman's feminist critique in *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983).

In his review of *Stoker* Richard Brody calls the film a "fractured fairy tale" (2013: n.p.). I will explore the implications of this by considering the intertextual allusions made to fairy tales like Hans Christian Andersen's "Red Shoes" and the Brothers Grimm's "Worn-out Dancing Shoes" which are a moral tales about women's deviant behaviour. Notably, the film also borrows from Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) especially with regards to narrative pacing, themes, and the use of names like Charlie. In this regard, I acknowledge the film's use of intertextuality to heighten its themes and narrative.

Conclusion

While recent critical scholarship highlights feminist themes in *Stoker* and *The Handmaiden*; this dissertation offers a *queer* feminist perspective, with a particular focus on the representation of the erotic and 'counterpleasures' (a term coined by Karmen MacKendrick). Both films not only explore the sexual awakenings of the women in the films, but also the subversive potential of queer desire. The focus of this dissertation, therefore, is not only on how the women are portrayed in the film, but also how they are able to elude the heteropatriarchal order through their transgressive sexual desires. Concepts such as bisexuality (or queerness), sadomasochism and the gaze are all important in understanding the actions of the characters and liberatory potential they represent to queer viewers.

Theoretical Framework

> Eroticism is the brink of the abyss. […] The abyss is the foundation of the possible. We're brought to the edge of the same abyss by uncontrolled laughter or ecstasy. From this comes a 'questioning' of everything possible. This is the stage of rupture, of letting go of things, of looking forward to death.
>
> (Bataille 1988 [1944]: 109)

It is impossible to articulate the intricacies of eroticism and intimacy without delving into queer theory and theories of transgressive desire. The above quote from French novelist and philosopher Georges Bataille perfectly encapsulates the trajectories of the protagonists in both *The Handmaiden* and *Stoker*. Both films deal with this "rupture" from the highly heteropatriarchal structures in the women's lives and leads to the ultimate liberation of these women. I will, therefore, be reading both films in terms of Bataille's theories of eroticism and transgressive desire as well as employing queer theory to further develop a more nuanced understanding of the characters and their motivations. I will also be employing feminist film theory and Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" to examine how the protagonists are framed in the films. While both films deal with transgressive desire they also vary in terms of style, genre, *mise-en-scene,* and theme, and thus require some variance in conceptual framework. Consequently, my analysis of the coming-of-age narrative, *Stoker,* depends primarily upon a Bataillean reading of human desire and the transgression of the parameters of a 'limiting life.' Alternatively, the romance plot of *The Handmaiden* calls for theories on queer intimacies, and in terms of erotic loves scenes engages with the feminist pornography debate. I will also be examining the extent to which both films portray transgressive desire in terms of sadomasochism and same-sex intimacy.

A Search for Being: Eroticism and Intimacy

French philosopher and novelist Georges Bataille defines eroticism as "assenting to life to the point of death" (1987: 11). The death drive, or Thanatos (the Greek god of death), can be referred to as a person's drive towards death and self-destruction. First proposed by Sabina Speilrein, it was later taken up by Sigmund Freud in his seminal essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920). The latter marks a critical shift in Freud's thinking, in which he acknowledges the duality of human nature. We are not simply driven by the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, but rather, as Sean Homer summarises, "the primary impulse of life is to propel towards the 'beyond of pleasure': death. Bataille (like his contemporary, Lacan),

perceived that we are not driven *towards* death [as Freud posited] but *by* death" (2005:89, Homer's emphasis).

Bataille is fascinated by proximate death, particularly in sadomasochistic practices and *le petite mort* meaning "the little death" experienced in sexual climax. This is especially of interest to the character of India in *Stoker* as her sexual awakening is linked closely with sadomasochism and death. According to Benjamin Noys:

> [t]he sexual act is an experience of continuity, that is an experience of the loss or dissolution of the boundaries of our body. This loss of the boundary of the body is an act of violence, even if we experience it in the tenderest caress, and in this loss of discontinuity it prefigures death, when our body will lose its integrity and return to the earth. (2000: 83)

Death and eroticism are continuously linked, "it is as if Thanatos drove the chariot of Eros" (Bauman 1993: 101). In invoking the Freudian Eros/Thanatos paradox, Zygmunt Bauman notes that love, by definition, is "fearful, unsatiated and restless" (1993:101). For Bataille both eroticism and death offer a path to transcendence, "a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self" (Bataille 1987: 23). Michel Foucault discusses Bataille and the limit experience when he notes that "in Bataille the theme of the 'limit experience' in which the subject reaches decomposition, leaves itself, at the limits of its own impossibility" (1991: 48). The limit experience is defined as an intense and seemingly impossible experience or action that approaches the edge of living. According to Bataille, taboo and transgression are irreducibly interlinked. Noting that "the taboo would forbid the transgression, but fascination compels it" (Bataille 1987: 68). Primal curiosity compels humans to forgo their social restrictions and surrender to their transgressive desires. Furthermore, Jonothan Dollimore extrapolates that, for Bataille, eroticism is heightened in the civilised context (2001: 252). Transgression, therefore, is part of the human condition; it is a desire to surpass the boundaries of life.

For Bataille, the violation of the body (in coitus, in transgressive desire, in torture) becomes the vehicle for an (im)possible mystical union between self and other, and between self and Other.[5] Eroticism is a "spiritual exercise" (Gifford 2005: 129), a quest for transcendence or ecstasy: from the Greek *ekstasis*, to stand outside the body (Hornblower and Spawforth 2005:

[5] The Other referred to here is absolute alterity or the Other that stands outside the Symbolic. The Symbolic, for Lacan encompasses the entire field of human interaction and existence. The Symbolic "Other" is viewed as the anonymous authoritative power and knowledge (Johnston 2018). According to Hendrix "the Other (language, law, systems of rules) assumes predominance over nature and instinct in human behaviour" (2019: 6).

505). In other words, eroticism is the quest for an impossible closeness. Furthermore, MacKendrick notes that "Bataille's fascination is with the body of the shattered subject, the transgression of the seemingly insurmountable boundary between discontinuous living and the continuity of death. It is not the death of the *body* but of the *subject* that is sought" (1999: 118). The violation of the body in sadomasochism is symbolic of the fracturing of the unified self because only then is it possible to escape the confines of limited life and venture into a world beyond. Bataille notes that "without doing violence to our inner selves, are we able to bear a negation that carries us to the farthest bounds of possibility?" (1987: 24). India, in *Stoker,* encapsulates this action of bringing violence to the inner self which allows her to go to the farthest bounds of possibility. This is the breaking of the subject to go past the limiting life that she exists in. Her sadomasochism drives her throughout the film, culminating in an explosive and domesticity-shattering ending. This ending signifies the rebirth of the chaotic 'self' amidst the fragments of the old (as daughter, niece, young woman). India needs to annihilate her old self to escape the narrow parameters of her existence. Only then can she move beyond the controlling discourses of her mother and uncle Charlie.

Karmen MacKendrick discusses sadomasochism and how it disrupts the binarism of oppression. She coins the term 'counterpleasures' which refers to pleasures that exceed the parameters of what is deemed conventionally pleasurable:

> Counterpleasures take up a highly disruptive place within, at the margins of, and explosively beyond [the institutions of pornography, Christianity, and erotic domination]. That is, Sade and Masoch do not give us pornography in any usual sense; they make use of pornographic techniques to problematize pleasure and unfold startling possibilities in language and narrative structure. [...] Sadomasochistic eroticism intensifies relations of control and subordination by fundamentally (that is, at the very beginning or foundation) altering their meaning, removing power from its orderly binarism of oppression to create a transgressive, postsubjective and highly Bataillean erotic. (1999: 14)

Park's films exemplify MacKendrick's concept of counterpleasures and subvert our expectations of gender power dynamics. This is elucidated through the gendered power relations set up in his films, especially the relationships between India and her uncle Charlie in *Stoker* and Hideko and her uncle Kouzuki as well as Sook-hee and Fujiwara in *The Handmaiden.* Near the end of *Stoker,* it is implied that India sides with her uncle, almost as if she is succumbing to his control; however, she betrays him and sets on her own journey thus liberating herself. Similarly, in *The Handmaiden* Sook-hee and Hideko appear to be puppets in Fujiwara and Kouzuki's game; it is only in the third part that we discover that they are in control of their narratives.

Intimacy is closely linked to eroticism and the breaking down of boundaries linked to desire. It is important to understanding the complex interpersonal dynamics in the films that defy conventional thinking around love, sex, gender, and relationships. MacKendrick discusses intimacies that "transgress language, forcing us to find our meanings in the interstices and twists, the absences and silences, the rhythms and rushes of words" (1999: 148). These twists, silences and rhythms are what characterise Park's films in which he incorporates aural and linguistic signs to show intimacy between the characters. Intimacy is, therefore, linked very closely to the erotic. In other words, the erotic can be read as a form of intimacy, a "rupture" of the subject and "letting go of things" as Bataille puts it (1988: 108). Intimacy is "a pleasure that already exceeds the possibility of pleasure, which by our usual thinking ought by rights to belong to a subject […] we are speaking of that which exceeds discontinuity, that we are in a space of nonknowledge" (MacKendrick 1999: 148). It is the continuous breaking down of the subject and a closeness to the other: chaos and peace at the same time. In other words, it is everything and nothing at once, a space of nonknowledge, to borrow MacKendrick's phrase. I use these concepts in relation to the cinematographic techniques used in the films such as the composition of the shot.

According to David Bell intimacy is trickier to theorise than sex or sexuality as it highlights the multiplicity and complexity of human relationships (1995: 286). The films that form the focus of this study deal with the complex nature of intimacy and how intimacy is shared between people; this is shown through the relationship of Sook-hee and Hideko in *The Handmaiden* as well as through India and uncle Charlie's compelling and incestuous relationship in *Stoker*. Poet and critic Juliana Spahr states that intimacy "includes desire, and conventional domestic relationships, and unconventional ones, […] and identity and identification with those like and unlike" (2001: 99). Lauren Berlant examines intimacy and its inseparability from systems of hegemony. According to Berlant:

> Rethinking intimacy calls out not only for redescription but for transformative analyses of the rhetorical and material conditions that enable hegemonic fantasies to thrive in the minds and on the bodies of subjects while, at the same time, attachments are developing that might redirect the different routes taken by history and biography. To rethink intimacy is to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living. (1998: 286)

In reassessing what intimacy is we are allowed to evaluate our ways of being with others through a different lens. Spahr defines a 'lyric intimacy' in which she discusses the "overlaps and slippages" between gender, sex, sexuality, desire, and various interpersonal relationships

(2001: 99). Furthermore, the bisexual nature of these intimacies "threatens and challenges the easy binarities of straight and gay, queer and 'het'" (Garber 1995: 65). The overlaps and slippages within intimate relationships is typified through the character relationships in both *Stoker* and *The Handmaiden.* In *Stoker* it is explored through India and her relationships with her uncle Charlie and her mother, whereas in *The Handmaiden* it is explored through the main characters of Sook-hee and Hideko. Additionally, Garber notes that "the erotic discovery of bisexuality is the fact that it reveals sexuality to be a process of growth, transformation, and surprise, not a stable and knowable state of being" (Garber 1995: 66). Therefore, this dissertation will examine the interrelationship between eroticism, intimacy, and the queer desire in Park's cinema. The films are both stories of awakening, highlighting sexuality as growth.

Boundary Shifts: Queerness

Despite the negative historical associations of the word queer to describe homosexual or 'abnormal' sexuality, it has recently been re-appropriated by academics to define the fluidity and changing nature of human sexuality (Benshoff and Griffin 2004: 1). Queer breaks down the binary between heterosexual and homosexual and encompasses the diverse spectrum of human sexuality. As Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin note:

> Queer theory posits that sexuality is a vast and complex terrain that encompasses not just personal orientation and/or behaviour, but also the social, cultural, and historical factors that define and create conditions for such orientations and behaviours. As such, queer theory rejects essentialist or biological notions of gender and sexuality and sees them instead as fluid and socially constructed positionalities. (2004: 1)

For Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, one of the originators of queer theory, the word queer opens a "mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's [gender or sexuality] aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (1994: 8). These "overlaps" and "lapses and excesses of meaning" are what define the sexuality of the main characters in both of Park's films. The films place their sexual orientations on a spectrum where characters' sexual orientations exceed either/or thinking—the idea of overlap is that of both/and rather than either/or.

Benshoff notes that "queerness disrupts narrative equilibrium and sets in motion a questioning of the status quo, and in many cases in fantastic literature, the nature of reality itself" (2004: 63). Therefore, destabilizing the status quo can lead to new possibilities, new social contracts beyond the strictures of patriarchal heteroreality. In both films, the queerness of the main

characters disrupts the equilibrium of the worlds around them, and they can build new realities outside of the patriarchal heteroreality they live in. According to South African queer theorist, Cheryl Stobie, representations of queer/bisexuality create anxiety, but also offer potential for "innovative ways" of interrogating the world, providing potential for "re-vision" (2003: 135). Gloria Anzaldua makes a perceptive statement on the shifting boundaries that allow this potential:

> When we experience boundary shifts, border violations, bodily penetrations, identity confusions, a flash of understanding may sear us, shocking us into new ways of reading the world. The ideological filters fall away; we realize that the walls are porous and that we can "see" through them. Having become aware of the fictions and fissures in our belief system, we perceive the cracks between the worlds, the holes in reality. These cracks and holes disrupt the neat categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality. (2000:280)

Queerness, much like transgressive desire, allows one to question "the regimes of the normal" (Warner 1991: xxvi) and move beyond the binarity of oppression.

Stobie uses the words queer and bisexual interchangeably and describes bisexuality as not just a sexual identity, but as a metaphor, used in literary and visual texts to represent liminal people who are boundary-crossers, who seem to possess an insatiable, transgressive desire (2003: 119). They are dangerous because they do not conform to any norms or abide by social convention. This is true for many of the characters in Park's oeuvre, but this is especially relevant to India in *Stoker*. Although she does not show attraction to both men and women, her sexuality is ambiguous and evident throughout the film. What makes her character so troubling is her excess of sexual desire. Her character will be discussed in greater detail in chapter five titled "Stoker." However, it is important to note the fluid nature of her sexual attraction and how it plays into her character development.

When discussing the fluidity of sexuality, Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum is also useful for understanding the overlaps in women's (sapphic) desires. In her essay entitled "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), Rich defines a lesbian continuum that calls for significance and cognisance of homosocial bonds beyond sexual identity. The term was meant to allow for the "greatest possible variation of female-identified experience" (Rich 1986: 73). The lesbian continuum, therefore, "takes the attention away from heterosexuality too. Ultimately the idea of the lesbian continuum is about re-establishing the importance of all women's women-identified experiences in life, regardless of their stated sexual orientation" (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004: 81). The lesbian continuum is not just about lesbian desire, but rather the relationships that women build with each other. This is important in understanding

the relationships between the women in both films and how their intimacy goes beyond the sexual, establishing a 'sisterhood.' Rich advocates for sorority and likens it to motherhood which she calls "a profoundly female experience" (1980: 650). In Park's films the concept of sorority is explored especially in *The Handmaiden* where the sorority between the two women is one of the driving factors for the plot. Signs of sorority are also found in *Stoker*; however, this is to a lesser extent and is mostly depicted in how uncle Charlie (as a masculine interloper in the feminine sphere) is a threat to what little sorority the Stoker women have.

Further discussing the lesbian continuum, Rich also notes the erasure of women's sexuality in a patriarchal society. Rich emphasises how society (and academia, by extension) tends to assume that heterosexuality is innate, 'natural' and normal. This heteronormative worldview, or 'heteroreality,' erases lesbian desire. Furthermore, it forces lesbians to live a double life, presenting themselves as heterosexual in public to be accepted (1980: 654). Rich also emphasises the relative absence of lesbian love in art and literature, other than when it is represented as perverse, thus servicing male sexual desire. She states that this is a form of male power manifesting itself and enforcing heterosexuality on women: "soft-core pornography and advertising depict women as objects of sexual appetite devoid of emotional context, without individual meaning or personality: essentially as a sexual commodity to be consumed by males" (Rich 1980: 640). Women's sexual desire is not their own, but rather something for male consumption.

Luce Irigaray also emphasises the relative erasure of female sexuality in the symbolic order as it privileges the masculine. Woman, in the phallologocentric order, exists for the pleasure of man. Therefore, she only exists as "the possibility of mediation, transaction, transition, transference—between men and his fellow creatures, indeed between man and himself" (Irigaray 1981: 108). Women, therefore, are rendered other to the symbolic order, female homosexuality doubly so. Irigaray states that "the interplay of desire among women's bodies, sexes, and speech is inconceivable in the dominant socio-cultural economy" (1981: 110). This points to the fact that the symbolic order cannot conceive of a world outside of the masculine, or rather that there is a world where women are not concerned with men. Therefore, the sense of sorority is invisible to the symbolic order. Park disrupts the governing symbolic order in his films through the main male characters, incorporating a critique of spaces that are reserved for men. This is shown mostly in *The Handmaiden* where the symbolic order is physically

manifested through Kouzuki's library. The library is a space for men and the only woman allowed in it is Hideko who acts as a mediator between the men and their sexual desires.

The Art/Porn Debate

There is a fine line between art and the pornographic, a line that Park's films tread. *The Handmaiden* deals with the (im)possibilities of representing women's desire and is a metafictional critique of common narrative assumptions. Gary Needham notes that it is difficult to define porn due to the subjective nature of it: "definitions of art and of pornography and art/porn find themselves caught in the ever-shifting climates of tolerance and politics so that it is possible to infer that pornography is what conservative states call art when they want to remove funding, censor or destroy work" (2018: 163). The question that comes to mind is what is deemed art and what is deemed pornography? In his chapter "Not on public display: the art/porn debate" Needham details the differing debates surrounding art and porn. There are three debates detailed: the aesthetic debate, the philosophical debate, and the legal debate. He discusses the difficulties in attempting to give an objective definition of pornography and art and mentions a few artists whose work tends to tread the line of art and porn (2018: 166). Many times, Needham notes, art is deemed pornographic when it comes under censorship (2018: 166). Furthermore, feminists such as Gloria Steinem mark the differences between erotica (and erotic art) and pornography. Pornography places an emphasis on dominance whereas erotica places its emphasis on mutuality. "Erotica is something quite different, portraying love as something chosen. Pornography is not sex, and sex need not be violent or aggressive at all. It is violence and domination that are pornographic" (Steinem in Bennetts 1979: 10). Steinem holds that "these two sorts of images are as different as love is from rape, as dignity is from humiliation, as partnership is from slavery, as pleasure is from pain" (2014: 145). However, the difference between art, erotica and pornography is on a spectrum rather than on trinary scale as Steinem suggests and is tricky to define (much like intimacy and queerness). Park's films have been criticised for their sexually explicit scenes, in particular *The Handmaiden* which has a sex scene between two women that some view as too graphic. The question of whether the sex scenes are artistic or pornographic is complicated and intricate, detailing more than just defining the terrain between the artistic and the pornographic. The intimacy between the two main characters should, by Steinem's definition, be enough to deem it erotic rather than pornographic; however, if violence and domination is the marker of pornography then it is under patriarchal power that we see pornography in the film: when Hideko is forced to read pornography to her uncle's patrons. In this sense pornography is used as dominance and control

whereas the erotic signals freedom for the protagonists. This is something I will examine in my chapter on *The Handmaiden*.

For MacKendrick the pornography debate invokes the aesthetic philosophy of *mimesis*, reality versus representation: "the relation of language to body is never simple, and certainly the relation of counterpleasurable literature to counterpleasurable act is not one of imitative depiction in either direction (from act to literature or vice versa)" (1999: 31). In other words, the depictions of sex in literature (and, by extension film) cannot be the same as the act of sex. Depictions of the counterpleasurable act can only provide an idealised or sensationalised version of the act. As such, pornography is only a depiction of the act and cannot fully represent what the act is. Its aim is not to show sex as it is, but rather to entice the viewer.

According to Consuelo M. Concepcion "pornography displaces the 'naturalness' of sexuality. Because pornography 're-presents' sexuality, it questions the dominance of any one expression of one sexuality over another" (1999: 99). While I do not view the same-sex love scenes in *The Handmaiden* as pornographic (in the sense that they are not exploitative or obscene), what demands critical examination is *how* Park's film self-consciously foregrounds the pornography debate, and grapples with the question of representing (and re-presenting) women's desires. Concepcion contends that pornography does not close the door to desire, but rather enhances it (1999: 99). Although Concepcion paints pornography in a more positive light, feminist theorists like Andrea Dworkin argue that porn places men as the subject and women as the object. This is also true of lesbian porn where most of the scenes are shot in a voyeuristic style implying that the viewer is watching in on them. Dworkin notes that "pornography's antagonism to civil equality, integrity, and self-determination for women is absolute; and is effective in making that antagonism socially real and determining" (2000: 36). Pornography becomes a way in which women are viewed in society, making the gap between submission and equality wider. This is due to the way in which women are depicted in porn. As Dworkins points out, women are primarily shown to be placed in positions where they have pain inflicted on them or are violated (2000: 36). Over recent years there has been a change to more sex positive feminism. Ellen Willis notes that "as we saw it, the claim that 'pornography is violence against women' was code for the neo-Victorian idea that men want sex and women endure it" (2005: n.p.). This is the basis of my discussion regarding *The Handmaiden* as the film depicts the main character (Hideko) enjoying sex and even the pornographic material that she is forced to read to her uncle's male patrons. It is not the pornography that is depicted as harmful, but

rather how it interpreted and employed by hegemonic masculinity to perpetuate and concretise male control and dominance over women's bodies. Rhee notes that "what is remarkable about *The Handmaiden*, however, is that the relationship between subject and object is presented as neither unilateral nor immutable, but reciprocal" (2020: 122). Although the men in the film try to exploit the protagonists using pornography, these same pornographic texts empower Hideko in her sexual relationship with Sook-hee.

