The creation of a post-gaze world? Art as a liberating force in Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and Park Chan-Wook's *The Handmaiden.*

'The female gaze is a grammar. It is about how the images are a dialogue and how you build trust with an audience'[1]. - Céline Sciamma

Decades have passed since Laura Mulvey first published 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' and introduced the idea of the male gaze in film theory. Originally written in 1975, the essay posits that the sexual imbalance of society is reflected in cinema, as the male assumes an active role while the female remains passive, both as characters and spectators. The woman is always an image that the man looks at in a voyeuristic way[2]. Mulvey believes that after being relentlessly subjected to such fetishistic representations, the male spectator has become 'hooked' on the idea of women as spectacle, while women are powerless to change this state of affairs[3].

This critical essay and its two core texts are directly concerned with the consequences that stem from being the subject of voyeuristic looks. Focusing on the role that art plays in *The Handmaiden*, Park Chan-Wook's 2016 adaptation of Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*, comparing and contrasting it with *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* by Céline Sciamma, its aim is to interrogate the films' respective relationships to the male gaze theory. After a brief introduction summarising the plots of both stories and emphasising their similarities, the first part of the essay will analyse the place of literature in both films, focusing on the role of erotic literature in *The Handmaiden* and of Greek mythology in *Portrait*. Then, the second

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[1] Maria Garcia, 'Deconstructing the Filmmaker's Gaze: An Interview with Céline Sciamma', *Cinéaste*, Vol. 45, No. 1, Winter 2019, p. 11
[2] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, Vol. 16, Issue 3, Autumn 1975, p. 11
[3] Ibid, p. 18

part will switch its focus to portraiture, analysing its role in both narratives. Finally, the third part of the essay will expand its focus to film theory and ask how the films fit within Mulvey's notion of the male gaze, asking if the response of a 'female gaze' is enough to encompass the plurality of women's artistic practises, and what alternative methods of understanding could be suggested instead.

The Handmaiden begins by introducing the audience to Sook-Hee, a lower class woman surviving through her pickpocketing talents. In the first part of the story, she is hired by a con man named Count Fujiwara to participate in a plan to trick a naive noblewoman named Lady Hideko into marrying him. Sook-Hee, pretending to be a servant, will befriend and manipulate Hideko, then lock her up in an asylum with Fujiwara to steal her fortune.

As the narrative progresses, it is revealed that the heiress is less innocent than she looks. Her past has forced her to become resilient, as she has spent her life abused by her uncle, who forces her to read degrading erotic literature to his friends in order to escape his punishment. What neither of the men of the story expect is that Sook-Hee and Hideko will fall in love with each other, outsmart them and run away together.

The plot structure of Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* offers striking similarities. Set in eighteenth century France, the film tells the story of Marianne, a rare female painter during this era. She is hired by a Countess to paint her daughter in secret. The resulting portrait will be sent to a Milanese man that she is arranged to marry in order to confirm the wedding. At first forced into painting her covertly, Marianne develops genuine affection for her model, Héloïse. Coming clean about her identity will lead them to collaborate on a second portrait and eventually confess their love to one another. The main

difference with *The Handmaiden* is in the film's conclusion, as Héloïse is forced to marry, Marianne returns to her life as a painter, and the two women never meet again.

In *The Handmaiden*, Kouzuki, Lady Hideko's uncle, is introduced as a collector of rare literature. Fujiwara explains that he has grown his fortune by organising public readings where his niece performs the books to an audience of rich men. At the beginning of the second act of the story, the film reveals that Kouzuki's collection consists of sadomasochistic erotic novels that Hideko has no choice but to keep performing, as the alternative is being abused by her uncle.

The appeal of these private sessions for the audience members resides in their ability to picture themselves enacting the sexual acts of the story with Hideko. Suk Koo Rhee, in her analysis of the role of the 'erotic-grotesque' in *The Handmaiden*, describes the scene where Hideko recounts the story of a Duchess whipping her lover. Kneeling on the floor as the men stare at her from above, she glances at each of the members of the audience one by one as insights into their own imagination shows that they are picturing themselves in the same sadomasochistic scenario with the heiress. As Rhee suggests, the narrator ensures to keep her audience captive, using her voice and eyes as precious tools in her storytelling, seemingly proving that she has a form of power in this relationship[4].