A discussion on women's desires cannot be had without mentioning lesbian pornography, especially in the context of Park's films. Cherry Smyth (1990) makes a case for lesbian pornography as consumed by queer women. She states that the radical feminist movement has "desexed the female body, robbed her of her pleasure, and created a suspicion of all pleasure promoted by cinema" (1990: 153). Furthermore, she states that lesbian sexuality has been rendered invisible by society. It is this invisibility that Park aims to redress in *The Handmaiden* through making women's desire visible and at the centre of the main characters' trajectory from oppression to sexual liberation. Smyth also points out the double bind of being a lesbian and consuming lesbian porn made by heterosexual men for the consumption of heterosexual men. Smyth reveals that there is a paradox in trying to "find ourselves in the heart of another's intimacy" (1990: 154). This is the same paradox that is posed throughout *The Handmaiden* where Hideko must come to terms with her own desires and the representations of lesbian desire in the pornography she reads to her uncle's male clients.

Who is Doing the Looking?

According to Laura Mulvey, film produces a fundamentally masculine perspective which reduces women to objects of male voyeurism and fetishism (1989 [1975]: 17). The gaze reflects the asymmetry of gender politics in heteronormative patriarchal society, making men the active lookers and women passive objects to be enjoyed and possessed by men. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey states that in patriarchal culture woman stands "as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (1989 [1975]: 15). Women in film are viewed through their relation to men, unable to be perceived as three-dimensional characters by the audience. Mulvey argues in her essay that the language of film is made by male filmmakers for a male audience and fits into the wider language of the patriarchy (1989 [1975]: 16). This can also refer to any art made by men for the consumption of men. In the

context of *The Handmaiden* the male gaze is imperative to understanding how Park aims to portray the (im)possibilities of women's sexual desire being a male filmmaker. Furthermore, scholar Kelly Oliver notes that "voyeurism and fetishism produce a desire to possess" (2017: 452). This is the language of the patriarchy that Mulvey discusses, the language to possess and control through objectification of women's bodies. According to Janice Loreck, "in the male gaze, woman is visually positioned as an 'object' of heterosexual male desire. Her feelings, thoughts, and her own sexual drives are less important than her being 'framed' by male desire" (2016: n.p.). Mulvey posits that the male gaze consists of three looks: the look of the camera, the look of the audience and the look of the characters (1989 [1975]: pp).

Mulvey's conceptualisation of the 'male gaze' has come under scrutiny, especially by academics of colour and queer theorists. Queer theorist Tamsin Wilton questions how Mulvey's male gaze applies in the context of the lesbian viewer: "Indeed, if Mulvey is to be believed, it is impossible for any woman to get pleasure from a mainstream narrative film without temporarily unsexing herself […] Yet lesbians still go to the movies and still get pleasure from watching films" (Wilton 1995: 144). Wilton points to the fact that lesbians still enjoy watching mainstream films, even though these are primarily written and produced by men. She also notes that because queer audiences are used to contradictory viewing experiences, they are still able to enjoy mainstream films. Wilton states that "symbolic interactionism surely comes into its own in attempting to make sense of the (altogether rather peculiar) social experience of cinema spectatorship" (1995: 146). She suggests that the unique setting of the cinema allows people from the sexual and gender spectrum to explore their pleasures as it liberates one from societal surveillance. However, this form of public spectatorship can also cause anxiety in the spectator, especially the othered spectator. Wilton notes that when a lesbian sex scene comes on screen she becomes aware of straight men in the cinema alongside her, and is "suddenly thrown back into the relations of surveillance which structure [her] social life" (1995: 146). The film self-consciously interrogates the male gaze in terms of the scenes depicting Hideko's readings to her uncle's patrons.

Mulvey does not acknowledge an active female gaze outside the male gaze and for her the female spectator can experience visual pleasure, but this is through the male gaze which determines that pleasure as masochistic. Julia Lesage suggests that men's and women's viewing experiences differ:

> Although women's sexuality has been shaped under a dominant patriarchal culture, clearly women do not respond to women in film and the erotic element in quite the same way that men do, given that patriarchal film has the structure of a male fantasy (1978: 89).

Women and men experience film differently, due to their individual erotic desires. In recent years, due to the increase of both female-led films and films directed by women, the female gaze has been considered. For example, Celine Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) has been described as the "epitome of the female gaze" (Nausheen 2020: n.p.). The film, much like the *The Handmaiden*, deals with the concepts of how women are depicted in art as well how the female body is represented on film. Sciamma takes a naturalistic approach to the female body, not shying away from showing the characters' protruding bellies or body hair[6] and discusses topics such as menstruation and abortion in a matter-of-fact way. This allows the audience to accept these features as normal and a natural part of women's daily lives, whether they're from the 18th century or present day.

Some cinematographers reject the notion of a female gaze, such as Natasha Braier who argues that if there is such a thing as a female gaze then it has not had time to develop into something we can analyse. Moreover, she asserts that "every cinematographer has their own unique gaze, technical skills, and style regardless of their gender. And reducing things to two types of gazes doesn't make much sense" (Telfer 2018: n.p.). She suggests that the cinematographer works in service of the director's vision and that the combination of the two artists putting a frame together. Despite Braier's claims, there does seem to be a shift in showing women in film as people rather than objects or props for the male characters. Perhaps this is more of a move towards cinema that is not bound by the binary thinking of male gaze versus female gaze.

In regard to the conundrum of the female spectator and the female gaze, it is worth noting that Mulvey had second thoughts about her categorical criticism of cinema's masculine bias. In her essay "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*" (hereafter referred to as "Afterthoughts") she focuses on the female spectator and how identification is affected if a female character is in the centre of the narrative. Mulvey

[6] It should be noted that although Sciamma chooses to naturalise the feminine experience by depicting these aspects of womanhood, the actresses in the film conform to Hollywood ideals of beauty. They are both slender, pale-skinned women who have soft facial features. Sciamma chooses to show that these women naturally have body hair, allows them to sit in positions that allow their bellies to protrude, and uses varied facial expressions that may seem ugly. Sciamma and Park still present relatively idealised visions of the feminine, and Park more so than Sciamma. Park's female characters exemplify an Asian (or western/Hollywood influenced) ideal of beauty: demure, lithe, graceful and blemish-free.

returns to the Freudian framework and theorises that the female spectator's desire is linked to the scopophilic desires of the male gaze. Mulvey's theories regarding female empowerment are rigid and presuppose a hierarchal structure in cinema that make men a requirement for women to gain authority in their cinematic viewing. With this framework, women only achieve their own gaze through becoming a masculinised female spectator. Furthermore, Mulvey's theories regarding this masculinisation of female spectators presents an immutable framework for analysing cinema as it does not acknowledge fluid spectatorial positions not linked to male power.

In her essay "The Leather Menace" (2011), Gayle Rubin posits that the human body is open to a multitude of sexual desires and pleasures: "sexual diversity exists, not everyone likes to do the same things, and people who have different sexual preferences are not sick, stupid, warped, brainwashed, under duress, dupes of the patriarchy, products of bourgeois decadence" (2011: 133). Rubin suggests that heterosexual societies socially construct hierarchal divisions between sexualities and their desires. Furthermore, Rubin's theory of the human body and sexuality obscures Mulvey's gendering of desire in the male gaze. Rubin posits that the diversity of human sexuality presupposes diversity of desires. In addition, she sees Mulvey's notion of the male gaze as a one-sided psychoanalytical approach that fails to notice or acknowledge the presence of fluid female desires in cinema.

In his review of Kaja Silverman's Male Subjectivity at the Margins (1992), Jim Ellis compares Mulvey's approach to the depictions of women in film to Silverman's contention that there is a difference between the gaze and the look:

> Feminist film criticism since Laura Mulvey has often argued that women in film typically function as the object of the male gaze […] Silverman argues instead that we are all always simultaneously subject and object of desire, and that the real problem with cinema is that "male desire is so consistently and systematically imbricated with projection and control" (144-5). Just as the penis is continually conflated with the phallus […] so too is the male look, a signifier of lack, often conflated with the gaze. (2016: 55)

For Silverman there is a marked distinction between gaze and look. The latter is a marker of lack and inadequacy, and thus, the male is not always the controlling subject. Men may occupy a marginal position in film. This revelation of lack in the look, is relevant to *The Handmaiden* where Hideko reads the pornographic texts to her male audience exemplifying Silverman's words that "we all function simultaneously as subject and object" (1992: 144) of desire. In addition, Silverman states that "[w]e have at times assumed that dominant cinema's scopic regime could be overturned by 'giving' woman the gaze, rather than by exposing the

impossibility of anyone ever owning that visual agency, or of him or herself escaping specularity" (1992: 152). Silverman suggests that the solution to the male gaze is not a female gaze because it is almost always impossible to escape specularity or have visual agency.

Conclusion

The following chapters will explore the links between intimacy and desire as represented in Park Chan-wook's films. The journeys of the women in the films highlight the importance of intimacy as a catalyst for liberation from the patriarchal and heteronormative parameters of the society they live in.

Throughout this dissertation I will be using this multifocal theoretical lens to explore the narrative trajectories of Park's female protagonists; namely, Sook-hee, Hideko, and India. The films' narratives follow the sexual awakenings of these women and deal heavily with the themes and theories discussed in this chapter. Therefore, it is imperative that the concepts discussed in this chapter are not dealt with in isolation, but rather in the broader context of each film.

The Handmaiden

> But the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough. The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information […] The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings.
>
> (Lorde 1984: 54)

Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden* is a winding erotic psychological thriller that tells the tale of two women attempting to free themselves from the looming patriarchal figures in their lives. The above quote from poet and critical thinker Audre Lorde exemplifies their plight: the quest for intimacy and the expression of their erotic desire in a heteropatriarchal society that ignores women's pleasures. In Lorde's description the erotic offers "a well of replenishing and provocative force." It is empowering—a nourishing and fortifying force of resistance. The discovery of the subversive power of the erotic drives the plot of Park's film, as love and desire between two women becomes a catalyst for their covert rebellion against heteropatriarchal dominion. The erotic tension between the two protagonists becomes "a measure between the beginnings of [their] sense of self and the chaos of [their] strongest feelings." Lorde acknowledges how men use women's erotic desire against them. This is often the case with pornography, which men use to objectify and fetishise women. Notably, the film self-reflexively interrogates and subverts the objectifying power of pornography.

Women's desire was (and still is) either viewed as non-existent, or insignificant in comparison to male desire. Lorde's use of the word "trivial" echoes Virginia Woolf's observation that women's interests, like fashion and friendship, are viewed as unimportant compared to men's interests. That men are fundamentally sexual beings has been normalised in society—a man's pursuit of sex is synonymous with his power and potency. This contrasts with women's desire which is never named. It is seen as relatively insignificant in comparison to a man's and exists only in the service of satisfying men (Woolf 1945: 74). When a woman displays overt sexual desire, she is pathologised—her desire being confused and psychotic. To maintain the heteropatriarchal economy, normative masculinity is pitted against femininity construed as

lack or deviation. This is foregrounded in *The Handmaiden* where the men's hypersexuality is evinced by Hideko's uncle's (Kouzuki) and his compatriots' consumption of pornography and erotic art. Kouzuki utilises pornography to control his wife and later his niece. Pornography objectifies women, but Kouzuki takes this objectification and fetishisation further by forcing Hideko to publicly read pornographic texts in his library to an audience of men, effacing her and her sexuality.

The film offers a self-reflexive comment on the (im)possibilities of representing women's desire shown through the narrative. The novel it is adapted from, *Fingersmith*, deals with a Victorian woman who is forced to help her uncle with his literary pornography collection. Park changes this setting to Korea under Japanese colonial rule, adding a deeper cross-cultural and transnational dimension to the film. Changing the setting to Korea during this transitional period in the country's history appeals to a South Korean audience. The change of setting introduces the Korean term *sadaejuui* which connotes the admiration for a more powerful nation. The term refers to people of a smaller nation (in this case Korea) being drawn to, and in awe of, the larger nation or colonising force (Japan), and thus becoming subservient to that power. *Sadae* means "dealing with the great" or "serving the great"; it can be interpreted as "loving and admiring the great and powerful" (Alford 1999: 150). *Juui* translates to "ideology" and is akin to the prefix "-ism" in English. In other words, *sadaejuui* conflates subservience with the political realism (or emphasis on the nation state's role) that accompanies the sage recognition of greater power (Armstrong 2007: 57-58). Park highlights the power of this cultural hegemony, noting how Koreans "internalise" this sense of deference to such an extent "that [they are] not worshipping the bigger power by force, but are doing it voluntarily" (in Topalovic 2016: n.p.). Kouzuki exemplifies the notion of *sadaejuui* especially with how he becomes a threat to other people of his nation (Count Fujiwara and Sook-hee) by rejecting his Korean nationality and exerting control over Korean people. Suk Koo Rhee notes that one of the reasons why Park changed the setting is because "Korea witnessed a hitherto unparalleled rise in interest in erotic-grotesque books and images" (2020: 116). This rise in the erotic-grotesque was introduced from Japan and this new taste was introduced to the colonised Korean people as an example of a modern culture. The change in setting allows Park to also foreground the debate between colonialism and masculinity in addition to allowing him to engage with the pornography debate. Rhee notes the effects that the West also had on the colonised people of Korea through the mediation of Japan:

> It highlights the way in which ideas and values that originated in the West, and were mediated by the Japanese empire, infiltrated colonial Korea in such a way that both subjected the indigenes to the hegemonic culture of the colonizer and enabled them to engage with it in a subversive manner. (2020: 116)

The idea that Korean people were both subjected to the culture of the coloniser and engaged with it in a subversive manner is brought to the forefront of *The Handmaiden* through the behaviour of characters like Kouzuki, who forces Hideko to read pornographic texts, and Hideko who appropriates these ideals (of pornography and the erotic-grotesque) and uses them to free herself and Sook-hee. The pornography debate permeates the entire film as erotic art and texts are used as a tool to control women but are also used by Hideko, to liberate herself from the confines of the heteropatriarchal society.

Before entering an analysis of the film, I will outline the film's complex nonlinear plot, which weaves between temporal settings, and often provides the same scene from different character perspectives. Thereafter, I will explore how *The Handmaiden* attempts to subvert the male gaze through the character of Hideko and her choices and actions in section one: "Subverting the Male Gaze". This section will analyse specific sex scenes that have been labelled pornographic by *Slate*'s Laura Miller. My primary focus is on the scene where the two women engage in sexual intercourse for the first time. This scene is shown twice: once as a short, non-explicit revelation of events and again, as an extended scene where the women are shown explicitly engaging in different sex acts. In discussing the male gaze, I will also examine the male characters and focus on the crisis of masculinity that the men face in section two, "Destroying the Male Fantasy". The analysis in this section will examine the two main male characters, Count Fujiwara and Hideko's controlling uncle, Kouzuki. The film demonstrates the fantasy of male subjectivity, as explained in Lacanian terms: how the male assumption of mastery, authority, 'wholeness' and power depends entirely upon the denial of lack or castration, and the projection of male lack upon woman. It also depends upon woman upholding this fantasy. When Hideko refuses to play her part, the tables turn. In section three titled "Pornography in *The Handmaiden*" I will examine the use of pornography and erotica in the film and how the film foregrounds the pornography debate. Finally, my discussion on pornography will lead into the final section titled "The Erotic as Power" which explores Sook-hee and Hideko's relationship and the intimacy they form. I draw on Bataille in formulating an analysis of queer intimacy in the film. In this section I will highlight how the two women free themselves from their puppet-masters and their phallic fantasies, and through their intimacy create an alternative sororal utopia.

The film is split into three parts each with a distinct tone and narrator. The first part is narrated by Sook-hee, the second is narrated by Hideko, and the final part's narrator is not a character, but rather uses the camera as an omniscient narrator. Each part of the film presents major moments of change in the story that allow us the negate the previous assumptions we have made about characters and events. Through these events we see Sook-hee and Hideko liberate themselves while also witnessing the downfall of Fujiwara and Kouzuki (Sticchi 2018: 62). Before I begin my analysis of the film, I will provide a brief plot synopsis.

The Handmaiden **Plot Synopsis**

Part 1:

A conman pretending to be a Count (Fujiwara) plans to marry a Japanese heiress, Lady Hideko, and steal her wealth after committing her to an asylum. He hires Sook-hee, a pickpocket, to become her handmaiden and encourage Hideko to marry him. Hideko is expected to marry her uncle Kouzuki who collects rare books, which are revealed to be antique Japanese pornographic texts (a detail revealed in part two of the film). Kouzuki has Hideko read passages from these books to potential buyers. As Sook-hee gets to know Hideko better, she begins to form an emotional bond with her. Sook-hee admires Hideko's almost childlike innocence as Hideko has not left her uncle's mansion since her youth. The two women often enjoy "playing" dress up together. When Hideko asks Sook-hee what married life with Fujiwara will be like, Sook-hee shows her by making love to her. Sook-hee exhibits reluctance to going through with Fujiwara's plan, much to his frustration. However, when Hideko shows similar reluctance to marry the Count, Sook-hee encourages her to go through with it. Hideko slaps Sook-hee and leaves in anger. When Kouzuki leaves on business for a week, Hideko and Fujiwara elope to Japan, taking Sook-hee with them. After getting married and cashing the inheritance it is revealed to the audience that Hideko's naïveté is a ruse. With Fujiwara, Hideko convinces the asylum that Sook-hee is the "Countess" by convincing Sook-hee to play one of their many dress-up games. This plan works and Sook-hee is committed instead of Hideko.

Part 2:

Part two begins with a flashback to Hideko's youth when Kouzuki used to abuse both Hideko and her aunt. It is revealed that the rare books that he collects are pornographic, which he trains his wife to read during private auctions. He also makes Hideko's aunt train the young girl to one day take her places as the reader. Later, Hideko's aunt is revealed to have hanged herself

from a cherry blossom tree in the garden. Hideko questions her uncle about her aunt's death, suspecting that it was not a suicide. Kouzuki takes Hideko down to his basement where he implies that he murdered her aunt because she was planning on running away with another woman.[7] In the more recent past, Fujiwara realises that it will be impossible for him to seduce Hideko as she is uninterested in sex and does not fall for his charisma. Instead, he makes a deal with her: if she marries him, he will save her from her uncle in exchange for half of her inheritance. They plan to hire a new handmaiden for Hideko that they can control. Hideko and Fujiwara decide to commit her to an insane asylum under Hideko's name so Hideko can have a new identity. However, Hideko soon falls in love with Sook-hee and, feeling guilty about the imminent betrayal, she attempts to hang herself. Sook-hee finds Hideko hanging from the same cherry blossom tree her aunt hanged herself on and attempts to save Hideko. In the process Sook-hee admits to trying to steal Hideko's inheritance. Hideko explains her plot with Fujiwara to admit Sook-hee to the asylum in her place, and the two plan to take revenge on both Kouzuki and Fujiwara. During their last night in the mansion, Hideko shows Sook-hee her uncle's collection of pornography which angers Sook-hee and prompts her to destroy the library.

Part 3:

The third part begins with Hideko and Fujiwara dining together. Fujiwara asks Hideko to marry him again as Sook-hee because of her new identity. He also tells Hideko that Sook-hee will be dead in a few days, making Hideko question his desires. With the help from her friends who set fire to the asylum and pose as firefighters, Sook-hee manages to escape. Meanwhile, Hideko poisons Fujiwara with opium drops. He passes out and she leaves with his money. Reuniting with Sook-hee, Hideko disguises herself as a man to throw off police officials and they to flee together to Shanghai.

Meanwhile, Kouzuki captures Fujiwara after receiving a letter from Hideko detailing the Count's betrayal to him. In his basement, Kouzuki tortures Fujiwara and asks the man sexual details about Fujiwara's wedding night with Hideko, highlighting that Kouzuki has always wanted to control and own Hideko. She is his desire. A flashback shows that the marriage was never consummated, but Fujiwara makes up a story about the night and convinces Kouzuki to give him a cigarette. After further questioning, Fujiwara refuses to answer any more details

[7] This detail is not evident in the theatrical release of the film, but in the extended director's cut it is made more apparent that Kouzuki killed her because she was a lesbian.

about Hideko. Kouzuki observes that the cigarettes are producing a strange blue smoke; the Count reveals that the cigarettes are laced with mercury and are slowly killing both men.

The final scene of the film shows Hideko and Sook-hee on a ferry to Shanghai, celebrating their freedom together. The camera pans over the wide sea and the full moon, suggesting that the women have successfully emancipated themselves. They have left behind the closed world of Kouzuki's mansion and are on the open sea, sailing towards a new life.

Subverting the Male Gaze

The Handmaiden serves as a critique of the male gaze and heteropatriarchal power. The film demystifies heteropatriarchal power and reveals the illusion of patriarchal control. The film achieves this through exposing male fetishism and objectification of women through pornography. (This is discussed here, but also in more detail in sections two and three: "Destroying the Male Fantasy" and "Pornography in *The Handmaiden*"). Freud identifies the association between castration anxiety and the fetish object, noting that the fetish in fact disguises a fear of the feminine and women's desire (1927: 154). While I provide a more detailed discussion of pornography later, it is worth noting that Park presents pornography in the film as an oppressive tool used against the protagonists forming the basis of his self-conscious critique of the male gaze. The film also foregrounds questions of women's agency in a male-dominated society: their capacity to make choices and actively control their destiny. Initially Hideko's uncle (Kouzuki) has agency and Hideko has none—this is especially true when she was a child and controlled by her uncle (as her aunt was before her). To Kouzuki, Hideko is his puppet and storyteller, and she has no agency or voice as a child or young woman. However, as the film progresses, Hideko (through her relationship with Sook-hee) gains agency and can liberate herself from his patriarchal control. She is no longer the object of the male gaze and is, in fact, free from the gaze placed upon her.

The Handmaiden has garnered some criticism for its explicit sex scenes. One reviewer, Laura Miller, states that the film falls into "visual clichés of pornographic lesbianism, their bodies offered up for the camera's delectation" (2016: 4). These visual clichés that Miller refers to are elements such as voyeuristic camera angles and the use of tribadism, a sex position often used in lesbian pornography directed by men (Kangasvuo 2007: 145). In contrast to Miller I contend that the film presents a critique of the male gaze and lesbian pornography for the consumption of men through both its sex scenes and the scenes of Hideko reading to her uncle's patrons. The film makes the audience question which characters (the women or the men) hold the power

and how power is leveraged between the characters. The film is about more than just the gaze, but how the gaze is used to the advantage of the women. To borrow Silverman's words, there is an "insistent specularisation of the male subject" (1992: 135) in the film which "functions not only to desubstantialise him, but to prevent any possibility of mistaking his penis for the phallus" (1992: 135). This specularisation of the male subject is explored not only through the two prominent male characters in the film, Fujiwara and Kouzuki (who I will discuss further in "Destroying the Male Fantasy"), but also through Hideko's male audience.

In the tableau of Hideko reading to her uncle's patrons she is shown to hold power and demonstrates control over the men in the room because she captivates the men with her words and voice. The first time Hideko is shown performing a reading as an adult, her male audiences' reactions arouse a sense of amusement in that they look uncomfortable despite their confidence before entering the library. The scene almost pokes fun at the way in which the men are consuming the pornographic material. The camera pans around the room, showing each man individually. There is a tense atmosphere as all the men hang on to the words Hideko has spoken as if their lives, or rather masculinity, depended on it. In the context of Silverman's distinction between the controlling gaze, and the look of lack, this scene reveals the mastery of Hideko and she reads and gazes upon her audience, conferring upon them the fantasy and illusion of phallic power (1992: 145). There is an added comical tone to the scene as the camera shows some men discretely crossing their legs as if they are hiding their arousal (Figure 2). Normally men would sit with their legs apart as a sign of confidence: the act of taking up as much space as they can shows a way of asserting dominance. However, some of these men sit with their hands over their groin. A man is depicted as taking his hat and placing it over his groin. One man is shown to be furiously fanning himself. Even the men who are sitting with their legs apart are shown to be under Hideko's spell as she reaffirms their sense of identity. There is also a heavy silence that hangs in the air after Hideko speaks and some men awkwardly clear their throats. This response to her reading not only shows the control she has over them, but also depicts a sexually repressed society. The men are uncomfortable with their arousal, especially since they are in a room full of other men. They do not behave how one would imagine men to behave, especially if they were watching a striptease or anything that would cause their arousal. Visually the scene is dimly lit and is warm in tone; seemingly a comfortable, and welcoming space for the men. However, this feeling is displaced by the power Hideko has through her voice. She has the power to manipulate the mood and, in turn, the men.

Instead of being her uncle's puppet (or instrument for male pleasure) she has become the puppet master.

This tableau of a pornographic reading by a woman for a male audience, foregrounds the film's self-conscious critique of the specularising gaze. In Laura Miller's view scenes like this, which "[vilify] men and their desires" are not sufficient in undoing or challenging the film's overall objectification of women in the sex scenes between Hideko and Sook-hee (2016: 4). While this scene might vilify men and their consumption pornography, it also highlights their awkwardness and embarrassment in the presence of Hideko, and under her gaze. The film offers a commentary on the mutual specularisation of subject and object in Hideko's relationship with her audience, as Rhee observes:

> What is remarkable about *The Handmaiden*, however, is that the relationship between subject and object is presented as neither unilateral nor immutable but reciprocal. If the male guests imagine Hideko's body as a spectacle for their obscene fantasies, Hideko in her own way treats them as objects for her control. (2020: 122)

Furthermore, Rhee posits that Hideko "challenges the imperial patriarchal authority" (2020: 122) and refers to Homi Bhabha's use of the term "sly civility" (1985). Rhee proposes that Hideko complies with the demands of her uncle and his guests, but also ensures that she counters the voyeuristic gaze of these men with her own displacing gaze which grants her the power of being the seeing and controlling subject. In this regard, her role as a reader, the role that is made to exploit and control her, allows her the freedom to see through the façades put up by the men in her life, especially her uncle. Rhee's words echo Silverman's examination that "we all function simultaneously as subject and object" (1992: 144). In addition, Silverman contends that it is not men's desire toward women that is the problem, but "that male desire is so consistently and systematically imbricated with projection and control" (1992: 144-5). This is depicted in Hideko's audience and her uncle who aims to control her by making her object desire.

Hideko's role as a reader is also important and worth noting upon. Her uncle believes he will strip her of her agency and voice by making her a reader like her aunt. This is how he intends to maintain his *author*ity and control. He wants to be the author of her actions and his desire to have her read the pornographic texts indicates his secret desire to have her perform those acts on him. The texts are a proxy or pretext for his desire to own her. The fact that he is old enough to be her father makes his union with her indecent, so he privately plays out these desires through her private reading lessons and the readings to his patrons. These readings are where

he can flaunt his ownership of her to these younger, more eligible men. However, it is evident that he is more in love with the fantasy of her than knowing her. There is nothing real or authentic about his relationship with her. He does not attempt to get to know her beyond what he can gain from her; he sees her as an object or vehicle for the erotica and not as a person. The library is meant to demonstrate his knowledge and control over women's bodies and his intention is to keep alive a fantasy.

When exploring the male gaze and how it is criticised by the film, I do think it is important to also explore Miller's criticisms of the graphic sex scenes. Although I contend that these sex scenes such as the extended bedroom scene and the final ship scene depict two women liberating themselves, depicting the growth of their relationship, the criticisms are not without a basis. The extended bedroom sex scene between the two women, can be viewed, as Miller puts it, placing the women's bodies up "for the camera's delectation" (2016: 4). The scene also falls into sequences that are perceived as pornographic—the protagonists are depicted engaging in tribadism, or an act that involves two women rubbing their genitals together, which is common in lesbian pornography created for the gratification of men. As Kangasvuo notes, in this type of lesbian porn "[s]ex between women is detached from any notion of lesbianism and tamed into a spectacle tailored to male needs" (2007: 144-145). However, Hideko and Sook-hee are also shown engaging in other sexual acts such as cunnilingus which is about providing pleasure to a woman as opposed to tribadism which is meant to mimic the heterosexual act of penetrative sex even if no penetration is involved. Their lesbianism and sexual desire for each other is not made into a spectacle to cater to male needs. The point of the scene is to show the two women exploring each other and their newfound sexuality. It is also important to specify that Park utilises the point of view shots to his advantage, enhancing the characters' development. Every movement of the camera is deliberate, placing the narrative in the forefront, the camera becoming the narrator. By placing the camera as if in the characters' position, the film allows the audience to see the women as complex and sympathetic characters.

The continuous change from specific character point of view frames to more external voyeuristic shots presents an ambiguity with regard to whose gaze the audience is meant to identify with. It is unclear if the subject of the gaze is a woman, man, voyeur or lover (Figlerowicz 2016). It is precisely this ambiguity that allows women to identify with the protagonists of the film; the characters are placed as the subjects and their pleasure is foregrounded. In her autoethnographic essay, Wilton questions why lesbians still watch films

made for a heterosexual audience. She suggests that the cinema-going experience and films provide a judgement free environment that thus liberates queer and gender nonconforming people. The ambiguity of the gaze in *The Handmaiden* aims to liberate the audience and depict an intimate relationship between Sook-hee and Hideko. Wilton suggests that pleasure from the spectator is not successful due to identification, but rather on "the degree to which the film facilitates the viewer relinquishing her 'self', escaping for a while from identity" (1995: 156). Film provides liberation from the act of identification of the self, thus allowing one to immerse themselves in something else entirely. In *The Handmaiden* the audience is not asked to self-identify with the protagonists, but to relinquish their 'selves' and watch the narrative journey unfold. The film compels the audience to empathise with the protagonists, echoing Boyle's analysis that queer films propose "that rather than concentrating on what or who is visible, we should pay attention to the blindspots in our own vision" (2012: 67). The film asks its audience to relinquish their identities and view the narrative from the gaze of the queer women, asking the audience, in Boyles words, to "interrogate our ethics of looking" (2012: 67).

As an auteur, Park utilises both point of view shots and voyeuristic shots to his advantage, heightening the ambiguity of the gaze through oscillating shots. This is evident in the extended bedroom sex scene between the two women in Hideko's room where the women are intimate for the first time. The bedroom scene illustrates the oscillation and ambiguity of the gaze that I have been discussing. The scene is shown twice—once from Sook-hee's perspective and again from Hideko's in part two. From Sook-hee's perspective, the scene begins when Hideko asks Sook-hee what will happen on her wedding night. She innocently asks Sook-hee about sex and if she will "feel" it. Sook-hee decides that it won't hurt to show Hideko how to kiss because she is "alone in a strange country, reading those useless books[8], without learning a single useful skill" (*The Handmaiden* 2016: 51:28). She takes out a lollipop, licks it, and allows the sugar to coat her lips. Sook-hee then gently kisses Hideko who asks her how she knows how to kiss. Sook-hee says that her friend Kutan taught her, but "only in words" (*The Handmaiden* 2016: 52:15). Sook-hee breaks away, satisfied that she has shown Hideko a useful skill, but Hideko pulls her back toward her. They kiss passionately before Hideko makes a reference to an earlier line where Fujiwara says making love to her would be like making love to a corpse. Confused, Sook-hee asks why and Hideko says because her hands and feet are

[8] At this point in the film, Sook-hee is unaware that the books Hideko is forced to read are pornographic and assumes they are just stories.

cold, putting her hand under Sook-hee's dress, massaging her breast to demonstrate. Sook-hee disagrees, saying that it feels good to which Hideko asks if Sook-hee can do the same to her so she knows what it feels like. Sook-hee obliges and Hideko is visibly enjoying it. Sook-hee then removes Hideko's dress revealing her breast (no nudity is shown, and we only see Sook-hee's expression) and says it is cute before pressing her lips to it. Aroused, Hideko asks her to show her more. Sook-hee begins to touch her up her legs as they kiss passionately; Hideko removes Sook-hee's nightdress and tells her to keep going. Sook-hee moves down Hideko's body. She looks between Hideko's legs and calls her "spellbindingly beautiful" (*The Handmaiden* 2016: 54:23). The camera shows her smiling face as she sticks out her tongue and slowly moves towards Hideko's vagina. The scene cuts to the next morning while Hideko is painting and Sook-hee is studying, but Hideko's faint moans from the night before linger in the background for a second.

The second instance of the bedroom scene occurs in part two from Hideko's perspective; it is an extension of the previous one, beginning at the point where the two women are kissing passionately. This extended bedroom scene shows more nudity and is the scene Miller is primarily referring to; however, there is no full-frontal nudity. The audience only sees the two women's breasts and bums as they try various sexual positions. The first shot that I would like to draw attention to is the shot from the extended scene which shows the point of view of Hideko as she looks over at Sook-hee who is between her legs (Figure 3). Hideko is on her back with her legs wide open as Sook-hee's face is buried between them, Sook-hee's arching back the only thing visible. The camera is aligned with Hideko's perspective. We watch with Hideko at Sook-hee's arched back, as if we are vicariously living through Hideko, having cunnilingus performed on us. This forces even the male viewer to occupy the position of a woman and is forced to take on a passive role of receiving pleasure. The viewer lies prostate; the intention is not one of dangerous vulnerability, but of relinquishing to pleasure. However, the shot then changes to an exterior position as if the viewer is watching from the side of the bed (Figure 4). It changes once again to an aerial shot of the two as they change position and perform cunnilingus on each other simultaneously. The scene constantly oscillates between the point of view shots and the more artistic, voyeuristic shots to exhibit the connection between the two women.

There are several instances where the gaze that is held by the camera is reflective of either Sook-hee or Hideko's point of view. However, there are also voyeuristic shots like one that

shows the two women in the mirror. The mirror is significant in terms of the Lacanian mirror phase which marks the of coming-into-being as an autonomous self. However, this moment is a slight diversion from the Lacanian individual self-formation as it signals a coupled self, a collaborative coming-into-being. According to Lacan's theory the child only realises themselves as an autonomous being in a moment of narcissism and self-estrangement—the image in the mirror gives the self the fantasy of wholeness. The child sees the boundaries or contours of the body and thus assumes a feeling of wholeness (Homer 2005: 21). This moment also signals the entry into language and signals the separation from the m/other. The child is individuated at the loss of what Freud calls the "oceanic feeling"[9] of oneness and limitlessness that comes with maternal connection. However, *The Handmaiden* shows a subversion and inversion of the Lacanian model. Sook-hee and Hideko return to the oceanic feeling of oneness that infants experience before they are able to differentiate themselves from other people (Freud 1962 [1930]: 11-12). The women are entangled in each other in the mirror reflection, the mirror confirming the boundaries and wholeness of the entangled, coupled self. In *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), Judith Butler explains the implications of Lacan's mirror phase:

> This process of psychic projection or elaboration implies as well that the sense of one's own body is not (only) achieved through differentiating from another (the maternal body), but that any sense of bodily contour, as projected, is articulated through a necessary self-division and self-estrangement. (71)

Butler, reading Lacan, notes that bodies become whole through the specular image which is idealising and totalising. This specular image is sustained by the sexually marked name and to have a name means to be positioned in the Symbolic. The women in the film become whole through each other, subverting Lacan's theory of individual self-formation. Sarah Waters makes note of their coupled self when she asserts that the women "are like mirrors of each other" (2017: n.p.) expanding that it was a deliberate attempt by Park to place the women on an equal level. By depicting their bodies together, as equals, in the mirror image, the film is suggesting that the women are outside the Symbolic as their image is not sustained by the

[9] This term was first coined by Freud's friend Romain Rolland in a 1927 letter to the psychoanalyst. The feeling is used to describe spiritual experiences and Rolland references Indian mystic Ramakrishna. Freud introduces the concept in the end of *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) and picks up the discussion in *Civilzation and Its Discontents* (1929).

Lacanian sexually marked name. This is opposed to the men who strive to be a part of the Symbolic even if it means attempting to keep up a pretence of who they really are.

The film also aims to dismantle and destroy the male fantasy created the by consumption of pornographic media that caters to the male gaze and hegemonic masculinity by using the camera to create an ambiguous gaze, forcing male viewers assume a feminine perspective. However, the film also attempts to critique and destroy the male fantasy through the characterisation of the two male characters, Count Fujiwara and Kouzuki, who try to regain their masculinity through imitation and exaggeration.

Destroying the Male Fantasy

How the film portrays Fujiwara and Kouzuki is telling of how men are also marginalised in a patriarchal and colonial society in the sense that they must forfeit or barter their "self." They are subjected to live within the phallogocentric (symbolic) order where any deviation is considered improper.

The two men in the film, Fujiwara and Kouzuki, are both placed in an antagonistic position against the women in the film. They are the ones who hold Sook-hee and Hideko back from gaining the freedom they desire. This section will examine how the film frames these two men and how the film exposes the fragility of hegemonic masculinity. Both Fujiwara and Kouzuki are masquerading as something they are not; one is a thief pretending to be a Japanese nobleman (Fujiwara) while the other is a Korean born citizen pretending to be Japanese (Kouzuki). Their pretences are upheld by their existing patriarchal society and especially within the colonised Korea as Japan's rule exacerbates the men's crisis of masculinity.

Fujiwara begins the film as a conman, pulling the strings, controlling everything and everyone around him. Throughout the film, this narrative of Fujiwara being the one who controls everything is developed; however, through dramatic irony the audience is aware, by the second part, that he is not as in control as he seems to be. He cannot completely control Hideko and Sook-hee the way he usually can: through his desirability and charisma. Freud's (and later Lacan's) theory of the phallus and the ego play a significant role in understanding Fujiwara's character and how he views the power he holds. Fujiwara believes that his power comes from his "manhood" as he puts it; he refers to his physical penis, but it correlates more with what he perceives a man to be—the ability to have any woman he desires and control her actions. Fujiwara is obsessed with the fantasy and places importance on the physical which Sticchi

notes reduces “his narcissistic sexual boasting to a ridiculous obsession” (2018: 75). Fujiwara is obsessed with his appearance and how masculine he is perceived to be by other men as well as women.

In the beginning of the film, Fujiwara seems be in a position of power and control; however, in the end, most of the power he holds over the women is stripped away. When the audience is first introduced to him, he is shown to hold the attention of the group of pickpockets in their own space. Sook-hee, who is removed from the rest of the group, is also fascinated by what he has to say (Figure 5). His ability to hold the attention of others is an indication of his power and influence. He is also shown to successfully seduce women in a flashback scene depicting how he managed to get the previous maid fired. However, as the narrative continues, he is shown to lose his power especially over the Sook-hee and Hideko. In particular, he is unable to control Hideko in the same way he can other women in his life. His lack of control points to the fact that he holds his power through his charm and sexual desirability; he uses his natural charisma to get what he wants. Hideko is immune to this charm due to her lesbianism and her class standing as she is not economically dependent on him. This leads him to be fascinated by her as she is his intellectual equal and able to see past his charade. It is, ultimately, his belief in the power of the phallic masquerade that leads Fujiwara to his downfall. In the final scenes of the film, he trusts Hideko and assumes that she has come into his room to celebrate with him and finally giving him what he’s wanted. Within this scene he is being controlled by his desire for the unattainable which is Hideko’s body. He relinquishes all his control, believing that he has the upper hand. The next scene humorously shows him pantless, with his bum in the air (Figure 6). The scene is further enhanced by the high angle shot, used most often when a character is in a position of inferiority. Fujiwara being shown in this position highlights the fact that he has lost all control and power of the situation. The film is implying that he never had control to begin with and that the puppeteer was the puppet all along. The look on his face and the later scene with Kozuki indicate that he almost shows an admiration towards Hideko for thwarting him.

The final scene of Fujiwara also points to the Freudian notion that men’s greatest fear is castration. Within Freud’s writing he did not make a distinction between the phallus and the penis, equating them most of the time (Homer 2005: 54). However, Homer notes that Lacan challenged Freud’s assumptions:

> For Lacan, the importance of Freud's insights was into infantile sexuality was not whether or not girls have a penis and boys fear theirs will be cut off, but the function of the phallus is of lack and sexual difference. (2005: 54)

Lacan's words indicate the phallus as a signifier that operates on all three registers of human reality[10] and it is a false or mistaken idea. Fujiwara believes the fallacy that his manhood carries his power, inaccurately conflating his penis with his phallus. Within the scene he is referring directly to his penis; however, he is pointing to his phallus. The women in the film have already "castrated" Fujiwara and revealed his façade. No longer in a position of power, he thinks the only way he can remain in control is by keeping his manhood intact. He has worked hard to maintain the illusion of power invested in the penis (the outward marker of phallic power), and the façade has become a reality for him. He is living a delusion right to the end. However, if the idea of manhood is linked to the phallus, he never initially had power. His power fantasy has been dismantled, he no longer has control, and it is questionable if he even had it in the first place. For Lacan, the castration complex is "conflated and redramatatized as a primordial imitation of structure" (Bowie 1991: 127). Bowie further states that "the phallic 'moment' launches a series of signifying practices and combinatorial procedures that the individual can never expect to outgrow" (1991: 127). In other words, the individual always has a fear of castration throughout their life, and they seek to combat this fear through their actions.

In examining the Fujiwara's final scene, his character is shown to have worked so hard to craft the illusion of power, that he has fallen under the fallacy's spell. Kouzuki has him captured and is torturing him, trying to pry as much information he can get about Hideko, in particular the "wedding" night and where she has gone. Throughout the scene, Fujiwara appears to be in the inferior position as he is being tortured; however, it should be noted that he has an economy over Kouzuki as he is the one who knows what truly happened between himself and Hideko. Fujiwara also holds power in the fact that he knows that the cigarettes that he is smoking contain mercury that will kill Kouzuki. As Kouzuki falls to the ground, Fujiwara states "at least I will die with my cock intact" (*The Handmaiden* 2016: 2:38:09). This points to his belief that

[10] These three registers are the imaginary, symbolic, real. The imaginary is associated with the Mirror phase (something I will discuss more in chapter four entitled "*Stoker*" when exploring India's characterisation). This phase is where the child sees an image of themselves and recognises it as themselves, thus the imaginary is pre-symbolic and pre-language. The symbolic register is related to the use of metaphors and signs to represent our ideas and communicate with others. However, in using the symbolic, we forsake the 'real' (Homer 2003: 55-56). The real to Lacan is the world that the individual will never perceive because "our reality consists of symbols and the process of signification" (Homer 2003: 81). In other words, it is the world outside of our senses. Existing in the real is primal, thus making this register pre-mirror (imaginary) and pre-symbolic.

his power comes from his penis. He wrongfully places an importance on his penis and what it means to him as a man. His character could be read as a critique of overtly sexual men or men who place importance on their penis, conflating it with what it means to be a man.

In discussing fallacies and façades, it is important to examine the way in which the character of Kouzuki, Hideko's uncle, is portrayed in the film. Kouzuki's character is complex and layered, showing a man living completely behind a façade. He is a Korean man who has rejected his nationality and now lives as a Japanese man, taken from his second wife's lineage. Kouzuki is not his family name, but rather the surname he took from his Japanese wife, his given name. Noriaki, means "to teach" or "enlighten" and is presumably one he chose during his naturalisation into a Japanese gentleman (Rhee 2019: 121).