However, Rhee's article forgets to remind that, before Hideko took her place, it was Kouzuki's wife who performed those readings, which pushed her to unsuccessfully try to escape from his hold and ultimately hang herself. About halfway through the film, Chan-Wook shows one of Hideko's formative experiences as she helplessly watches her

[4] Ibid.

uncle refuse to help her aunt as she suffocates, punishing her for running away from what he considered her duty. Hideko may nowadays find a form of power in her readings, but she is also fully aware of the consequences that stem from disappointing her uncle's expectations, and therefore only expresses herself in ways that he approves of.

While literature in *The Handmaiden* has the power to destroy a woman's sense of self, in *Portrait of a Lady On Fire*, it can conversely build strong female friendships. After Marianne destroys her first portrait of Héloïse, the Countess travels to mainland France for a few days, leaving the two women alone in the mansion with its one young servant, Sophie. One evening, Héloïse, borrowing a book Marianne has brought on the island, discovers the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and reads it aloud to her two companions. Sharply contrasting with the preceding reading sequence where a clear relationship of uneven power is established, here, the three women are gathered around the same table in an intimate setting, and are allowed to debate on equal footing their interpretation of the story.

This myth is a recurring motif throughout the film, and bears significance from its first appearance on-screen. By choosing to make Marianne a reader of Greek Mythology, Sciamma makes her aware of a culture that acknowledged same-sex love on religious and educational levels[5], and produced series of stories containing the myth of Ovid[6] as well as the writings of Sappho. This is not the only clue that Marianne and Héloïse already know of a life beyond traditional expectations, as both of them have also spent some years of their lives in a convent, a rare space where women could learn how to write and read, and, as Christine Downing argues, have the tools to express lesbian desire in a discreet way[7].

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[5] Christine Downing, 'Lesbian Mythology', *Historical Reflections / Réflections Historiques*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Lesbian Histories, Summer 1994, p. 170
[6] Ibid, p. 169
[7] E. Ann Matter, 'My Sister, My Spouse: Woman-Identified Women in Medieval Christianity', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Fall 1986, p. 86

So far, Marianne has been discussed as a lover and a reader, but her character can't be discussed without addressing her identity as a painter. Portraiture was for much of history a field governed by men, to which *Portrait*'s protagonist only gained access through her father's notoriety, like most female painters of the eighteenth century[8]. Whereas Hideko is confronted with nudity from the youngest age, Marianne is forbidden from the study of anatomy and most specifically from seeing the male nude body. When Héloïse asks her if this is a matter of modesty, her answer is clear: 'It's mostly to keep us from doing great art. Without any notions of male anatomy, the major subjects escape us'. Although she confesses to painting male subjects in secret, those portraits will never give her the notoriety that her male colleagues get to enjoy[9].

Yet Marianne's life as an artist is not free from historical inaccuracies, which, considering the overall faithfulness of the film, comes across as a dimension of the story that must be examined. Indeed, Marianne may end the movie as a heartbroken woman, but she has also become a more accomplished artist than most female painters in the eighteenth century could have ever dreamt of. This time period saw a ban on admitting women in the Royal Academy, as, according to Catherine R. Montfort's research, 'women were amateurs who lowered the Academy's prestige'[10]. Marianne, quite strikingly, is not only properly educated in the artistic conventions of her time, but even becomes a teacher after the main events of the film. It is also worth noting that in eighteenth century France, rare popular female artists would be faced with 'attacks on their moral character, questions about their talent' and 'ambiguous compliments'[11]. Meanwhile, Marianne's work is shown to be popular

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[8] Catherine R. Montfort, 'Self-Portraits, Portraits of Self: Adélaïde Labille-Guiard and Elisabeth Vigée Lebrun, Women Artists of the Eighteenth Century', *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 2005, p. 2
[9] Ibid.
[10] Montfort, p. 3
[11] Montfort, p. 7

enough to be shown in a gallery, and gathers positive reactions from those who see it. The man who approaches her at the end of the film does not seem taken aback by her talent and even immediately offers a correct interpretation of a recent painting depicting the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, in an exceptional moment of understanding between an artist and her critic.