Through voiceover exposition from Fujiwara, the audience learns that Kouzuki's first wife is the woman who is now the housekeeper and who taunts a young Hideko. She is Korean born just like Kouzuki; however, he denies this aspect of himself in favour of a Japanese lifestyle which now includes a Japanese wife. His rejection of this part of his life is the beginning of the façade he creates. He calls Korea ugly and states that it is "soft, slow, dull, and therefore hopeless" (*The Handmaiden* 2016: 1:35:10); just before this he calls Japan beautiful and says that "beauty is cruel by nature" (*The Handmaiden* 2016: 1:35:05). This rejection of his past points to the colonialism inherent within this society. Kouzuki the 'other' aims to be like his coloniser in every aspect including name and lineage. Although not at the forefront of my argument, the colonisation of the Korean people is important to understanding the characters and their development. Kouzuki attempts to assimilate himself to the coloniser's ways, rejecting everything that points to his Korean heritage. Kouzuki, thus, becomes the embodiment of *sadaejuui* in his extreme praise of Japanese culture. Kouzuki's assimilation into the coloniser's culture is marked by his adoption of both Japanese and British architectural styles to his mansion, the two styles spliced together without much harmony. Rhee identifies that "[t]he bizarre aspect of the forced conjoining of the two completely heterogenous styles offers a biting view of Kouzuki's blind worship of the modern" (2019: 118). In attempting to adopt a modern architectural style and collecting erotic art, something introduced by the Japanese, Kouzuki attempts to become like his coloniser. His blind worship of Japanese culture also indicates a crisis of masculinity on his part; forced to be a colonised subject, Kouzuki feels like his power has been taken away. To rectify this, he puts on façade as a Japanese nobleman, adopting a surname he only received through marriage and not heritage.

His performance near the end of the film is reminiscent of Japanese Kabuki theatre which is stylised by its use of elaborate face make-up or masks (Kincaid 1925: 21-22). Kouzuki's final scenes, therefore, show his façade of masculinity crumbling. In other words, his mask begins to come off. In his last moments, he thinks he has great power; however, this is not the case, and he dies vulnerable. It is not only the way he dies that is important, but also how he looks when he dies. He is in a dressing gown that is open, and his hair is wild and unruly, his eyes wide (Figure 7). His appearance here is opposed to his usual dress where he is covered up, his hair combed, and hands gloved. Kouzuki's usual calm and composed self is transformed into a crazed madman. This indicates the breaking down of his character—he is losing control of the situation because Fujiwara (and even more so Hideko) have the upper hand over him. He wants something that only Fujiwara can give him: information on how Hideko looked and felt. Like Fujiwara, Kouzuki is rendered powerless because he is driven by his fallacies and sexuality.

The film portrays both Fujiwara and Kouzuki as men driven by their need for power, therefore, reinforcing how men hold control in a heteropatriarchal society. Men perceive their phallus as control, utilising the phallus means having control over those around them. As Jan Campbell notes: "men fear their loss of identity and unconsciously project this lack onto the body of the woman, who is then seen as castrated" (2000: 109). Furthermore, the men in the film cannot perceive the women as holding control because, within the phallogocentric order, woman is defined as lack. Woman, by this definition, is an absence or void. Lacan states "woman does not exist" (Lacan 1998 [1975]: 7), a phrase often misunderstood. However, Lacan is highlighting that woman operates as a difference (the Other) and thus excluded from subjecthood. In other words, woman exists outside the symbolic. Bruce Fink expounds that "a woman is not split in the same way as a man; though alienated, she is not altogether subject to the symbolic order" (1995: 107). Woman is defined as lack, but also as object desire because she must "be" the phallus. This is at the cost of surrendering her femininity. Lacan suggests that "a woman will reject an essential part of femininity, namely, all her attributes in the masquerade" (1977 [1958]: 289-290) and it is through the masquerade that the woman goes from not possessing the phallus to *being* the phallus or object desire. The twist in Park's tale is that the women reclaim their femininity and refuse to be the phallus. They don't have to put on a masquerade or façade because they are enacting their freedom by their controlling patriarchal figures.

The snake that sits in the front of Kouzuki's library is a physical symbol of the phallus or the belief in the phallic masquerade. This symbol is destroyed by Sook-hee in an act of liberating her love. The destruction of the snake is symbolic of the women's liberation from the phallogocentric symbolic order that holds power and control in their lives. This is the same phallogocentric order mentioned by Irigaray where women exist as "the possibility of mediation, transaction, transition, transference—between man and his fellow creatures, indeed between man and himself" (1981: 108). The library can be viewed as a physical manifestation of the phallogocentric order, made more evident through the snake guarding it. This is evident when the only women allowed in are the women who are forced to perform for men or being subservient to men in the case of the housekeeper. Therefore, these women only act as mediators between the men, the literature they consume and other men in the room; they are not important and act only as vessels for the titillation of men. The destruction of the phallus (the snake) is, therefore, the castration of the phallogocentric order. The scene where Sook-hee stands in front of the snake, sword in hand and Hideko behind her, expression submissive but appreciative, is a powerful scene as Sook-hee cuts off its head (Figure 8). In essence, Sook-hee is doing the one act that men fear the most: she is (symbolically) castrating them. Hideko's voiceover reveals that she views Sook-hee as her saviour. She states: "My saviour who came to ruin my life. My Tamako, my Sook-hee" (*The Handmaiden* 2016: 2:12:48). The phallus that guards her uncle's treasure trove of pornography is destroyed by the woman she loves, and she is elated that she gets to witness it. There is even a little pride in her voice as the music swells to the scenes of Sook-hee breaking the snake and tearing Kouzuki's rare pornography collection. Hideko watches as Sook-hee sets about tearing apart the books and spilling ink on them. However, she is not entirely a bystander to all of this; she helps Sook-hee open the coverings of the pond (Figure 9). She also throws red ink on the books, a colour associated with both blood and passion. The significance of the colour is important as it symbolises the destruction of the library and the passion and intimacy of Sook-hee and Hideko's relationship. In razing Kouzuki's pornography collection, the women are actively claiming their subjecthood and destroying the tools used to control them. However, the film also depicts Hideko borrowing from the pornography she is made to read and essentially using this tool of control as a tool for her erotic rapture. The film self-consciously foregrounds the pornography debate through erotic art and Kouzuki's pornography collection.

Pornography in *The Handmaiden*

The Handmaiden attempts to deal with the question of representing women's sexual desires. Gloria Steinhem explains that pornography is different to erotic art, but are often conflated because "sex and violence are so dangerously intertwined and confused" (2014: 145). Within the film, pornographic material is used to dominate and control Hideko and her aunt, but it is also used by Hideko to enact her freedom. This echoes Concepcion's contention that pornography does not have to close the door to desire and can, in fact, enhance it (1999: 99). While Concepcion has a more positive view on pornography, Dworkin argues that pornography ultimately places men as the subjects and women as the objects (2000: 36). Although Dworkin's view of pornography is quite rigid and vilifies it, it does form the basis of how pornography is portrayed in the film. However, *The Handmaiden* takes the pornography debate further and asks what would happen if you remove men (the original subjects) from the context of pornography.

In the context of *The Handmaiden*, the feminist perspective can be applied to the pornography shown in the film as the men are depicted as the subjects and women as the objects, much like Dworkin's assertation. It is this objectification that the protagonists free themselves from through redefining what sexuality means to them. Furthermore, they take the tool that places women as objects and play out the acts depicted in these texts for their sexual gratification. As already stated in my theoretical chapter, Steinhem defines pornography as "not sex, and sex need not be violent or aggressive at all. It is violence and domination that are pornographic" (in Bennetts 1979: 10). Within the film we can see that pornography is used as a tool for domination over the women whereas the erotic signals liberation for them. It is important to note, however, that these women use this tool for domination and reappropriate it. They give it new meaning by layering on their intimacy and erotic desire for each other. It is their quest for an impossible closeness, paired with the use of pornography that allows them to unlock their shackles.

According to the author of *Fingersmith*, Sarah Waters, the film, although a story told by a man, is "still very faithful to the idea that the women are appropriating a very male pornographic tradition to find their own way of exploring their desires" (2017: n.p.). The women re-enact scenes from the books that Hideko is forced to read, appropriating the acts depicted in the books to discover themselves (and each other) and further their journey together. Furthermore, they are taking something that is made by men for the consumption of men and making it about

their freedom devoid of men. This is what Sarah Waters initially aimed to achieve in her novel and what Park has translated into his film. It is about two women removing the subject pornography was made for and making themselves the subjects. Rhee highlights that, in *The Handmaiden*, "the relationship between subject and object is presented as neither unilateral not immutable, but reciprocal" (2020: 122). The pornographic texts are not depicted as harmful, but rather how the texts are employed by hegemonic masculinity to perpetuate male dominance and control over women's bodies. However, as Kouzuki tries to exploit Hideko by using pornography, these same texts empower Hideko in her sexual relationship with Sook-hee.

Reviewer Claire Armitstead states: "when I say that I found the lingering intimacy uncomfortable to watch, because it sails so close to traditional girl-on-girl porn, Waters counters that younger women and young queer people appear to be welcoming it" (2017: n.p.). As a young queer person this is where I stand in my argument towards the film's scenes of sex and nudity. Although directed by a man, the film achieves something that lesbian pornography made by men (which Miller compares the film to) does not. *The Handmaiden*'s graphic sex scenes are not about capitalising on the amount of nudity that is in one frame or to excite the audience that is watching in. The sex scenes are depicting the intimacy between the two women as they discover what type of pleasure they enjoy. The artistic style in which the bedroom scene of their first sexual encounter is shot is meant to evoke feelings of love and lust within the audience because that is what the two characters are feeling in that moment. The sex scenes cannot be explored in isolation, but rather as a crucial part of the story and are necessary to the audience's understanding of the relationship between the two women and their attempts at freeing themselves from the patriarchal society. In discussing the paradox of lesbians enjoying lesbian pornography, Cherry Smyth posits that reactionary feminists have "desexed the female body, robbed her of her pleasure, and created a suspicion of all pleasure promoted by cinema" (1990: 153). Smyth also highlights that lesbian sexuality has been rendered invisible and repressed by society, so lesbian pornography thus becomes a vehicle for lesbian and bisexual women to see themselves and express their sexuality. Hideko uses pornography in this exact way. Having no access to other types of literature and forced into a sheltered life without feminine companionship (especially after her aunt's suicide), she is only able to see herself in depictions of women's pleasure presented in pornography.

I cannot discuss pornography and how it is utilised as a tool for subjugation in *The Handmaiden* without mentioning colonialism which requires the subjugation of nations. As I have mentioned

in my introduction to this project, erotic texts were introduced to the Korean population by Japan (the coloniser). Japan essentially regulated the media Korean people consume and used this media as a tool of control. In turn, Kouzuki uses pornography as means to show dominance over Hideko and her aunt. Peter Bradshaw, in his review of *The Handmaiden* for *The Guardian*, makes a comparison between porn, colonialism, and sex:

> And porn's undertow of shame has a political dimension. It is a cousin to the mortification of submitting to colonial rule. But sex is the sanctuary from pornography in *The Handmaiden*, the sex that Hideko and Sook-hee enjoy is the refuge from porn and its furniture of abuse and control. (2017: 3)

Bradshaw's view is that porn can be seen as "a cousin to the mortification of submitting to colonial rule." In other words, both pornography and colonialism operate on the levels of control and dominance. Colonialism is often seen as the successor of patriarchal control and plays an important part in the story of Hideko and Sook-hee. In addition, there should be an unequal power dynamic between the two women: that of the coloniser (Hideko) and the colonised (Sook-hee). However, no such power dynamic exists and both women see each other as equals and find, as Bradshaw puts it, sanctuary in each other through the act of sex. This equality despite class differences is something that Waters mentions as deliberate by Park (in Armistead 2017: n.p.) Additionally, sex is not the same as pornography; sex provides the two protagonists with a freedom that they did not have. Depictions of the act are not the act itself, nor does sex bring about humiliation and shame to the women. Although the women reappropriate and use pornography for their own purpose, it is also a reminder of the abuse and control that Hideko was subjected to with her uncle. These two things can exist at once and it is why the scene where Sook-hee destroys the library for Hideko is empowering for the women. It is symbolic of Sook-hee liberating Hideko from her uncle's control and providing her the opportunity of a life without her uncle. Additionally, their intimate relationship and the feminine erotic are important to understanding how the women free themselves from the confines of the mansion's walls. This is, ultimately, the tool that they use to embrace who they truly are.

The Erotic as Power

Sook-hee and Hideko's relationship is both socially and sexually transgressive. Hideko desires to move past the only life she knows under the control of her uncle. Sook-hee also wants to move past her lowly life as a seamstress and pickpocket, away from the control of men. It should be noted, however, that the relationship between Sook-heee and Hideko is not portrayed

as a political one, it is shown as being a natural progression for the two as they begin to realise their intimacy. Spahr understands intimacy as "desire, and conventional domestic relationships, and unconventional ones […] identity and identification with those like and unlike" (2001: 99). Intimacy, unlike the extremely hyperbolic nature of poetry, is rooted in realism, in the small moments that people share with each other. Although *The Handmaiden* flows like a poem, in a similar hyperbolic fashion, it also depicts intimate moments between the protagonists. In this regard, their relationship is about questioning the binarism constructed within heteropatriarchal definitions of gender, sexuality, and desire, favouring a more fluid definition and holding these ideas on a spectrum.

Ultimately, Sook-hee and Hideko's relationship is about finding liberation from the men that control their lives. For Hideko it is her uncle who, for her entire life, controlled her every movement and for Sook-hee it is Fujiwara who used her as a pawn in his scheme. Through their relationship with each other, they find a solidarity in suffering. Jia Tolentino, reviewer for *The New Yorker*, calls this a freedom that women can only find with one another (2016: n.p.). Tolentino's observation resonates with Rich's theory about the freedom found within the sanctuary of women-centred friendship and intimacy (1980: 650). Rich also realigns the concepts of sorority and the erotic, stating that they are linked and almost on a spectrum:

> Female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, thus limiting the erotic itself. But as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence, as we delineate a lesbian continuum, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself. (1980: 650)

Throughout the film, the women make use of the erotic as a life-giving force in their lives. Following Audre Lorde's assertion that the erotic is a tool for liberation, I contend the two women can use their bond to free themselves from the wider heteropatriarchal society around them. Lorde posits that "the erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (1984: 53). It is this resource that the two women tap into to liberate themselves from the confines of the society in which they live. The erotic serves as more than just a form of intimacy and search for impossible closeness, it is also a catalyst for the women to see a life outside the walls of Kouzuki's mansion.

The intimacy that the women share is not just about the sex scenes, but other moments that show the development of their relationship. For example, there is an intimate scene early in their relationship, just after having met for the first time and they are getting used to their roles

as handmaiden and lady. Hideko sits in the bathtub as Sook-hee helps her bathe. Hideko complains that her tooth is sharp and hurting her, so Sook-hee files down the tooth. As Sook-hee places her hand in Hideko's mouth, the camera lingers on Hideko's breast, as if Sook-hee is looking at it. It then shows Sook-hee's upper lip which is covered in sweat and then the camera holds on Hideko gently caressing Sook-hee's arm, her fingers tenderly touching the woman. From the audience's perspective this is only their third time interacting with each other, but they move with the familiarity of two people who have known each other for years. There is also a sense of nervousness to their interaction, as if the two women are afraid of being too familiar with each other. This sensation is shown through Sook-hee's nervousness (sweat on her upper lip) and hesitancy to get too close to Hideko.

There is also an ambiguity with regards to how certain roles are played out in the film. The women are portrayed as equals despite coming from different class and national backgrounds. Although Hideko is the lady and Sook-hee her maid, they both know that the other exists in the same oppressive regime. They both help each other in different ways; for example, Hideko encourages Sook-hee to learn how to read and write whereas Sook-hee teaches Hideko social skills. They begin to develop a sense of sorority, allowing them to find a sanctuary with each other. Rich discusses the lesbian continuum and how all women are a part of it, whether they identify as lesbian or not, and allows women to "connect aspects of woman-identification" (1980: 651). Rich also mentions a mother-daughter relationship that is of importance to understanding Sook-hee and Hideko's relationship and their oscillating roles. The two women change from being master-servant, child-doll, and mother-daughter—suggestive of the equality in their relationship. Thus, their relationship cannot be placed in patriarchal, heteronormative parameters as they are both the saviour and the saved and these heteropatriarchal parameters usually provide a binary opposition: male versus female or gay versus straight, for example. Sarah Waters, in an interview with *The Guardian*, discusses how the protagonists are presented as equals in the end and how Park's decision to change the setting to Korea under Japanese rule affected their relationship:

> [W]hen I spoke to Park he said he was bringing the Japanese mistress and the Korean sewing girl together on an equal level. The novel is about class rather than gender: people passing themselves off as something they're not. The film is more about colonialism: that very fraught relationship between Korea and Japan. (Armistead 2017: n.p.)

The aspect of colonialism cannot be ignored when it comes to analysing the film because all the characters are influenced by the effects of Japan's colonial rule. Hideko is of Japanese

descent; she speaks both Japanese and Korean and knows how to read. Sook-hee, on the other hand, is Korean and does not know how to read or write. In a way, Hideko is aligned with the coloniser while Sook-hee the colonised; however, they are depicted as being on equal footing by the end of the film even if they are not equal at the beginning. In fact, Sook-hee literally walks in Hideko's shoes at one point, showing the care and respect that each one has for the other. Hideko's book smarts contrasts with the street-smart Sook-hee, but these differences are depicted as bringing them together rather than dividing them. In showing that these two are different, yet still equal, it only enhances the intimacy between them. In addition, the film shows them in oscillating roles which aims to enhance the intimacy between them, blurring the lines between class standing. The roles they occupy present a positive feminine alternative to the traditional heterosexual relationship where positions of dominance and passivity are fixed and static. In Hideko and Sook-hee's same-sex desire, power is constantly shifting—it is a game of alternating roles. This is what makes their relationship transgressive and boundary shifting; it is the rejection of binary roles that makes their bond queer.

In a moment of passion, Sook-hee reveals, in a voiceover narration, her deepest desire to breastfeed Hideko wishing that she had breastmilk. This reminds the audience of her introductory voiceover where she states that, if she had breastmilk, she would feed all the babies that her aunt takes in. In the bathtub scene, Sook-hee calls Hideko her baby as she is bathing her. The scene itself is interestingly placed as Hideko sits in the bathtub, sucking on a lollipop as Sook-hee hovers over her in an almost motherly position (Figure 10). Sook-hee shows her care and love, depicting the mother-daughter roles they take on. However, these roles change throughout the film as the women begin to play "dress-up" more often. Hideko enters the role of servant as she dresses Sook-hee as her master. This could also be perceived as a child (Hideko) playing with her doll (Sook-hee). Sook-hee also makes an observant comment while undressing Hideko when she says, "ladies truly are the dolls of maids. All these buttons are for my amusement" (*The Handmaiden* 2016: 37:03-37:07) and wonders what will happen if she were to slip her hands underneath the fabric. This scene, paired with the sensual scene in the bath earlier on, marks the gradual process of their sexual awakenings which culminates in the bedroom scene.

The bedroom scene is important to understanding their relationship and its growth. I have already discussed this scene in detail when examining it through the gaze and how the different perspectives lead the audience to identify with multiple gazes. However, the scene is also

important to understanding the protagonists' eroticism and intimacy. Once the pretence is stripped, the women give into their desire for each other. As Audre Lorde states, "the erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings" (1984: 54). The bedroom scene is meant to represent their deepest desire for each other culminating in their erotic ecstasy, visually representing this "chaos" that Lorde describes which is them giving into their desires and leaving all trickery behind. The erotic allows the two women to better understand themselves and their desires. This is depicted through the two women's exploration of each other during their first time being intimate in this pivotal scene. They engage in different sex positions such as cunnilingus and tribadism. By letting themselves feel this erotic ecstasy, they can lay bare their emotions for each other and strengthen their relationship. Lorde's comment also echoes Bataille's reading of the erotic as an annihilation of the self. According to Bataille: "the whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives" (1987: 4). Eroticism destroys our entrenched human boundaries and transports us to another realm, or the sacred. Furthermore, Bataille describes the 'sacred' as being the "prodigious effervescence of life that […] the order of things holds in check, and that this holding changes into a breaking loose, that is, into violence" (1989: 52). Experiencing the sacred, thus, occurs through a violent rupture of limits that releases into a state of simultaneous ecstasy and pain. For Bataille, the sacrifice of one's earthly self is necessary to achieve an experience of all-consuming ecstasy, one that is total and without reservation. This moment of simultaneous ecstasy and pain is what drives Sook-hee and Hideko to their spiritual liberation, thus promoting their physical liberation from the parameters that have defined their lives. According to MacKendrick:

> Sadomasochistic eroticism intensifies relations of control and subordination by fundamentally (that is, at the very beginning or foundation) altering their meaning, removing power from its orderly binarism of oppression to create a transgressive, postsubjective and highly Bataillean erotic. (1999: 14)

Although Sook-hee and Hideko's relationship is not overtly sadomasochistic, their intimacy alters the meaning of control and subordination which ultimately allows them to question the binarism within their world. Furthermore, Sook-hee and Hideko's relationship seems to exemplify the "highly Bataillean erotic" not only in its intensity, but in the way it subverts the meanings of control and subordination.

Throughout the film the women use the erotic to liberate themselves from the heteropatriarchal society around them. They not only utilise it during sexual intercourse with each other, but in

other ways. Hideko, especially, uses the erotic to her advantage. She understands the drive within her as well as the wonton sexuality of the men around her and she exploits this to her advantage. This is evident in her relationship with the Count. She knows that Fujiwara has a weakness and that it is tied to his sexuality, and she dangles the prospect of him owning her body in front of him. This is evident in two distinct scenes. The first scene is Hideko and Fujiwara's first conversation where he realises that it will be impossible to woo her as she is not as innocent as she seems. Rather, she convinces him that they should work together because she too wants to rob her uncle of the wealth he has sustained by abusing her and her aunt. The second scene is near the end of the film when Hideko uses her body to get Fujiwara to drink opium laced wine for her to take his money and escape with Sook-hee. Hideko removes her robe and allows Fujiwara to kiss her on her breasts, knowing he will get excited. He lets his guard down long enough for her to poison him by transferring the spiked wine into his mouth. She knows that Fujiwara wants to possess her body. Bedding her would be another great conquest for him. She uses this knowledge to her advantage to get what she wants. Hideko is aware of her sexuality and the way men objectify her.

The protagonists' journey is defined by the two women attempting to go beyond their limited (and limiting) lives, away from the objectifying eye of the men. Within the parameters of a heterosexual and patriarchal narrative, these women would be confined to the roles of wife and mother. Furthermore, the two women attempt to liberate themselves using the stories told by men against the men in their lives. It is important to note that it is not only the appropriation of the stories told by men, but an appropriation and manipulation of the heteropatriarchal society that surrounds them. Film reviewer Mark Kermode states that "the film's female protagonists strive to find a space of their own, beyond the boundaries of stories told by men" (2017: 2). In the beginning of the film, the spaces that the women occupy are controlled and regulated by the men in their lives. For example, the library where the only women allowed are the ones who are forced to read for Kouzuki's patrons. However, Hideko and Sook-hee utilise the space they have alone to liberate themselves from the control of men. Hence, Hideko's bedroom becomes a place for them to fully question their limiting lives and provides a space for them to explore a life without the surveillance of the patriarchy. This is evident in the scene where they play dress-up. Both women take on different roles, appropriating and playing around with the idea that they can be whatever they want to be. Throughout the film, the women find safety in each other which echoes what Tolentino says is the freedom only women can find with each other (2016: n.p.).

Another space that appears to be a restriction for the women is the asylum that Sook-hee is sent to at the end of the first part. Lisa Appignanesi observes how women's emotions and sexuality have historically been pathologised (2008: 25). The asylum, a place where the "criminally mad" could be placed was developed as a therapeutic tool to help people. However, asylums slowly began to become places of confinement that men used against innocent women and, as Appignanesi asserts, "both men and asylums drove women mad" (2008: 216). Appignanesi echoes Elaine Showalter's seminal study, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1987), which demonstrates how insanity equates to deviance from patriarchal norms, and that madness is (was) by definition a female condition. In the film, the asylum is used as a tool to silence Sook-hee. Fujiwara convinces the doctors that Sook-hee is the Japanese heiress (Hideko), but she believes she is the lady's maid. This is part of the plot to silence Sook-hee so he and Hideko can run off with the fortune. Throughout history men used asylums to control women and their emotions, choosing to rather lock them away than to listen to their concerns. However, what is interesting about *The Handmaiden* is that it takes this trope and once again subverts the audience's expectations. Hideko and Sook-hee are aware of Fujiwara's plot and plan Sook-hee's escape from the asylum. The asylum becomes a place that symbolises freedom from the control of Fujiwara and Kouzuki; the protagonists use the men's tools against them. They dupe Fujiwara into thinking that he has the upperhand. Instead of being a place of torture, the asylum becomes a place that allows their liberation, furthering the two women's journey together.

Sook-hee and Hideko find liberation from the spaces they are forced to exist in and find refuge in the intimacy between themselves. Sex not only becomes a refuge for the two women, but as Jia Tolentino states:

> Sex is an essential tool in each character's deception—but the women, unlike the men, are wrenching themselves toward self-actualization. As Sookee [sic] and Hideko try to deceive each other, they work themselves into a position to be vulnerable; their role play ends up activating reserves of emotional instinct and physical lust. (2016: n.p.)

In the beginning the women use sex as a means of deception; this is especially true for Hideko who hides behind an innocent façade to gain the trust of Sook-hee. However, deception requires remaining closed off and concealing your intentions. The sex (and intimacy) between the two women leads to honesty and unmasks the deception. Tolentino notes that they work themselves into a position of vulnerability and I contend that this is through the spaces they choose to occupy. Hideko's bedroom becomes a safe space for them to explore their erotic desires and

enter a relationship where they can be vulnerable with each other. One of the most pivotal scenes is when Sook-hee tries to convince Hideko that marrying Fujiwara is the right thing to do. Hideko sees it as an opportunity to let herself be unguarded because she is with the woman she loves and who she assumes loves her.

The scene begins with Sook-hee and Hideko in her room: Hideko is reclining on the couch in her room and Sook-hee is on the floor, massaging her feet. Sook-hee makes a note of how Hideko's toenails have grown ever since she has met the Count, repeating the line that Fujiwara has fed to her in a previous scene. She then asks Hideko if she ever wonders about the ships and distant places that she cannot visit and Hideko replies, "I could be content here, if you were with me" (*The Handmaiden* 2016: 58:12) pointing to the fact that she has grown attached to her handmaiden. Sook-hee, although visibly flattered, ignores this statement and expresses how lucky Hideko is to have a man who can protect her. It is in this moment that Hideko takes the opportunity to question her courtship with Fujiwara, expressing that she may not love him and that she may love someone else. Sook-hee, scared of what the consequences will be for her if she expresses what she really feels, insists that Hideko will love him. Enraged by her response, Hideko slaps Sook-hee and sends her outside to her servant's room. In a voiceover narration, Hideko states that she wishes she had never been born and is seen running out the main entrance of the house. Hideko is then shown to have tied a rope to the cherry blossom tree in the garden and has wrapped it around her neck, implying that she is going to kill herself. As she lets go, her legs are caught by Sook-hee who is pleading with her not to die and apologises to her, revealing the plot to send her to the asylum. Hideko asks if she's worried about her and confesses that she is worried about Sook-hee because she is the one intended for the asylum and being tricked by Fujiwara. This scene is a moment of realisation for both women as they ascertain that they have both been used by the men in their lives. It also acts as a confession of their love, especially Sook-hee's love for Hideko.

The scene where Sook-hee and Hideko learn of the deception from the men and begin to plan their escape resonates with Anzaldua's insight:

> [h]aving become aware of the fictions and fissures in our belief system, we perceive the cracks between the worlds and holes in reality. These cracks and holes disrupt the neat categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality. (2000: 280)

They are aware of each other's desires and their intimate bond has revealed the "holes in reality." Both Sook-hee and Hideko are boundary-crossers as they do not fit into the neat

category of gay versus straight. They define their sexual desires through each other, fluidly changing how they are perceived by the other and oscillating roles. Their relationship also reinforces Stobie's observation that "bisexuality offers a conceptual means of unsettling binaries" (2003: 119). Indeed, queer desire is used in texts to represent liminal people who are boundary-crossers. The queer nature of their relationship allows them to unsettle the binaries placed on them.

The final scene of the film is between the two women acting out a passage from one of the pornographic novels that Hideko was forced to read. The scene is depicting these two women enacting their freedom. Hideko gifts Sook-hee with a set of bells stolen from Kouzuki, encouraging Sook-hee to re-enact one of her favourite passages. The scene shows the two women enjoying each other and the intimacy they have developed through their shared experience. The scene also visually depicts their freedom as they are sailing off to a new country where they can be themselves without being under the watchful eyes of the Count and Kouzouki. There is a contrast here as they leave behind the closed world of the uncle's mansion for an open, free flowing sea. This is not the first time that water is associated with escape in the film. When they are leaving for Japan, they are shown crossing a body of water on a boat and the camera lingers on the moon casting a reflection on the water.

Water symbolises freedom in its free-flowing nature, but it is also associated universally as a feminine symbol. According to Stefan Helmreich "the ocean has been motherly amnion, fluid matrix, seductive siren, and unruly tide, with these castings opposing such putatively heteromasculine principles as monogenetic procreative power, ordering rationality, self-securing independence, and dominion over the biophysical world" (2017: 1). The ocean is both the originator of life and a destroyer, both the mother and seductress. The ocean opposes the "monogenetic procreative power" of heteromasculine principles, that is, the ocean is not the sole source of life and requires collaboration to create life. Similarly, the women find autonomy through collaboration—reciprocal and mutual supportiveness. In addition to Helmreich's assessment of the ocean, Klaus Theweleit proposes the many ways in which water imagery in literature is associated with the feminine:

> A river without end, enormous and wide, flows through the world's literatures. Over and over again: the women-in-the-water; woman as water, as a stormy, cavorting, cooling ocean, a raging stream, a waterfall; as a limitless body of water that ships pass through . . . woman as the enticing (or perilous) deep; as a cup of bubbling body fluids; the vagina as wave, as foam . . . love as the foam from the collision of two waves, as a sea voyage. (1987: 283)

Water is free flowing and fluid, representing something that changes with the tides. It also has healing properties as it cools down burns and is essential for people to live. The sea symbolises the women's freedom, fluidity, and mutability. It represents a space beyond patriarchal power. The final scene also ends with a pan out shot, showing the reflection of the moon on the ocean. The moon and the ocean are interlinked as the moon determines the tides. Additionally, the moon is also a feminine symbol—the goddess Luna in Roman mythology (Norma, K 2018: n.p.). The moon is the middle ground between the brightness of the sun and the darkness of the night, making it represent the realm between conscious and unconscious. Through the characters of Sook-hee and Hideko, who are liminal characters and have a capacity to cross established boundaries, we can see them represent the realm between conscious and unconscious, aware of the world around them and the cracks within it. To show Sook-hee and Hideko surrounded by these feminine symbols further enhances the notion that their liberation is found within the feminine and not in the masculine spaces they once occupied.

Conclusion

The Handmaiden, ultimately, is the narrative journey of two women realising their sexuality and liberating themselves from the heteronormative society around them. The film challenges the male gaze and the mutual specularisation of subject and object through Hideko's role as Kouzuki's storyteller. Pornography is used as a tool by Kouzuki to create dominance over Hideko. By reappropriating this tool of oppression, Hideko can fully express her erotic potential and use it as a liberating force for herself. The film also explores the limitations of a heteropatriarchal society through the characterisation of the men in the film. Kouzuki and Fujiwara in the film are trapped by the limitations created by hegemonic masculinity, ruled by a fallacy, and bound by honour to keep up failing pretences. However, Sook-hee and Hideko can see through the pretences and outsmart the men, thus, setting themselves loose from the constraints of the heteronormative society in which they find themselves. The film ends with them escaping the restricting space of Kouzuki's mansion and journeying toward a new life over the free and fluid ocean.

Stoker

> I've grown quite weary of the spunky heroines, brave rape victims, soul-searching fashionistas that stock so many books. I particularly mourn the lack of female villains—good, potent female villains. […] I'm talking violent, wicked women. Scary women. Don't tell me you don't know some. The point is, women have spent so many years girl-powering ourselves—to the point of almost parodic encouragement—we've left no room to acknowledge our dark side. Dark sides are important. They should be nurtured like nasty black orchids.
>
> (Flynn 2015: n.p.)

Gillian Flynn, author of the cult classic thriller, *Gone Girl* (2012), (adapted for film by David Fincher in 2014), observes the postfeminist girl-power generation's lack of "violent, wicked women." She has done her part in redressing this dirth, as has Park, in the character of India Stoker. Flynn's botanical metaphor for wicked women—"nasty black orchids"—recalls India's self-description as a flower in the opening monologue, a flower that doesn't choose its colour. She doesn't name her colour, but it is most certainly dark, fitting the genre of the film: film *noir*. What makes *Stoker* a unique narrative is that it is both a neo-noir film, employing elements of *noir* such as the *femme fatale* figure, and a *bildungsroman*, a story that explores a character's formative years. Bernice Murphy calls the film an "unconventional female *bildungsroman*" due to the nature of India's awakening—murder is the rite of passage to womanhood and self-realisation (2016: 192). Throughout her essay, Murphy compares *Stoker* to Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) as the protagonist, Merricat, and India are both sheltered young women who grow up to do great harm to the people around them. However, India is also compared to the classic *noir* figure of the *femme fatale* (deadly woman) or, as Samantha Lindop posits, the *fille fatale* (deadly girl). I argue that the film follows a *bildungsroman* narrative strand within and through a *noir* genre. Elements of the *bildungsroman* are found through the allusions to fairy tales such as Hans Christian Andersen's "The Red Shoes" (1845) and the Grimm brothers' "The Worn-out Dancing Shoes" (1815). In this chapter, I argue that *Stoker* rewrites and subverts these fairy tales by depicting India as embracing her deviance rather than hiding it. In addition to *Stoker's* similarities to Shirley Jackson's gothic novel and the allusions to fairy tales, the film also pays homage to Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). Hitchcock's influence is evident in the relationship between India and her uncle Charlie who enters her life after her father's untimely

death. The motif of the staircase, the climatic plot twist, and symbolic use of darkness to signal impending doom are all echoes of *Shadow of a Doubt* (Walker 2005: 30). In an interview with *Filmmaker Magazine* Park notes that the Hitchcockian influence came from Miller's script rather than a conscious decision by himself as the director. He states:

> Hitchcockian influence is really something that Wentworth [Miller] was under when he was writing *Stoker*. And because I could see how much influence of Hitchcock, or Hitchcockian elements, there was in the script, that was actually something I wanted to avoid rather than subscribe to. It's not something that I do in making my own films — make obvious references to other filmmakers — but I quickly realized that there's something structurally inherent in *Stoker* that has a Hitchcockian influence. It's […] a part of the makeup of these characters, so much so that if one wanted to really take away the Hitchcockian elements or references, it would end up being a completely different film. […] "Okay, I'll accept this, and not only accept it, but turn it into one of the enriching aspects of the film, fostering its multiple interpretations." It's a case of me choosing to do this film, and choosing the script, not because of the Hitchcockian elements, but despite the fact that it had Hitchcockian elements in it. (in Osenlund 2013: n.p.)

Park notes that he did not want to be too heavy handed with the allusions to Hitchcock, choosing to rather keep the elements already prevalent in Miller's script while also attempting to make the film true to his own filmmaking style. Although Park's film is influenced by Hitchcock in terms of style and *mise-en-scène*, *Stoker* also has enough of his own personality to set him apart from other directors.

Following Hitchcock, the film subverts tropes of the *noir* genre. James Naremore notes that "it has always been easier to recognise a film [as *noir*] than to define the term […] there is in fact no completely satisfactory way to organise the category" (2008: 9). *Noir* has a set of tropes that allow audiences to intuitively recognise the film as *noir*. Most notably, the films utilise dark lighting and night-time settings to convey a moral darkness that permeates these narratives. This motif of darkness is also how the genre received its name, as 'noir' is the French word for black. These films also have some connection to Gothic aesthetics and narratives, or social dystopia (Hadjioannou 2016: 131). Critics Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton identify the five characteristic features of *noir*: oneiric, strange, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel (2003: xiii). Stobie expands on the conventions of the genre affirming that "stylistically these films are usually disrupted by flashbacks and display first-person narration. They focus on crime, particularly murder, in gritty urban settings. The characters are flawed and alienated and are frequently shown as engaged in love affairs" (2012: 376). Both *Shadow of a Doubt* and *Stoker* utilise *noir* conventions to further the narrative; however, both also subvert *noir* conventions. *Shadow of a Doubt* subverts gendered conventions with uncle Charlie taking on the role of the seducer, a role typically belonging to the *femme fatale*, and it is the younger Charlie (his niece)

who becomes the lead investigator, a role traditionally given to the male character in films *noir* (Hadjioannou 2016). In *Stoker* India is set up as the *femme fatale*, but she does not meet the same fate as these classic *noir* figures. 1940s American *noir* was used as a caution against assertive, licentious women whose defiance of patriarchal gender norms resulted in their downfall or death (Dickos 2002: 146). In these films, the *femme fatale* is often contrasted with the "good woman" (the model for appropriate social behaviour). However, in *Stoker* India's independence is not restrained, but allowed free reign.

My analysis of how India defies patriarchal conventions will be expanded on later in this chapter in the sections titled, "India's (Killer) Awakening" and "Shoes, Fairy Tales, and Deviant Women." In the latter I explore the film's intertextual invocation and rewriting of the fairy tales of the Red Shoes and the Dancing Princesses and how *Stoker* defies and subverts certain film *noir* tropes. *Noir* is an important backdrop for understanding India's deviant sexuality and the whole film's challenge of conventional morality. Having said this, it should be noted that my analysis of India is a sympathetic one. Although she is a psychopath, she is portrayed as the protagonist, and we are guided primarily through her point-of-view. *Stoker* is asking the audience to relate to, and sympathise with, a psychopathic killer. Not only does India challenge conventional morality in the more obvious sense of being a killer, but she also subverts gendered expectations. This is highlighted in how *Stoker*'s ending reverses *Shadow of a Doubt*: instead of returning to domestic life, as Hitchcock's heroine does, India breaks free from the bounds of 'safe' domesticity, venturing off to the masculine space of the big city, New York—a symbol of freedom and endless (dangerous) possibility. This modern and defiant twist does not allow India to fall into patriarchal narratives that align femininity with restraint and domesticity. Park allows the audience to imagine a wild, deviant, and powerful feminine. India's character may be hyperbolic, but she is evidence of the possibility to break free from societal conventions and moral strictures that govern middle-class suburbia. Therefore, *noir* becomes a testing ground for alternative ways of being and for living outside the patriarchal law.

The focus of my analysis is on India's identity formation and how she represents the patriarchal fear that young women who are afforded too much power are dangerous. There are many facets to her awakening, which I will discuss in "India's (Killer) Awakening" and touch on in "India and Charlie as Doubles" and "The Oedipal Narrative." India's inter-relationships with her uncle, mother, and father all play a role in her narrative journey. This is especially the case

with her former two relationships. I expand on Bernice Murphy's analysis of the depiction of female adolescence as monstrous in horror cinema. I use Murphy's insights into India's character as a sounding board for my exploration of India's sadomasochistic desires and her (borderline incestuous) relationship with her uncle, Charlie.

In section one, "India's (Killer) Awakening," I analyse three pivotal scenes that highlight India's coming-of-age: her opening monologue, the piano scene, and the moment where she becomes an active participant in Charlie's crimes. Relying on Foucault's and Bataille's insights into the paradoxical and fluid nature of sadomasochistic attractions, I examine Charlie and India's quest for limit experiences that reveal the interconnectedness of violence, pleasure, and power. In section two, "India and Charlie as Doubles," I identify the parallels between the two characters and how Park uses *noir* conventions to show this mirroring both visually and thematically. Due to the undeniable Freudian resonances of narrative, I explore the extent to which the film invokes and subverts the Oedipal narrative. The latter is the title of section three, in which I discuss how Charlie acts as both a mirror for India and as her surrogate father. Reading through the lens of Kaja Silverman's critique of the Oedipus complex in *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983), I outline how India rejects Oedipalisation and its gendered assumptions. India's defiance of phallocentrism leads into my fourth and final section of the chapter, which focusses on the film's intertextual allusions to fairy tales and the significance of the leitmotif of shoes. Through a feminist critique of two cautionary tales about deviant women—"The Red Shoes" by Hans Christian Andersen and "The Worn-out Dancing Shoes" (or "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" or "The Shoes that were Danced to Pieces") by the Brothers Grimm—I explore the symbolic significance of India's shoes. I will also briefly compare the characters in these fairy tales to the *noir* figure of the *femme fatale*. Situating the film as a subversion of the *noir* genre, I note how India's fate deviates from that of her 1940s counterpart. Before entering the analysis of the film, I provide a plot summary.

Stoker **Plot Synopsis**

The film opens with a monologue from the protagonist, India Stoker, in which she describes how her identity is formed by the adults in her life. India asserts that she is "not formed by things that are of [herself] alone". She points to a genetic inevitability in her makeup, placing emphasis on nature rather than nurture. Likening herself to a flower that cannot choose its colour she states: "we are not responsible for what we have to come to be" (*Stoker* 2013: 01:04-2:01). (This opening monologue will be analysed in more detail in the next section.) The film

then fades to a shot of India in a long white dress, running in her family's garden and another transition shows her picking at a blister on her big toe. The film then transitions, showing her looking around boulders in the garden and emptying the basket of tennis balls on their tennis courts, clearly looking for something. The scene transitions to her climbing a tree where she finds a box labelled "Happy birthday" and the scene abruptly changes to a zoom in on a cake on the dining room table, revealing that it is India's 18th birthday. A phone rings in and the audience hears a woman scream as the candles burn out and the film fades into the title card ("Stoker" in cursive handwriting) which then fades into a close-up shot of India's mother, Evelyn, with a black veil and crying. Through exposition from the priest's eulogy, it is revealed that India's father, Richard, has passed away. At Richard's wake back at the Stoker mansion, both mother and daughter are introduced to Richard's younger brother, Charlie. India, who was unaware of Charlie's existence, is slightly unsettled by his presence and becomes increasingly so when Charlie announces that he will stay with India and Evelyn indefinitely to support the two women any way he can.

India then witnesses Charlie and the caretaker of the house, Mrs McGarrick, get into an argument. Mrs McGarrick tells Charlie that she has been his "eyes and ears" since he was a little boy and goes missing soon after this interaction. Meanwhile, Evelyn and Charlie grow close to each other, although India continues to rebuff Charlie's efforts to befriend her.

India's Great Aunt Gwendolyn visits the Stoker household much to Evelyn and Charlie's consternation. During dinner Gwendolyn seems surprised by Charlie's claims that he had travelled the world and tells Evelyn that she needs to talk to her. Due to a seeming fear and suspicion of Charlie, Gwendolyn decides to stay at a motel rather than the hotel she told the family she had booked. At her motel room she becomes increasingly anxious and notices that her mobile phone is missing. She goes out into the rain and decides to phone the Stokers' from a phone booth; however, Charlie arrives before she can make the call and strangles her with his belt. While these events occur, India discovers Mrs McGarrick's body in the freezer and realises that Charlie is a murderer.