Both Héloïse and Marianne have had previous experiences allowing them to diverge from the expectations of womanhood French society imposed on them. This, however, doesn't mean that they are free of its influence. When Héloïse sees Marianne's first portrait of her, painted without her consent, she is hurt, while the painter is confused by her criticism. Héloïse is visibly disturbed by the image in front of her. 'Is that me?', she asks. 'Is that how you see me?' Marianne is quick to justify herself, responding that what is on the canvas is not only reflective of her own artistry: 'It's not only me. There are rules, conventions, ideas', she explains. Later realising that Héloïse's dislike of the painting is justified, she destroys it, setting in motion the second half of the story.

Portraiture also appears in *The Handmaiden*, but plays a very minimal role. It mostly serves as a pastime advantageous to Count Fujiwara, demanding Sook-Hee model for him. As she is required to remain completely still, this keeps her from interfering while he seduces Hideko. The heiress' lack of artistic education makes her a poor painter, giving Fujiwara an excuse to touch her while pretending to guide her hands. Her distress when the gaze turns into a touch which disgusts her is represented by her pencil furiously scribbling over her portrait of Sook-Hee, as if Fujiwara's presence itself was forcing her to give up on her love for the young woman. Rather than liberating its female characters, art further constricts them into their assigned roles.

Following from this depiction of female oppression, Park Chan-Wook's story contains the same idea of rebellious destruction as *Portrait*. When Sook-Hee finds out how Hideko has been treated by her uncle, a long scene towards the end of the film follows her as she destroys Kouzuki's library, drowning, painting over and jumping on the same books that shaped Hideko's entire life and mind. Hideko, first a silent observer, finally joins in towards the end, indicating a shift in her mindset as she realises her life has been taken away from her by her uncle and his friends. This is presented as the climax to the story, and is followed by what appears to be a happy ending for both women as they flee together to Shanghai.

In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, however, destruction is only perceived as a needed step for the characters to be able to create something new. It is when Héloïse gives her consent to being painted by Marianne that portraiture becomes a liberating act for both women. In one of the most important scenes of the film, Marianne confesses to Héloïse that she wouldn't like being in her place, as she has observed her so much that she can identify her emotions through her small tics and expressions. 'We're in the same place', responds Héloïse. 'Exactly the same place.' She then asks Marianne to come near her, only for her to realise that while she is looking at Héloïse, her model has the power to look back with just as much intensity. 'If you look at me,' continues Héloïse, 'who do I look at?'

According to John Berger, much of portraiture relies on a binary that implies a male painter looking at a female muse, who can do no more than watch herself being looked at[12]. Women are depicted with the male spectator in mind, and therefore exist in a way that flatters him[13]. What Héloïse introduces in this scene is a notion of equality beyond this binary, which

[12] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), eBook, Chapter 3
[13] Ibid.

allows Marianne to realise that her unique position as a female painter, simultaneously considered passive and active, allows her to create an art beyond binaries. The second half of the story can be read as a demonstration that the best portraits are made not when a painter looks at a model, but when two people are looking at each other. The final portrait of the film, resulting from this collaboration between subject and artist, is unique for its time, playing with the conventions Marianne knows and showing premises of art movements which will come after her. It contains the characteristics of the 'rite of passage' portrait common to the Renaissance[14], while showing premises of the 'rebellious edge'[15] that will later define 19th century art, leading to a unique art style that serves as a memento to Heloise and Marianne's love story.

Park Chan-Wook and Céline Sciamma's uses of art in relation to their female characters can be used as a starting point to understand the films' take on female liberation in a cinematic context. Sciamma's understanding of the male gaze may be the least ambiguous. While the fact that Sciamma has referred to *Portrait* as a 'manifesto about the female gaze'[16] in an interview with *Vox* is often quoted in reference to the film, she is much more reserved in another interview a few months later with *Cinéaste*, admitting that her own gaze results from conventional male gaze, and that a purely female cinematic gaze is not something that has been achieved yet[17]. There is no debate in her words that the male gaze exists, that its influence is long-standing and that deconstructing it is a work in progress that requires directors of all genders to collaborate and learn to invent[18]. This understanding of the male

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[14] Patricia Simons, 'Women in Frames: The Gaze, The Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture', *History Workshop*, No. 25,
[15] Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, 'Romanticism: Breaking the Canon', *Art Journal*, Vol. 52, No. 2, Romanticism, Summer 1993, p. 18
[16] Emily VanDerWeff, 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire Director Céline Sciamma on her ravishing romantic masterpiece', *Vox*, 19th February 2020 <https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/2/19/21137213/portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire-celine-sciamma-interview>
[17] Garcia, p. 10
[18] Ibid.

gaze is replicated in the film's own narrative, as Marianne interrogates the conventions she assumed were unquestionable and builds her own sense of creativity from this reassessment.