While at school, India is unable to control her aggression and stabs a bully, Chris Pitts, when he attempts to punch her in the face. She draws the attention of another student, Whip Taylor. At home, India notices that Evelyn and Charlie are growing more intimate. She sneaks out the house and ends up at a local diner where she sees Whip. She and Whip go into the woods where they begin to make out until she bites his lip. Whip then attempts to rape her, but Charlie

intervenes in time. He breaks Whip's neck with his belt and the lifeless body lies on top of India. She then helps Charlie bury the body in the Stoker garden and tries to phone Gwendolyn, only to hear the phone ringing beneath her. She realises that Charlie has killed her as well. Later, as she is washing the dirt off her body in the shower, India begins to masturbate to the memory of the murder, eventually climaxing at the thought of Charlie snapping Whip's neck.

Upon going through her father's office for mementos to take with her, India realises that the key she received as a birthday present opens the drawer to Richard's desk. She discovers letters addressed to her from Charlie over the years that detail his travels to other countries. However, she notices that the return address is for a psychiatric hospital. She confronts Charlie about this, and he reveals the truth: jealous of Richard's greater affection for Jonathan, Charlie killed their younger brother by burying him alive. Charlie is placed in a mental institution until his release on India's 18th birthday. Richard picks him up and asks Charlie to stay away from India, providing him with a new car, an apartment in New York City, and money. Aggrieved, Charlie bludgeons Richard to death with a rock and makes it seem like it was a car accident.

Upon learning this news, India is shocked and angry. Charlie says that he wants to give her a birthday present, a pair of red stiletto shoes to replace the childish saddle shoes she often wears. It appears as if she has forgiven Charlie, especially after he provides an alibi to the sheriff when he questions her about the night Whip went missing. Uncle and niece form a bond, much to the chagrin of Evelyn. Charlie tells India that he wants her to come to New York city with him. Later that evening, Evelyn admits that she dislikes India, and wants to watch her suffer. Evelyn then confronts Charlie, implying she knows about Charlie's violent tendencies. To save himself, Charlie attempts to seduce Evelyn and begins to strangle her with his belt. However, India shoots him with her rifle and buries his body in the garden before leaving for New York in his car.

India is pulled over by the sheriff for speeding and he asks why she is in such a hurry, to which she replies that she wanted to catch his attention. She stabs him in the neck with garden shears and follows him to the field to shoot him with her rifle. The closing shots mirror the opening scene, revealing that the opening monologue is from the end of India's narrative arc and her self-actualisation as a killer (Lindop 2015: 105).

India's (Killer) Awakening

The film's opening monologue acts as a prologue to the events in the film, as well as a framing device as the film's opening and closing shots are the same. The audience is met with freeze frame shots of India looking down upon something as we hear her voiceover:

> My ears hear what others cannot hear; small faraway things people cannot normally see are visible to me. These senses are the fruits of a lifetime of longing, longing to be rescued, to be completed. Just as the skirt needs the wind to billow, I'm not formed by things that are of myself alone. I wear my father's belt tied around my mother's blouse, and shoes which are from my uncle. This is me. Just as a flower does not choose its color, we are not responsible for what we have come to be. Only once you realize this do you become free, and to become adult is to become free. (*Stoker* 2013: 01:04-02:01)

In this opening self-reflection India acknowledges and foregrounds her singularity: the boast of her suprahuman visual and auditory perception is alarmingly suggestive of an animal predator. Although it falls into the parameters of neo-noir, the film also borrows themes from the horror genre and the vampiric figure. This is most notable through its title which alludes to the author of *Dracula*, Bram Stoker. Lindop points out that in fiction vampires possess superpowers such as the ability to shapeshift, physical strength, impeccable vision, and hearing among other traits. Although, there are no actual vampires in *Stoker* (as opposed to Park's 2009 film *Thirst*), both India and Charlie are vampiric in terms of their insatiable deviant (sexual) appetites. Indeed, India's sensory acuity foregrounded in the opening monologue suggests her likeness to those preternatural, nocturnal predators of Gothic fiction.

India states, rather defiantly, that she is not formed by herself alone and that she is made up of her father, mother and even her uncle. In the opening scene, the camera constantly shifts from India's hair blowing in the wind to the grass, leaves, and flowers which are blown by the wind, visually reinforcing the metaphor of her voiceover narration: that she is subject to, and predetermined by, the force of nature. India's voiceover narration self-consciously signals this film as a *Bildungsroman*. The German term *bildung* is closely aligned with the word 'self-formation' and refers to education and growth—one's acquirement of knowledge about the world and one's self. According to Ellen McWilliams "the most useful, inclusive, definition of *Bildung* can be taken as a physical, intellectual, or indeed spiritual process of cultivation and transformation" (2009: 8). Thus, it is India's formation into a killer that drives the plot of the film. Furthermore, it can be concluded that the film should follow the *bildungsroman* narrative as it revolves around India's coming of age. Notably this is the only time in the film where India directs the audience through narration. These opening lines of the film encapsulate India's journey from childhood to maturity and her subsequent awakening. Her identity is a composite

of the parts of her family—her blouse belongs to her mother, and her belt was once her father's, and her shoes are a gift from her uncle. She says that you are free only after you achieve self-awareness and, in that freedom, you become an "adult" or, to better put it, reach a stage of self-actualisation. Murphy notes that "India's opening (and sole) voiceover establishes her clear sense of difference from the rest of the world" (2016: 192). Her voiceover narration indicates that she is aligning herself with nature (genetic predetermination) rather than culture/society (artificial human constructs), choosing to reject the social norms placed on her as woman. The audience watches as she walks confidently across a highway, her hair and skirt billowing in the wind (Figure 11). This opening montage is made up of jump cuts of India and her surroundings as she gives her voiceover. It jumps from a shot of India crossing the road away from a police car, arousing intrigue of a possible crime. These shots are juxtaposed with close-ups of blades of grass, India's eye looking down at something, and blood splattered flowers (Figure 12).

Park utilises sharp freeze frames coupled with India's monotonous tone and distinct lack of background score to create a feeling of discomfort and uneasiness in the scene and, by extension, in the audience. By beginning the film with the sense of discomfort, the audience is made aware that this may not be a conventional coming-of-age story and there is ambiguity about the genre. The police car and India seemingly leaving a crime scene indicate that this is a thriller, but her voiceover and the dissolve from her adult self to her 'childhood' self suggests a *Bildungsroman*. It is these mixed signs and conventions that cause intrigue. The final shot in the opening montage is a close-up of India's face as she looks down on something, a slight smile on her face (Figure 13). This shot pauses on India's eye, signalling an entry into her mind's eye or memory, and then dissolves into the past: a girl running through a green field, picking at her blisters, and exploring the family garden. Notably, the hazy image makes India appear younger and girlish, belying her 18 years. The screen fades to India's eighteenth birthday cake (indicating that she is legally an adult) with the news of her father's death.

In the opening lines, India also points to her clothes which are borrowed from her mother, father, and uncle. It is worth noting that clothes play an important role in accentuating India's differences from the rest of society. Although the film is set in modern-day American suburbia (characters are seen using mobile phones and the school India attends is an architecturally modern building), India dresses more conservatively with her 1950s silhouettes almost as if she is a woman out of time. This could be a reference to Hitchcock's heroines, but it also displaces the audience so the film does not feel too grounded in a specific time. Murphy makes

an interesting comment on India's use of vintage clothing stating that "India's penchant for old-fashioned, high-necked dresses and blouses […] emphasize the character's intense self-containment and sense of restraint" (2016: 193). I argue that what India is "containing" is her sadomasochistic desires. Lindop also observes India's stylisation calling it "dowdy" and "highly conservative" (2015: 105) and notes that most of the costumes also reflect the same muted colour palette. This muting of colour metaphorically stands for the repression of India's 'true colours' as a sadomasochist and killer. India's obsession with pleasure and pain is evident in the short scene after the opening montage where she sits down to pop a blister on her foot (Figure 14). Her deliberate and intense fascination with her wound and the delight she experiences in watching and controlling its oozing liquid, summons to mind Foucault's observations about the sadomasochistic pleasure and power in medical examination. This scene is pivotal in alerting the viewer to India's penchant for "counterpleasures," even though delight in popping a blister, just like popping a pimple, is not so extraordinary. It is here that sadism and masochism collide, as Foucault explicates in Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*:

> The medical examination, the psychiatric investigation, the pedagogical report, and family controls may have the over-all and apparent objective of saying no to all wayward or unproductive sexualities, but the fact is that they function as mechanisms with a double impetus: pleasure and power. The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting. Capture and seduction, confrontation, and mutual reinforcement: parents and children, adults and adolescents, educator and students, doctors and patients, the psychiatrist with his hysteric and his perverts, all have played this game continually since the nineteenth century. These attractions, these evasions, these circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed, but *perpetual spirals of power and pleasure*. (1978: 45)

Foucault does not distinguish between sadism and masochism or see pleasure and power as antithetical. Neither does he see the sadist and masochist in fixed hierarchies of dominance and subordinance. Rather, these positions are interchangeable or cyclical: they are "spirals of pleasure and power". This notion that power, pleasure and pain are interlinked and interchangeable is evident in India's character and her relationships, particularly with Charlie. She seems to derive pleasure from popping her own blister, causing herself pain which shows the inseparability or "double impetus" of pleasure and power. She methodically focuses on the blister, carefully popping it and pressing it so the liquid flows out. She looks at it with a curiosity and tries to control how quickly the puss flows out. This scene alerts the audience to the pleasure she gets from exercising a power to question, spy, and search out. She applies a

medicalising gaze on herself during the blister-popping scene, slowing down and controlling the popping. This makes it quite excruciating and even uncomfortable to watch as the viewer experiences it with her. Foucault calls attention to the sadomasochistic pleasure-power evident in relationships like doctor-patient, parent-child, and adult-adolescent, and the fluidity of roles of dominance and subservience in these "attractions." This "eroticisation of power" (Foucault in Macey 2019: 690) limns India and Charlie's relationship. Their deviant and criminal desires befit Foucault's description of S&M as the "desexualisation of pleasure," "inventing" "new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of the body": pleasure beyond the traditional and limited association it has with "pleasures of the flesh" or "fucking and drinking" (Macey 2019: 690). In other words, S&M is a game with roles, but these roles are sometimes fluid. India and Charlie's relationship can be read as a teacher-student or adult-adolescent archetype. Charlie has been watching India since she was a baby and has contributed to her identity formation by gifting a pair of saddle shoes every year on her birthday. However, India has also been observing Charlie, taking on the role of a predator spying on its prey, manipulating him to get what she wants.

Charlie and India both exhibit killer instincts, imbued with erotic energy, and suggestive of "new possibilities of pleasure." Charlie has an enigmatic character which gives him a "mesmerising quality that renders him abject in that he is at once compelling and disturbing" (Lindop 2015: 106). Moreover, he is framed in a way that is reminiscent of shapeshifting. When he is first seen in the film, he appears like a mirage in the distance with the sun behind him and his figure shimmering in the heat. He also seems to vanish into thin air after an exchange with India, making her wonder if he was there. Charlie is also visually shown in shadow form (Figure 15) which is a technique that is found in vampire films like Friedrich Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) (Lindop 2015: 106). The piano scene is pivotal as a revelatory of moment of the mutual erotic attraction between uncle and niece. Up until this scene, India has been suspicious of Charlie and his intentions. He is a shadowy figure and a mystery that must be solved, but there is also an attraction towards Charlie and the possible danger he may represent. The scene begins with India alone at the family's grand piano after returning home from school where she stabbed an intimidating classmate with a pencil. As she sharpens her pencil, she reflects on the violence she has inflicted on the boy, the bloody shavings falling on her sheet music that is on top of the piano. India begins to think about Charlie and the body she found in the basement freezer. She starts by playing a solo tune that is slightly unsettling which she plays three times before moving into a familiar three note motif that has been repeated

throughout the film. She is quickly disrupted by the entrance of Charlie who appears at her side adding ominous bass octaves. With his domineering personality, he attempts to take over, shifting the tempo from adagio to allegro, they begin to play a duet. India turns to him with an irked expression, follows his lead temporarily, but counters his menacing bass and urgent playing with her own more staccato and upbeat chords. Charlie smirks, seemingly delighted by the challenge. The duet is a duel of wills, demonstrating the Foucauldian versatility of role-switching in the S&M game. The duet that India and Charlie play is specially composed for the film by minimalist composer Philip Glass and the three-note motif is repeated throughout the film's score (Norelli 2018: n.p.). The piece reflects both characters' temperaments through their playing style—Charlie's experience is evident in his confidence and aggression, while India is self-assured and responds to Charlie's urgency with jaunty and lively chords. She is perhaps 'new to the game,' but she seems to learn quickly.

Throughout the piano scene India seems to become more and more sexually aroused. It is notable that, in the beginning when Charlie arrives at the piano, the camera moves from her fingers down to her saddle shoes. These shoes are not only the symbol of her youth and adolescence, but also represent his involvement in India's life. She has obviously been a constant interest to him (he has been watching, pursuing, and seducing her), and, in turn, his mysteriousness has fascinated her. Now their synchrony and affinity for each other becomes evident through their duet. A duet is a piece where both players are of equal importance and must be well matched. This moment highlights their forbidden desire for each other. It is also interesting that when she starts alone, she plays the treble clef, but he contributes the bass. As he moves further and further down the bass—it adds a darker, more ominous mood to her mournful beginning. The bass's darker resonance may reflect his darker side and his established history of murder. While the tune is mournful to start with, her treble is lighter and can be associated with youthfulness. She starts slowly and solemnly, but he changes the pace, shifting to a brisk allegro with staccato, taking on a playful tone, and adding complexity. Finally, he brings his arm around her and enters her domain in the treble. As they continue to play, India seems to become more short-winded, taking in small breaths, until the piece eventually reaches a climax before India is left to finish the piece on her own as Charlie disappears just as quickly as he has appeared.

The duet between India and Charlie is a courtship of keys. Clare Nina Norelli uses the term "musical coitus" (2018: n.p.) to describe their duet. The duet relies on the synchrony of the two

players, and it becomes a metaphor for physical intimacy and sex. It begins slowly and steadily, with the man seemingly initiating the act (although this is not always the case with all couples, it seems to be a norm in heteropatriarchal intimacy) and builds up to a climax where both parties reach a moment of ecstasy before it ends abruptly with a sense of almost hollowness. The scene ends with India awakening from her trance state as the music they weave together becomes an out-of-body experience akin to the aftermath of an orgasm—awakening from the ecstasy of reaching a tipping point. Norelli observes:

> India emerges from the duet with a greater awareness of herself, embracing her murderous nature and desires. She no longer requires an instructor. The piano is the catalyst of this formative moment, her metamorphosis from girl to woman and, as she acknowledges in her monologue, "To become adult, is to become free." (2018: n.p.)

It is in this moment that India realises her ability to be more than what her parents have led her to believe. She becomes self-aware and, by extension, liberated from the expectations placed on her. Reading the duet through a Bataillean lens, it marks a moment of transcendence, breaking down of the boundaries between self and other. This is evident when Charlie enters India's domain of the piano, wrapping his arm around her and embracing her. Bataille notes that "without doing violence to our inner selves, are we able to bear a negation that carries us to the farthest bounds of possibility?" (1987: 24). The duet scene is the beginning of India's annihilation of her old self that will eventually lead her to denying the narrow parameters that have been placed on her existence.

The piano scene is the beginning of India's sexual awakening which is only escalated by the allure of her dangerous uncle Charlie. Murphy notes that "[p]reviously, India had always played alone, but once Charlie sits next to her on the stool and joins in, her almost swooning response to his presence emphasizes the undertow of erotic tension that existed between them from their first encounter" (2016: 195). For Murphy India's "burgeoning sexuality is linked to her growing infatuation with her uncle and her escalating willingness to use violence against others" (195). There is clearly an incestuous relationship between the two characters that is only heightened through this scene as all of India's desires culminate. To India, Charlie represents danger and the unknown; he is mysterious and aloof. He also seems to know more than he lets on and carries a charm about him that attracts almost every woman to him, including her mother.

India's awakening culminates in the scene that represents a turning point in the narrative and occurs after the piano scene. After the incident at the piano, the camera cuts to India lying on

her bed presumably still thinking about what happened. She hears music from downstairs, she gets up and walks through house, eventually hearing her mother and Charlie laughing in the dining room. India eavesdrops on their conversation. The scene is reminiscent of Freud's "primal scene": the act of the child witnessing their parents having sexual intercourse for the first time. Freud posited that the child interpreted the scene as an act of violence perpetrated by the father onto the mother. Although the child does not fully understand the scene, it traumatises their psychosexual behaviour. Melanie Klein furthers Freud's argument; however, where Freud saw the scene as enigmatic for the child, Klein diverged from this theory in that she did not see this moment as primarily traumatic. Rather the effect was more ambivalent as David Mann notes:

> In her later work, Klein (1955) describes how the infant is both enticed and repulsed by the image of watching and listening to the primal scene. The child comes to feel excluded by the parental intercourse (Klein 1952) where the parents enjoy the objects (penis and breast) which the child wants. The infant may have the fantasy of the parents in a state of constant mutual gratification. This may lead to the image of the combined parent: mother contains penis or whole of father; father contains breast or whole of mother. In this phantasy the parents are fused inseparably in coitus. (1997: 140)

Although the scene that India witnesses between her mother and surrogate father-figure (Charlie) is not sexual intercourse, it is enough to enhance her curiosity in sex. Before witnessing her mother and Charlie kiss, India is mostly portrayed as asexual. That is, she is not interested in sexual intercourse and in some cases is repulsed by the boys in her class (for instance, the scene where she stabs a boy with a pencil for coming too close to her). Her prim clothing is also suggestive of her disinterest in sex. The scene begins with Evelyn and Charlie talking in the dining room, Evelyn with a glass of wine in her hand. The camera cuts to India in the hallway, eavesdropping on their conversation. The shots in the scene evoke a sense of voyeurism as the camera takes on the point of view of India and from the window as if we are outsiders observing the action. As the scene progresses Evelyn and Charlie become increasingly intimate as they flirt with each other. India is visibly disgusted by it; however, she also cannot look away from the scene and continues to watch as her mother and uncle begin to kiss. This is shown as a close-up shot as if her eyes are zooming in on the two lovers (Figure 16). India moves from the hallway to the window, but her eyes are still fixed on the scene in the dining room. She watches as Charlie and Evelyn kiss and as Charlie begins to grab Evelyn's breast. Both horrified and interested in the scene, India is only awoken from her dreamlike state when Charlie (who has known that she's been watching) makes direct eye contact with her. With the voyeuristic camera angles, the scene is set up like Freud's primal scene. The child

watches as the parents (in India's case her mother and surrogate father) are intimate from a place where the parents cannot see or are unaware of the child.

After witnessing her mother and Charlie kissing, India runs away and pursues a fellow classmate, Whip, that she meets outside a diner. The two go to a nearby park where India slowly whirls around a merry-go-round and says:

> Have you ever seen a photograph of yourself – taken when you didn't know you were being photographed? From an angle you don't get to see when you look in the mirror? And you think that's *me*. That's *also* me. Do you know what I'm talking about? (*Stoker* 2013: 51:22-51:46)

One can infer from this comment that she is reflecting on the influence Charlie has on her, encouraging her to see another side of herself—an angle that allows her to explore her murderous instincts further. India then runs into the woods, Whip following close behind her. Clearly mirroring the actions of her mother and Charlie, she kisses him first (mirroring Charlie) and lets him touch her breast (Figure 17). However, she bites his lip, to which he responds by attempting to rape her. It is at this moment that Charlie enters and "rescues" India by choking Whip unconscious. What then follows is a scene where India showers and relives the moments of the night, the camera jumping from shots of the murder and burial to India in the shower. Charlie is shown to have broken the boy's neck as she lays under the body (Figure 18). She then helps him to bury Whip next to Aunt Gwen on the Stoker lawn. As the scene in the shower progresses, it becomes evident that India is not traumatised by the events (which is implied when she begins to cry after stepping into the shower), but rather aroused by them, as she begins to masturbate in the shower. According to Murphy:

> India's "coming of age" has not come about as a result of a sexual encounter with a boy her own age, but rather as a result of her unmistakably aroused response to Charlie's brutal actions and her de facto collusion in his homicidal behaviour. (2016: 196)

As Murphy points out, India's sexual awakening is quite different to the usual coming-of-age narrative. She does not experience sexual intercourse with a boy, but rather explores her sexuality through her own body (autoeroticism). Furthermore, her sexual desire is sparked through her fascination with violence, death, and danger. Both India and Charlie share an erotic pleasure when taking Whip's life, but it is also a moment of the "eroticisation of power" and is exemplary of Foucault's ideas of multiplying pleasures beyond the body.

India 'gets off' on the power she can exert which echoes Foucault's words that "sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure

domain which knowledge tries to gradually uncover" (1978: 105). Sexuality is produced by control and exerting power. In an interview, Foucault confesses the unsurpassable pleasure he felt when he faced a near-death experience (Macey 2019: 673). His experience is evocative of the Bataillean erotic which sees the death drive as the vehicle for an erotic-spiritual transcendence, or in Bauman's terms, "Thanatos [drives] the chariot of Eros" (1993: 101). According to Bataille "without doing violence to our inner selves, are we able to bear a negation that carries us to the farthest bounds of possibility?" (1987: 24). India begins to embrace her true nature when she is reliving and re-enjoying her newly discovered eroticism in the shower, recounting how Charlie killed Whip. This scene in the shower is when she does violence to her*self* through masturbating over what most people would view as a traumatic experience. Although she has not had a near-death experience, by participating in Whip's murder she is vicariously 'enjoying' this limit experience. Bataille notes that it is only in eroticism that one faces the dissolution of the ego through the eradication of boundaries between the self and other, and the subsequent eradication of the subject.

India's rupture of self occurs in the moment of ecstatic transcendence. It is an encounter with alterity, with the absolute other: death. MacKendrick points out that "it is not the death of the *body* but of the *subject* that is sought" (1999: 118) Through India's enjoyment of this newfound erotic, she experiences the annihilation of her 'self' and the realisation that she enjoys counter-pleasurable acts. As MacKendrick notes, "counterpleasures take up a highly disruptive place within, at the margins of, and explosively beyond [the institutions of pornography, Christianity, and erotic domination]" (1999: 14). Sadomasochism alters the meanings of subordination and control, undoing the "binarism of oppression to create a transgressive, postsubjective and highly Bataillean erotic" (MacKendrick 1999: 14). India's conservative clothing and her initial shock when she finds out that Charlie has killed the housekeeper and Aunt Gwendoline, shows that she's repressing the aspect of herself that enjoys sadomasochistic acts. Only when she is alone, does she recognise the pleasure she derives from the pain she and Charlie inflicted on Whip (indicated by her masturbating to the memories of the killing). Furthermore, it is only in this annihilation of the self that India can break the parameters put onto her as daughter, niece and young woman and fully embrace her nature as a sadomasochistic killer. Both the piano scene and the scene where she masturbates in the shower to the memory of killing Whip are character defining moments. India embracing her true nature signifies the rebirth of the chaotic 'self' amidst the fragments of the old (as daughter, niece, young woman).

Lindop makes an interesting observation about India's transformation into a killer noting:

> Although at 18, India is too old to be experiencing menarche, her development into a fully-fledged killer, whereby she transgresses from shooting birds to slaying men for pleasure, coincides with her entry into adulthood, which, for her, signifies both power and freedom. (2015:108)

This is highlighted in her monologue where she says "we are not responsible for what we have come to be, only once you realise this do you become free, and to become adult is to become free" (Stoker 2013: 02:01). India's style also becomes less conservative and more revealing or provocative as she swaps her brogue-style shoes for the red high-heels, her mum's flowy blouse and a shorter hemline. India's transformation into a killer girl not only happens with her maturation into legal adulthood, but also coincides with her father's death.

India's father has been someone that she was close to prior to his passing, despite him having to travel for work. He encouraged her to pursue hunting and tried to protect her from Charlie, an event that leads to his death. In killing Richard, Charlie can take his place (as a substitute father) and influence India to embrace her killer instinct. Charlie sees in India what her father also saw—that India possesses the same sadomasochistic desires as him. Park, following Hitchcock, employs the narrative and visual trope of mirroring, especially in the relationship between India and Charlie to highlight the similarities between these two characters. Although I have discussed India and Charlie's relationship in great depth, my analysis has, thus far, not detailed how these two act as doubles of each other and how their (surrogate) father-daughter relationship reflects the patriarchal fears of affording young women too much power.

India and Charlie as Doubles

India's killer instinct has mostly been regulated by her father, Richard. Knowing her personality is like Charlie's, Richard provided an alternative outlet for her in the form of hunting birds to deflect her killer impulses. However, succeeding his death, Charlie becomes his replacement (or India's surrogate father) and India is drawn to give into her impulses rather than repress them. As the film progresses, she becomes more like Charlie. According to Lindop:

> This is not only determined through India's actions, but symbolically her transformation is articulated by means of a series of shot sequences that frame India and Charles as mirror images of each other or show their respective forms crossing over and melding. (2015: 109)

India and Charlie become indistinguishable by the end of the film, so much so that it is as if they are mirroring each other—a technique used by Hitchcock in *Shadow of a Doubt*.

Hadjioannou notes that, in *Shadow of a Doubt*, "what is quite intriguing is that each Charlie is a sort of mirror reflection of the other, an idea developed by Hitchcock's aesthetic construction of the two establishing scenes with which he first introduces the two characters" (2016: 140-142). Similarly, India and Charlie are mirrored in *Stoker*. For example, when India first meets Charlie at Richard's wake, he is framed standing on the top of the staircase (a shot also reminiscent of *Shadow of a Doubt*) while India is standing at the bottom. At the end of the film, when India knows the truth about Charlie, their first meeting is mirrored, but India is now the one standing on top of the staircase. In some cases, it even seems like they are becoming the same person and alternate roles of dominance and submission, echoing Foucault's thoughts on pleasure-power relationships and the spiralling of sadomasochistic roles between uncle and niece.

Lindop notes that using mirroring and doubling, common in representations of lesbian desire, either denotes sameness or difference. This iconography was popularised by Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) which deals with themes of doubling and duplication. The film's protagonists also seem to swap personalities, showing a reciprocal exchange. This reaffirms, or even echoes, the spiralling of roles asserted by Foucault. *Stoker* makes intertextual reference to *Persona* through shot replication as well as regarding themes of identity, duality, and sexuality. Although Charlie does not become visibly weaker like the protagonist in *Persona*, India does become stronger and "more aligned with her uncle" (Lindop 2015: 110). In the final scenes of the film, she becomes more powerful than Charlie and kills him. He does not become physically weaker, but rather less astute when it comes to trusting others which leads to his demise. India also takes his credit cards, car, and other items that Richard gave him to start a new life in New York. This series of events signals to the viewer her preparedness to become Charlie's successor. However, in killing him, she is liberating herself from the patriarchal power that has been held over her. It is telling that the only people she is shown to kill or had a part in killing are men – Whip, Charlie, and the sheriff – and the person she chooses to save is her mother who has been absent most of her life. Her feminine allegiance is further evident in the horror she displays at finding out that the housekeeper and her great aunt Gwendolyn have been murdered. While India is an independent cold-blooded killer, she still demonstrates some sense of sorority in sparing the lives of other women.

According to Lindop, Charlie becomes India's substitute father, in the absence of her biological father:

> Charles Stoker functions as a substitute father who perverts his love and paternal responsibility towards his niece on a number of levels, most profoundly by indoctrinating her into the tactile thrill of murder. The symbolic replacement of the good, responsible Richard, with corrupt, unbalanced Charles can be interpreted as representational of the death of the conventional, 'stable' family, though Charles' biological attachment to India also implies a broader cynicism about the value of communal and familial bonding. (2015: 111)

Unlike other violent paternal figures, Charlie does not want to kill India, but rather wants her to join him so they could become a killing team. As Lindop observes, this form of father/daughter alliance is usually uncommon in American film and television. However, the television series, *Hannibal* (2013), also shows a similar relationship where teenager Abigail Hobbs forms a close bond with the cannibal Hannibal Lecter succeeding the death of her own cannibal father who used to use her as unsuspecting bait to lure young girls to their deaths. However, unlike India, Abigail falls victim to patriarchal rage. Lindop mentions *Hannibal* not only because of the similarities between the bonds that the two teenage girls experience, but also because cannibalism (like vampirism) has a link to the oral sadistic phase of development. According to Joan Riviere this phase is where the child has a strong desire to devour both parents, especially the father who represents a threat to the infant-mother bond (1929: 309).

Stoker depicts a strained relationship between India and her mother, but also shows subversion of the Oedipal narrative. Lindop contends that "*Stoker* articulates unresolved pre-Oedipal fixations that, in this instance, function as a masochistic patriarchal response to shifting gender dynamics, in particular, the increasing power of young women" (2015: 112). The film dramatises societal fears about young women who possess the power to dismantle heteronormative ideals through their deviance. Although psychoanalysis is considered a social science, it deals with and addresses people's intimate secrets and is concerned with the nuances interpersonal relationships (Santner 2006: 196). Psychoanalysis lends itself to the analysis of literary and visual texts primarily because it provides a rationale for people's desires and unconscious motives.

The Oedipal Narrative

India's progress into a man-killing monster is represented through the subversion of the Oedipal narrative and how India interacts with her parental figures. India loses her father during

the Genital stage[11] of her psychosexual development; however, her lack of social awareness shows that her development may be 'stunted' according to Freud's model, and she is still trying to process the Phallic stage which determines the child's bond to the father. According to Freud, the Phallic stage is also the development of the Oedipal complex where a successful resolution results in the child identifying with the same sex parent (Freud 1953 [1905]: 225-226). Not only does India lose her father, but she has a strained relationship with her mother who also shows a disinterest in India. During a child's first stages of development, Freud suggests this is where the bond between Mother and child begins and is the start of a healthy and loving relationship (1953 [1905]: 224). From the relationship depicted in the film, one could suggest that something happened during these phases that allowed for a distance between Evelyn and India. This indicates why India has a stunted development and why she is still struggling through the Phallic stage after puberty.

The opposite sex parent is fundamental during the Phallic phase, as outlined by Freud in the Oedipus complex (1953 [1905]: 225). With her father gone, India looks towards her uncle Charlie as the male figure in her life. Charlie, therefore, becomes the substitute or surrogate father for India. Feminist psychoanalytical theorist, Kaja Silverman, notes, in *The Subject of Semiotics*, that "[Freud] associates the male subject with aggressivity, voyeurism, and sadism, and the female subject with antithetical but complementary qualities of passivity, exhibitionism and masochism" (1983: 138). India, interestingly, possesses traits more typically associated with the male subject in a Freudian paradigm, making her a threat to heteropatriarchal society. Silverman exposes Freud's biological essentialism, contending that these gender roles are culturally constructed and the subject's identification with their assigned roles causes a change in behaviour (1983: 140): both male and female subject "refer their cultural status to their anatomical status after the former has been consolidated, and they do so at the suggestion of the society within which they find themselves" (1983: 140). India does not conform to these

[11] Freud maintained that personality developed through a series of childhood stages where the id's pleasure seeking-energies become focused on a particular erogenous zone (an area of the body that is sensitive to stimulation). There are five psychosexual stages which are the oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital stage. The zone associated with each stage serves as the source of pleasure. Personality is mostly established at age five and a child's early experiences play a major role in their personality development and influences their behaviour later in life. If a psychosexual stage is completed successfully then the result is a healthy personality; however, if issues are not resolved then fixations can occur. Until conflict is resolved, a person will remain "stuck" in this stage and may seek unhealthy behaviour (Kipp & Shaffer 2013: 480-481). India's psychosexual development seems to also be delayed according to Freud's model as most of this development is meant to occur quite early in life.

traditional roles or cultural indicators, but deviates from them, causing unease in the people around her especially her mother and the sheriff.

In psychoanalytic theory, society acts as a mirror against which the subject tests their appropriate role. Thus, mirrors and mirroring play a crucial role in India's development. The Mirror Stage, proposed by Lacan, marks the beginning of a child's conscious recognition of the self and from this stage onwards the child can make the connections between their appearance and their mind (Dor 1998: 96). This is where the child's ego begins to develop and associations between looking good and feeling good are strengthened. The child also experiences a difference between who they are and who they see in the mirror. During the Mirror Stage, the child learns to distinguish between "I" and the "other" as distinct to oneself. To Lacan, the mirrored child becomes a goal and a version of ourselves that we want to "take hold of;" it puts an end to "the fantasy of the fragmented body" (in Dor 1998: 94). India's strained relationship with her mother is shown throughout the course of the film. With the loss of her father and the strained relationship with her mother, India's ideal of self becomes broken. Although she understands actions and consequences, India does not care about the repercussions she may face. This is seen in the second half of the film which foregrounds the emergence of her violent nature. In addition, India is introverted and almost detached from the people around her, especially her peers. She never fully connects with the concept of the mirror image being her own as she cannot relate to the people around her.

Mirroring does not necessarily require a mirror or reflective surface; it is also possible for other people to act as reflections. Family and society, are arguably, the main mirror for the child. Although the initial phase may be when a child is 18 months or during their language acquisition phase, the subject revisits the mirror phase throughout their life (Griggs 2020: 116). Lacan suggests that the recognition that occurs in the mirror stage amounts to a misrecognition. This carries on throughout life as the subject recognises themselves as being a particular kind of 'I' or taking the imagining of oneself to be a certain sort of ego-level self. This highlights the ego as not only a heteronomous object, but it is the repository for the projected dreams of others, in particular the subject's parents or primary caregivers. The child becomes a receptacle for their parents' dreams and wishes (Johnston 2018: n.p.). This is shown through India's relationships with her mother, father, and uncle Charlie. It is vital that the subject recognises the ego as 'me' (representing the unique selfhood) as this allows the subject to misrecognise

that the ego is an alienating introject where the subject is seduced by others unconscious and conscious desires and wants (Johnston 2018: n.p.).

Evelyn is a cold mother towards India, and she seems to be quite unaccepting of the concept of motherhood and never fully embraces her child physically or emotionally. Therefore, India has grown up without a motherly influence in life and never saw the influential and symbolic image of a mother holding her child. With the introduction of Charlie, the audience begins to see India reflect Charlie and his actions. He becomes India's primary mirror evident not only in her violent tendencies, but how she expresses herself towards others. She begins to mimic Charlie's cool and aloof demeanour, showing a confidence that wasn't fully there in the beginning of the film. Charlie also finds ways to influence and shape her identity by sending her shoes every birthday. In the scene where India puts on the pair of red high shoes, she encapsulates herself in them. It is symbolic of the unity of the ego and implies that Charlie leads her to her final transition of self.

As the narrative progresses, Charlie, her substitute father, influences her actions and she mirrors his violence. It is not only his violence that she mirrors, but also, as evident in the piano scene, his actions, and emotions. This is because he represents the male figure that she no longer has in her life. She aims to imitate her mother's sexuality. Her actions are a direct consequence of the loss of her father and the lack of emotional support from her mother; however, the film challenges Freud's theory as India chooses her mother's life over her substitute father. Additionally, it is evident that India does not envy her mother, but rather pities her and her attempts to change India's ways. The film's deviance from the Freudian narrative aligns with Silverman's observation that the mother is the first love object:

> The history of the female subject differs from that of the male subject in many respects. One of the most important of these has to do with the radical discontinuity between the libidinal investments of her infancy, and those which she is required to make at the Oedipal juncture. Because she is usually the source of infantile warmth and nourishment, the mother constitutes the first love object for both male and female subjects. Since the male subject is encouraged to select her as the locus of his Oedipal desires, and later to replace her with members of the same sex, there are no major interruptions in his erotic life. However, the female subject is obliged to renounce her first object choice, to effect a quite violent break with the source of her earliest pleasures. (1983: 141)

India's experience differs from this narrative as Evelyn is not a source of "infantile warmth and nourishment." In fact, she seems quite indifferent to motherhood, as if it was a burden placed upon her. Once India goes through Oedipalisation, it is expected that she would renounce her mother, transferring her love for the mother onto her (surrogate) father. However, India chooses

to save her mother and, in effect, chooses to align herself with Evelyn. As mentioned previously, India appears to pity her mother and her inability to liberate herself, but in choosing to spare Evelyn, she is also showing her forgiveness. She is showing Evelyn a kindness that she hadn't experienced from her mother in a very long time or perhaps, ever. Despite Evelyn's lack of maternal warmth, India mirrors her in terms of dress style and when she wears her mother's blouse. India and Evelyn's relationship is not the ideal mother-daughter bond, evident in Evelyn's cool aloofness towards, and even dislike of, her daughter.

The differences between India and Evelyn are depicted throughout the film, not only through the characters' actions, but also through the set design and costumes. This is especially true for the choice of clothing that each character wears. Park wanted all of India's outfits to be symmetrical and all of Evelyn's to be asymmetrical (Rome 2013: n.p.). Not only does this visually highlight a clash or difference in their characters, but it shows India's character and her almost neurotic thinking. This is opposed to Evelyn who is emotionally unstable and seems to live life in the moment. Evelyn's room also reflects the asymmetrical style of her clothing and is filled with warm tones like sultry reds and dim, moody lighting. Evelyn's room contrasts with the rest of the Stoker house and the general colour palette of the film which is cool greens, blues, and greys. This suggests that Evelyn is the outsider in India and Charlie's world. The natural consequence to this is for India to kill Evelyn and join forces with Charlie; however, India chooses her own path and decides to save the outsider and kill her partner in crime.

In the final scenes of the film, Evelyn seems to become more like the birds that India used to hunt. Bird and cage symbolism is pervasive throughout the film, from the outdoor swing that India sits in (Figure 19) to the peacock blue of the dress that Evelyn wears when India chooses to save her. Birds are often associated with freedom and liberation from the confines of life. Not only is India shown to be the predator who kills game birds, but she is also a caged bird herself. The production designer, Thérèse DePrez, describes the outdoor chair that India sits in as a nest: "I saw it in a magazine and thought it looked like a big nest […] and again there's the idea of scale – how beautiful for India to be sitting in that in the backyard, this small person, that little baby chick inside of this big nest" (Rome 2013: n.p.). Comparing India to a chick is apt as she begins the film as an adolescent girl who is sheltered and protected by the suburban life she lives; however, as the film progresses, she learns to fly and begins to move away from her nest. The shot of India framed in the shoe boxes also continues this bird motif, surrounded by the shell (her shoes) and ready to hatch and realise her potential. She leaves the 'nest' of the

suburbs to discover the city, but also, she begins to let go of her repressed sexual desires and frees herself from the confines of the societal (and parental) expectations of her.

Shoes, Fairy Tales, and Deviant Women

Stoker has been described as a "fractured fairy tale" (Brody 2013: n.p.) and indeed India's narrative journey and her escape from the confines of societal expectations invokes and alludes to two well-known cautionary tales: Hans Christian Andersen's "The Red Shoes" (1847) and the Brothers Grimm's "The Worn-Out Dancing Shoes" (1815). Both serve to warn rebellious young women that infractions of the 'norm' result in punishment or ostracism from society. As in these fairy tales, India's shoes are a symbol of rebellion and signal her development into a sadomasochistic killer.

India's shoes, which we learn are gifts given to her on every birthday from Charlie, highlight her identity formation. Her well-worn saddle shoes are a reminder of her childish sensibilities, in comparison to the red high-heels she receives as a final gift. Unbeknown to her, Charlie is subtly influencing her through these shoes; he is the one holding the strings at this point. While the intention of his gift may be to keep her in perpetual childhood, his control is not absolute because saddle shoes, unlike heels, are made for exploring which means they are resilient and flexible. He pursues her through the shoes, but the pleasure-power roles spiral until finally India is the watcher, seducer, and pursuer. There is a powerful scene in which the saddle shoes, one for every year, are shown in a horseshoe shape around India who is lying on her bed (Figure 20). Murphy notes that this attention to detail "highlights the obsessive nature of both uncle and niece" (2016: 193). Reading through the prism of Foucault, it is evident that this compulsive meticulousness, their shared predilection to "monitor, spy and search out," is what multiplies pleasure beyond the body.

Their actions are ritualistic: Charlie sending the shoes every year and India hoarding them, assuming they are from her father. The ritualistic nature of their actions is also typical of sadomasochism, with its almost religious enactment of rituals like bondage and discipline or dominance and submission. The symbolism of the shoes also recalls the adage, "walk a mile in someone else's shoes," an injunction for empathy. Shoes are a marker of self and, to some degree she is walking in Charlie's shoes, the shoes of a killer. Although there is wiggle room in these shoes as the power dynamic keeps spiralling, it is fitting that India receives a key instead of her actual present (a pair of red high heeled shoes) on her 18th birthday. Not only does it unlock the secrets of Charlie, but it is also symbolic of her unlocking her "true nature."

The saddle shoes, a symbol of her past, are rejected in favour of the key: a symbol of who she can be if she unlocks her "true" nature.

Later, Charlie gives her his last gift: a pair of red high heeled shoes. This is her final initiation into womanhood. Both the style and colour of the shoes are significant to India's journey. Gone are the days of India's childishness and adolescence (as represented by her saddle shoes). She is now fully aware of her deviant sexual desires and can transition into seeming womanhood. Symbolically, the high heels represent femininity as well as sexual desire. Similarly, the colour red represents lust and desire, indicating India's own transgressive tendencies. The colour is usually associated with passion and in the case of fairy tales like "Little Red Riding Hood" (1687), red was associated with sexually licentious women and prostitutes or any women who did not submit to patriarchal control. Red is also the colour of blood thus pointing to her inclination toward sadomasochism and murder.

Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale, "The Red Shoes" (1845) tells the tale of Karen who asks for a pair of red shoes from her foster mother. Karen wants to wear her shoes to church, but her foster mother says it is improper and only black shoes must be worn to church. Enamoured by her red shoes, Karen still wears them and is cursed by an angel to never stop dancing. She decides to cut off her feet, but the shoes continue to dance and bar her way to the church. The story ends with her praying to God for help. The angel reappears and allows Karen the mercy she asked for, letting her go to heaven where the red shoes are never discussed (Andersen 2019 [1845]). In this fairy tale, the red shoes come to represent women's deviant behaviour and pride. The story is a cautionary tale meant to warn girls against defying gendered codes of restraint and propriety in a patriarchal society. Karen's dancing is a sign of the taboo on women's pleasure—she is not dancing for or with a man. Drawing on Irigaray's assertion that women's pleasure is non-existent in a hom(m)o-sexual economy, woman only has value in terms of the pleasure she may give a man (1981: 110). Karen is deviant because she chooses to dance—a dangerous, wild, and seductive act—and derive pleasure on her own, without a man. The red shoes, therefore, come to symbolise women's pleasure free from societal codes and prescriptions. This notion resonates with India's opening monologue that suggests her desire to be free like the wind, aligning herself with wild, spontaneous nature, and not controlled by societal limits. In *Stoker* the red shoes represent India embracing her deviance and "giving in" to her true nature, much in the same way Karen's red shoes symbolise liberation from patriarchal and societal codes of how a woman should be obedient, domesticated, and

silent. It is noteworthy that the shoes—allowing her to 'step into' her wild and wayward inclinations—are given to her by her wayward uncle, and not by her good father, as she initially assumed. The shoes come to represent more than just danger, but also the liberation that India experiences when she does not repress parts of herself. *Stoker* reverses the patriarchal narrative as India's red shoes become a symbol of her freedom and a way for her to embrace her "unladylike" ways. Essentially, the film rewrites the outcome of the ending of the fairy tale. Instead of chastising wild and wayward women, Park's tale celebrates the unleashing of a fiery and unfettered feminine power.