In *The Handmaiden*, Hideko and Sook-Hee may destroy what hurt them and flee, but we never know what they plan to do after this fairytale-like ending. This differs from Sarah Waters' original ending, where the two women are separated for many years, and Maud, Hideko's counterpart in the novel, becomes a talented erotic literature author. It isn't until Maud develops her own creative practice, which allows her to become financially independent and express her sexual attraction to her lover in her own words, that the two women are brought back together.

Park Chan-Wook on the other hand does not insinuate that Hideko possesses any kind of artistic drive. The final scene of the film instead shows Hideko asking Sook-Hee to try a new sextoy, reenacting a lesbian story from her uncle's collection which was shown in one of his reading sessions at the turn of the film's third act. Sook-Hee ignores its implications, but Hideko knows that this sexual act is born from the same books she was attempting to flee, showing her difficulty in imagining a life beyond her uncle's gaze.

Even before this controversial ending, the sex scenes of the films are what created the most amount of debate around its potential male gaze[19]. When asked about these criticisms by Nick Newman in an interview with *The Film Stage*, Park Chan-Wook's response asks the audience to 'forget that he is a male director', and wonders why depicting a woman having sexual desires should automatically make it fall into the 'male gaze category'[20]. His insistence

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[19] Marc Raymond, 'From Old Boys to Quiet Dreams: Mapping Korean Art Cinema Today', *Film Criticism*, Vol. 42, Issue 1, March 2018, p. 23

[20] Nick Newman, 'Park Chan-Wook Talks 'The Handmaiden', Male Gaze, Queer Influence and Remaking a Spike Lee Film', *The Film Stage*, 19th October 2016

that what he depicts are ‘honest sexual desires’ once again furthers the idea that he perceives the film’s depiction of sexuality to be an authentic one.

Yet this different understanding of what constitutes the male gaze should not be used as an excuse to dismiss Park Chan-Wook’s vision. ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ is an analysis based on psychoanalytic principles, a format which is 'ill-equipped to deal with issues such as race and class' and disregards lived experiences[21]. Mulvey's original theory does not acknowledge that her experiences as a white Western woman are not universal, while the essay remains Hollywood-centric in its examples, making it difficult to apply to films outside of this norm.

Indeed, as Park Chan-Wook was born in an era where cinematic expression was severely restricted for several decades by Korean military governments[22] and any opinions outside of the state’s were therefore practically invisible on screen[23], he has a different understanding of cinematic theory than Céline Sciamma does. During the filmmaker's childhood, French film theorists had already discussed the importance of the woman’s gaze as part of its feminist cinema throughout its New Wave[24], giving her the foundations for this theory to inform her future work.

However, being aware that the male gaze exists does not make Sciamma’s depiction of womanhood entirely revolutionary for all women. Sciamma's own limits can be

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<https://thefilmstage.com/park-chan-wook-talks-the-handmaiden-male-gaze-queer-influence-and-remaking-a-spike-lee-film/>

[21] Corinn Columpar, ‘The Gaze as Theoretical Touchstone:The Intersection of Film Studies, Feminist Theory and Postcolonial Theory’, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No.1 / 2, Spring-Summer 2002, p.32

[22] Seung Hyun Park, ‘Film Censorship and Political Legitimation in South Korea, 1987-1992’, *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 1, Autumn 2002, p. 120

[23] Ibid, p. 124

[24] Lucille Cairns, *Sapphism On Screen: Lesbian Desire in French and Francophone Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 10

exemplified by the fact that her story only depicts a rebellion for white, mostly upper-class characters. This can be linked to Caetlin Benson-Allott's criticism of the lack of clarity of the notion of a female gaze, lamenting the fact that contemporary directors still struggle to encompass experiences besides the white woman's[25]. Considering the male gaze as the only prism to use to judge films leads to disregarding the way they may be either challenging or accepting other hegemonic norms.