The film also alludes to "The Worn-Out Dancing Shoes" (1815) by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm. This story tells the tale of twelve princesses who dance so much that they wear out their dancing shoes. Their father locks them up every night, but the princesses are still able to escape and wear down their dancing shoes. The king offers his kingdom and daughters to the man who can find out where the princesses dance and how they get there. The princesses manage to thwart several suitors, some of which lose their lives. A poor, wounded soldier decides to try his hand at outsmarting the princesses. He is helped by an old woman who advises him not to drink any wine the princesses give him. She also gifts him a cloak of invisibility. With the old woman's advice and the gift, he discovers that the princesses have access to a netherworld through the bed of the eldest where they dance with princes of their choosing. After following them for three days, the soldier turns over this evidence to the King in exchange for one of the daughters (Grimm, J & Grimm, W 2003 [1815]).

In her feminist critique, Hayley S. Thomas (1999) reads the princesses' rebellion as an escape from the confines of their patriarchal society. Thomas notes that in fairy tales, the women are often either punished or rewarded based on how they behave; this is especially true if the women express independence in some shape or form. According to Thomas:

> [These narratives] reward the good/natural woman (i.e., nature *within reason*; nature mediated by the social, that is, by men) and punish the evil/unnatural woman (i.e. nature in excess; nature unmediated, that is, controlled solely by women who fortify its 'nature-ness'). In choosing to actively resist the good and 'natural' joys of being a wife, mother and martyr, the princesses embrace what Lacan terms *jouissance*. (1999: 172)

The psychoanalytical concept of feminine *jouissance* best describes the "counterpleasures" shared by the princesses, Karen, and India. Homer's definition of *jouissance* is surprisingly resonant of India's counterpleasures:

> The term is usually translated as 'enjoyment' but, as we will see, it involves a combination of pleasure and pain, or, more accurately, pleasure in pain. Jouissance expresses that paradoxical situation where patients appear to enjoy their own illness or symptom. In French the word also has sexual connotations and is associated with sexual pleasure. The example of jouissance that Lacan usually provides, however, is of religious or mystical ecstatic experience. (2005: 89)

Jouissance implies a pleasure that is exclusively feminine. It is akin to an orgasm, but also like a religious or mystical ecstasy. It is also the pleasure-in-pain which Bataille speaks of: an eroticism that pushes the boundaries of the self. When reading the fairy tale through this Lacanian mode, Thomas observes that the princesses are clearly the most fallen of women. When comparing the fairy tale to *Stoker*, the similarities between the princesses and India are evident through their desire for independence or an escape from the stifling reality they find themselves in. India's opening monologue highlights her desire for nature unmediated by society, that is, men—she desires nature in excess. However, *Stoker* subverts the typical narratives of the deviant woman being punished for independent and 'unnatural' behaviour: in the end, rather than surrendering to the Law, she kills the sheriff without a qualm on her journey to endless delights in the city. She does not fear him or the Law and invites his attention to eliminate him. Where the princesses exert their independence by dancing until their shoes are worn out, India exerts hers through a more sinister and sadistic means—by killing anyone who comes in her way. In essence, her metaphorical shoes are never worn out and they continue dancing, but unlike in Andersen's tale, it is to her enrichment. Thomas notes that Freud viewed shoes as analogous to female sexuality and dancing as analogous to sexual activity (1999: 176). Although we do not see India dancing, she plays the piano, a skill she shares with her equally sadistic uncle. India's red shoes become a symbol of her wayward or wanton sexuality. From wearing sturdy, practical saddle shoes which are black and white (almost prudish) she progresses to deep red high-heeled shoes. Shoes (particularly dancing shoes) defy patriarchy's prescription of a 'natural' woman as passive, dependent, showing restraint and asexual to an extent (Thomas 1999: 90). India is the antithesis of this ideal and just like the princesses and Karen in "The Red Shoes" she counters the patriarchal narrative of what it means to be a woman. However, unlike Karen and the twelve princesses, India can enact her freedom and flee from patriarchal control.

Another deviant woman character that India also resembles is that of the *femme* fatale or *fille fatale* in films *noir*. Like the twelve princesses and Karen in the fairy tales, the *fatale* figures' narratives are set up as cautionary tales. Lindop observes that *Stoker* "exudes a distinctly *noir* sensibility in terms of both narrative structure and screen aesthetic" (2015: 105). The film

makes use of aural devices like sound bridges and sonic overlaps along with visual cues such as expressionist camera angles and extreme close-ups. This is seen through Park's use of light and lighting within the film as well as through how shots are composed in terms of camera angles. Markos Hadjioannou comments on the conventions of *noir* and identity formation, stating:

> Film noir […] attempts to create a world whose origins still lie in a realm of boundaries, where identity formation is still a clear-cut construct. Yet the reality of these films points out that these boundaries are continuously transgressed, making for a series of symptoms to appear: a series of *noir* sentiments linked to anxiety, fear, paranoia, and fatalism. (2016: 138)

Although *noir* films attempt to create an idea that identity formation is clear-cut, the films themselves seem to blur the boundaries that society has placed. *Stoker* shows this through the identity formation of India, while also breaking down the patriarchal boundaries and conventions placed on characters who show deviant behaviour. Often the *fatale* figure is punished for deviance and going against patriarchal norms of a "good woman" (Dickos 2002: 146). The *fatale* figure echoes the characters in the fairy tales by Andersen and the Brothers Grimm, except in the formers' case their journeys often end in death. Hadjioannou notes that "[*noir* films] echo in both audio-visual and narrative terms the offset of a new social order where the stability of gender roles is seriously tested" (2016: 138). In *Stoker*, patriarchal authority is tested, as are gender roles.

Hadjioannou further explains that *noir* introduces a new reality where women "enact different desires and needs: for emancipation, for entry into the workforce, and for sexual freedom" (2016: 138). These words are echoed through India's radically alternative choices like leaving the confines of her suburban home to go New York City, known famously as "the city that never sleeps" or "The Big Apple." Her emancipation from the Law (in all forms) also exemplifies Hadjiannou's words as she does not choose a relationship with her uncle (implying submission) or a domestic life with her mother. She also chooses to kill the Sherriff in a scene that makes her appear as if she is flowing with the wind. The viewer's anxiety from the beginning turns into both anxiety and interest in the prospect of what dangerous acts she may commit in the city. Hadjioannou also names issues on the feminist agenda: women as active players in the economy or the workforce and sexual liberation.

In *Stoker* the fears about changing gender dynamics and the increasing power girls hold is not fully diffused:

> India is not punished or destroyed for her behaviour, nor is the potency of her character undermined by situating her as an object of erotic contemplation as is common in 1990s representations of deadly girls. Rather, in addition to directly challenging male domination by killing the formidable Charles, she usurps the Law (and conversely, in Lacanian terms, patriarchal symbolic order itself) by going out of her way to brutally murder the Sheriff. Therefore, just as the phrase girl power is sometimes used in postfeminist discourse to imply that women now have too much power, I suggest that figures such as India (along with Ginger and Jennifer) articulate masochistic male paranoia that the power afforded to young women is too great. That as they transcend into adulthood they are manifesting into out-of-control (man destroying) monsters. (Lindop 2015: 112)

By the end of the film, India becomes a powerful "monster" who starts to kill for pleasure rather than for protection. She represents the fears that people (especially men) have of deviant women holding power in society. However, she is also able to free herself from the widely patriarchal parameters placed on her through killing her substitute father and, using Lindop's terms, usurps the Law. My reading of India is not entirely allied to Lindop's descriptor of her as "monster" as this is something that implies India is unthinking in her actions. Although India is wanton and free, she is also depicted as rational and intellectual—a cool and calculated killer. It is this rational and intellectual side that is ignored by the patriarchal society which sees her more as an out-of-control man killer. I contend that films like *Stoker* instil fear in male viewers, but in a younger generation of women like myself they are viewed as powerful, liberatory narratives that present (through their hyperbolic situations) the potential to break free.

The film is a counter to the classical *noir* plot which tends to caution against the deadly woman who do not conform to gendered stereotypes. India's character can be read as a sly deceiver as her outward appearance is prim which seems to portray a 'good girl,' but this conceals her insatiable and transgressive desires. Like a circle, the film ends with the opening scene where it is revealed that India has killed the sheriff and is heading towards New York. It's almost like an ouroboros which symbolises rebirth and cycles of nature. The latter parallels her assertion in her opening monologue that she is creature of nature.

Conclusion

Stoker is a deeply psychological film that borrows elements from Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* with its similar plotline and themes. It is the tale of the *bildung* and coming-of-age of a *fille fatale.* It is also a transgressive romance of incestuous intimacy between an uncle and niece—teacher and apprentice. Utilising *noir* conventions, India's sexual-intellectual awakening fuels patriarchal society's fear of women's unrestrained *jouissance*, or an unspeakable ecstasy that arises in the co-mingling of pleasure in pain. India's curiosity and will to knowledge is her raison d'être and exemplifies Foucault's views on sadomasochism as the

multiplifaction of pleasures beyond the body. Through her actions India exemplifies Bataille's erotic and the breakdown of boundaries between self and other. Eroticism is used as a liberatory tool that opens India to a world of boundless possibilities and tantalising dangers. The ending of the film is only India's beginning, leaving the viewer's imagination on the threshold, now enthralled and expectant of what dangerous adventures await her in the city.

Conclusion

> I am not free while any woman is unfree, even if her shackles are very different from my own.
>
> (Lorde 1984: 132-133)

The aim of this study has been to explore the narrative journeys of Park Chan-wook's protagonists in *The Handmaiden* and *Stoker* as they attempt to liberate themselves from the heteropatriarchal parameters placed upon them. The focus of this study has been to discuss how the protagonists free themselves from their limiting lives by embracing the erotic and their transgressive desires. Both texts deal with the erotic and the protagonists' quests for an impossible closeness, but the application is different. In *The Handmaiden* the audience is rooting for the two women to be together and escape the constrictions of Kouzuki's mansion; their impossible closeness is one of a lesbian romance. In *Stoker* the 'love' relationship is not a typical romance, but the intimacy India has with her uncle ultimately leads to her self-discovery and liberation. Although there are no explicit sex scenes in *Stoker*, it is equally as erotic as *The Handmaiden*. Charlie and India, like Sook-hee and Hideko, possess an impossible closeness not just by incest, but by their shared pleasure in violence and the boundaries between life and death. These films make the audience empathise with, and be concerned about, the protagonists' quests for freedom even if their "shackles are very different from [our] own." They consequently elicit what Martin Rossouw refers to as the "transformational ethics" of film: it's capacity to change a viewer's "thought, perception, and experience" (2021: xi). Contemplative endurance is "brought about by the supposed nature of the film's transformational work, which is to obstruct and challenge the viewer's default ways of thinking" (2021: 119). Through their exaggerated and winding narratives, Park's films can act as agents for change.

Park relies on hyperbolic and fantastic situations to tell his stories; however, these narratives have appeal across the sexual-orientation and gender spectrum. It has been established in my literature review that Park has attained the status of "transnational" (Lee 2008: 212) and "hybrid" auteur (Choi 2010: 59), despite his own distancing from this terminology. His capacity to occupy the liminal zone between art and commercial cinema allows him access to

a wide and diverse audience that may be 'straight', closeted, queer or anywhere beyond or in-between. After realising that his first internationally recognised film, *Oldboy*, lacked three-dimensional female characters, Park became interested in telling stories about women. Films like *The Handmaiden* and *Stoker* aim to tell narratives of complex women, encouraging the audience to sympathise with defiant, psychologically complex, and dangerous women.

The conceptual framework of the study lies in the intersections between queer theory and feminist film theory as the characters' expression of eroticism and intimacy create a highly Bataillean "rupture" from the heteropatriarchal structures controlling these women. Georges Bataille's assertion that eroticism is "assenting to life to the point of death" (1987: 11) becomes the basis for my exploration of the protagonists' sexual awakenings. I utilise Karmen MacKendrik's term 'counterpleasures' to further explore how the protagonists subvert our expectations of gender power dynamics especially in terms of India and her sadomasochistic desires in *Stoker*. In addition, I discuss an intimacy that MacKendrick calls a "space of nonknowledge" (1999: 148). In my discussions on intimacy, I conclude that, when we reassess what intimacy is, we can evaluate our ways of being with others from a different perspective, one that allows us to see the "overlaps and slippages" (Spahr 2001: 99) between gender, sexuality, desire, and our various interpersonal relationships. The bisexual nature of these intimacies "threatens and challenges the easy binarities of straight and gay, queer and 'het'" (Garber 1995: 65). The overlaps and slippages within intimate relationships is typified through the character relationships in both *Stoker* and *The Handmaiden*.

Park's films are tales of awakening, highlighting sexuality as growth. In the context of *The Handmaiden* this is a specific queer erotic tale. Thus, my study examines the interrelationship between intimacy, eroticism, and queer desire. Echoing Sedgwick's proposition that the word 'queer' allows us to see sexuality on a spectrum rather than a binary scale, the characters in Park's films exceed either/or thinking. In addition, I concur with Benshoff's analysis that "queerness disrupts narrative equilibrium and sets in motion a questioning of the status quo" (2004: 63). For Stobie representations of bisexuality offer a potential for "innovative ways of examining and interpreting the world" (2003: 135) and that "bisexuality offers a conceptual means of unsettling binaries" (2003: 119). The protagonists in *The Handmaiden* use their positions as queer women to disrupt the societal equilibrium and use their queer identity to their advantage. Although India in *Stoker* is not overtly queer, her defiance of traditional gender roles is an action that unsettles binaries.

In *The Handmaiden*, Sook-hee and Hideko's relationship demonstrates the liberatory power of the erotic. Their bond is portrayed as a foil to the male characters Fujiwara and Kouzuki, who believe they have the upper hand. Laura Miller's review of *The Handmaiden* highlights the need to examine the male gaze and how the film subverts it, bringing into question whose gaze the audience should identify with. Mulvey posits that film is produced from a male perspective. Loreck contends that woman is positioned as an object for heterosexual male desire and that her own desires are framed as less important or even non-existent (2016: n.p.). Sook-hee and Hideko are not framed as objects of desire and certain camera angles are from the position or point of view of the characters. The women's oscillating roles as both servant and master and saviour and victim only aim to enhance the fact the women are equal because of the intimate bond they share despite their differences in language and class. The film is quietly revolutionary in its depictions of its women and the oppressiveness of the heteropatriarchal society that surrounds them. Furthermore, the characterisation of the men in the film is a critique of the Symbolic order and the hegemonic masculinity that is ruled by a fallacy, entrapping the men in a system of maintaining pretences. The film's critique of the male characters is strengthened by its portrayal of pornographic text and how the men in the film consume it. This is in direct contrast with how the women reappropriate these texts, making themselves the subject of them rather than the objects to be desired. Smyth details a paradox of lesbians consuming lesbian pornography made for heterosexual men stating that queer women are trying to "find ourselves in the heart of another's intimacy" (1990: 154). In changing the meaning of these texts and placing themselves as the subjects, Hideko and Sook-hee fully expresses their erotic potential and utilise it as a tool to escape the limiting life in Kouzuki's mansion.

Stoker, in its Hitchcockian style, depicts a 'bildung' of a young woman coming into adulthood by embracing her deviant sexual desire. The film examines India's exploration of her sadomasochistic tendencies which become the catalyst for her liberation. These tendencies are highlighted through her incestuous relationship with her uncle Charlie and the similarities they share in terms of sadomasochistic behaviour. India's sexual awakening is a representation of the fears that heteropatriarchal societies have of young women who are afforded too much power. Exemplifying Foucault's theories on the "perpetual spirals of power and pleasure" (1978: 45), India allows her curiosity and will to knowledge to propel her into a new life. As MacKendrick posits: "it is not the death of the *body* but of the *subject* that is sought" (1999: 118). Through her actions, she can break down the boundaries between self and other, going

beyond her limiting life as a daughter, niece, and young woman. The allusions and intertextual references to films *noir* and fairy tales only heighten India's narrative journey; where the women in those tales were punished for their behaviour, India allows the potential for something new because she is not restrained. India's journey shows her giving in to her counterpleasures and embracing Lacan's feminine *jouissance* or the pleasure in pain that allows one to push the boundaries of the self.

Although the two films differ in style, *mis-en-scène*, source material and even language, they do have similarities. The most striking similarity between the films is that they both subvert the audiences' expectations. In *The Handmaiden* the audience assumes that both women will betray the other to gain Kouzuki's fortune, but in the third part it is revealed that they work together to liberate themselves from the looming patriarchal figures. Similarly, in *Stoker*, we are led to assume that India is preparing to leave with her uncle to start a new life away from the small town she has grown up in. However, she kills him, saving her mother in the process, and drives to New York on her own. In both films the women find independence through the erotic, evident in their journeying away from the places that have caused their potential to be stifled. The concept of sorority is explored in both films. In *The Handmaiden*, the sorority between the two women is one of the driving factors for the plot. Signs of sorority are also found in *Stoker*; however, this is to a lesser extent and is mostly depicted in how Charlie (the masculine interloper in the feminine sphere) is a threat to what little sorority the Stoker women have.

The films show that women's erotic and intimacies can be harnessed as a positive force by women to escape their limiting lives. I would like to point to the importance of queer texts and queer representation in the media that people consume. Showing queer relationships and transgressive desire normalises the fluidity of gender, sexuality, and sexual desire, allowing for a greater acceptance of aspects that may be viewed as deviant. Claire Boyle notes that queer films ask the audience to "see—and tolerate—in the homosexual a *seeing subject*, rather than an object for our (narcissistic or erotic) viewing pleasure" (2012: 67, Boyle's emphasis). In other words, queer cinema allows the viewer to empathise with queer characters by making them the subjects of films. Heterosexual audiences are forced to identify with queer characters, allowing these characters to be seen as three-dimensional humans rather than objects made for heterosexual audiences' amusement. Boyle contends that, by disrupting the viewer's gaze, queer films suggest that "we should pay attention to the blindspots in our own vision" and

"interrogate our ethics of looking" (2012: 67). Not only this, but queer audiences who see themselves positively represented in film, literature and even music are likely to see themselves as border-crossers who are able to bring about social and cultural change. Ultimately, *Stoker* and *The Handmaiden*, through their otherworldliness and hyperbolic narratives, allow the audience to stretch their imaginations to new possibilities not available to them.

Given the lacuna of diverse literature on the women in Park's film, this study contributes a queer feminist reading of *Stoker* and *The Handmaiden*, exploring their journeys of liberation through the erotic. While this study offers a sustained analysis of the female erotic and women's search for intimacy in only two films from Park's oeuvre, it presents the opportunity for further research into his oeuvre, and more broadly in the field of queer cinema. Park presents these tales as hyperbolic quests for freedom from heteropatriarchal parameters placed on his protagonists and highlights the struggles of women in society. Park's films not only make an important contribution to the genre of queer films, but also inspire future development of queer, specifically lesbian, films aimed at a diverse audience.

Appendix

Figure 1: The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife

Figure 2: Hideko's audience

Figure 3: Sook-hee from Hideko's point of view

Figure 4: Exterior shot of Hideko and Sook-hee

Figure 5: The Count talking to the group

Figure 6: The Count waking up

Figure 7: Kouzuki looking unruly

Figure 8: Sook-hee destroys the library

Figure 9: Hideko helps Sook-hee open the pond

Figure 10: Hideko in the bathtub

Figure 11: India's skirt in the wind

Figure 12: Bloodstained flowers

Figure 13: India looking down at something, smiling

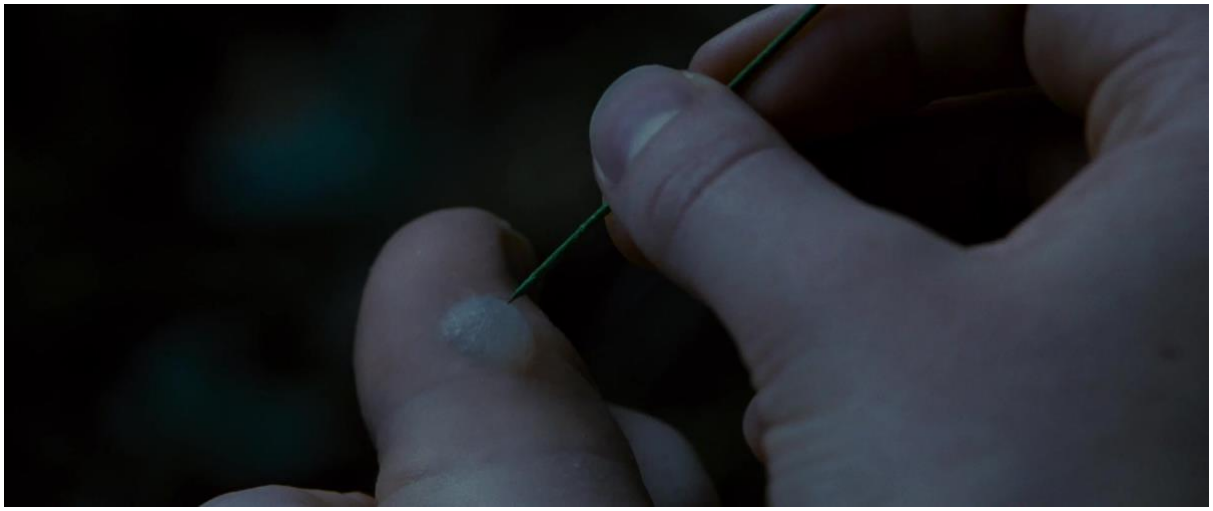

Figure 14: India popping a blister

Figure 15: Charlie as a mirage

Figure 16: Charlie and Evelyn kiss

Figure 17: India kisses Whip

Figure 18: Charlie kills Whip

Figure 19: India like a chick in an "egg"

Figure 20: India surrounded by her shoes

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