Korea is a country with a colonial past, which is a major theme in the film, and something that Chan-Wook explicitly addresses in *The Handmaiden* by depicting a love story between a lower class Korean woman and a Japanese heiress. Sarah Waters herself defended the film as a different story than her novel, describing it as 'more about colonialism'[26]. Yet the same key points of the story become difficult to analyse through a post-colonial point of view: what to make of a Korean man obsessed with the literary culture of his oppressor? How much does living surrounded by her coloniser's language, architecture and art impact Sook-Hee, as a Korean woman? The colonial undertones of the story are complex, and once again become puzzling in the final scene. It after all depicts a lower-class Korean woman being made to, without her knowledge or consent, conform to Japanese storytelling in what is supposed to be her most intimate moments. By removing the opportunity for Hideko to, like Maud, write her own form of eroticism, the characters remain stuck in the same hierarchy. They have looked back at their oppressor and attempted to destroy what they have built, but no new creation has been born out of this change.

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[25] Benson-Allott, p. 66

[26] Claire Armiststead, 'Sarah Waters: 'The Handmaiden turns pornography into a spectacle - but it's true to my novel', *The Guardian*, 8th April 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/apr/08/sarah-waters-the-handmaiden-turns-pornography-into-a-spectacle-but-its-true-to-my-novel-#:~:text=Interview-,Sarah%20Waters%3A%20'The%20Handmaiden%20turns%20pornography%20into%20a%20spectacle%20%E2%80%93,it's%20true%20to%20my%20novel'&text=You%20pearl%2C'%20I%20said.,%2Ddown%20and%20inside%2Dout.>

Despite the films' limits, it should be said that by acknowledging that subverting the male gaze is at all possible, both directors directly contradict Mulvey's original text. Alternative modes of looking have been talked about previously in discussions of gaze theory. In France, Agnès Varda insists on the importance of an individual gaze, claiming that 'The first step for feminists is to say, right, OK, I'm being looked at, but I too am looking… The world isn't defined by how I'm looked at, but how *I* look at the world'[27]. While the male gaze as it is envisioned in film theory is hegemonic and oppressive, attempting to construct the 'female gaze' as a direct response that adopts the same characteristics may force a narrow understanding of womanhood and keep women creators stuck in the same place they started. Strictly turning the tables and championing a singular female gaze has the risk of envisioning female liberation as something that must play into the same codes that imprisoned them, which is where Sook-Hee and Hideko end up at the end of *Handmaiden*.

Another possible clue to envision a wider response to the male gaze is mentioned by Benson-Allott, as the modern female gaze is often linked to the rise of intersectional feminism[28], a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 in an effort to describe the ways in which race and gender had been analysed in mutually exclusive ways which excluded Black women from both discussions[29]. Since then, it has evolved to include other groups that are frequently discriminated against, such as the LGBTQ+ community, people from lower socio-economic backgrounds or disabled people[30].

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[27] Cairns, p. 10
[28] Benson-Allott, p. 65
[29] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Vol. 1989, Issue 1, Article 8, p. 139
[30] Ibid, 'Opinion: Why intersectionality can't wait', *The Washington Post*, 24th September 2015 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait/> [accessed 08/03/2022]

Intersectionality and individuality are not necessarily contradictory: by being more aware of the place they occupy in the world, creators can deconstruct the conventions they believe to be the norm to create their own stories, while acknowledging that their experience is only one piece of an incredibly vast range of ways to look at the world. Invention leads to creation, and plural voices aware of the ways in which systems of oppression impact their lived experiences can start building artistic visions that go beyond the notion of a single gaze.

Rather than fully opposing *The Handmaiden* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, both films can be understood as similar stories informed by different lived experiences and communicating different messages. The films' use of literature and portraiture depict oppression, destruction and creation, while the cultural contexts that the directors stem from explain their own understandings of what constitutes liberation from the gaze. The necessity of envisioning the response to the male gaze as unique to each director and expressed through creation is made clear by the concerns of intersectionality raised in recent responses to Mulvey's original theory. Whether writing, painting, or simply creating their own identity outside of the parameters of the male gaze, this analysis shows the necessity to turn away from the female gaze as the only possible response to male oppression, opening the possibility of an intersectional and plural creative world.

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