

“WHOSE EYES MAY LOOK ON THEE”

Queering the gaze in *The Handmaiden* and *Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu*



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*Blest as the immortal gods is he,
The youth whose eyes may look on thee,
Whose ears thy tongue's sweet melody
May still devour.*

*Thou smilest too?—sweet smile whose charm
Has struck my soul with wild alarm,
And when I see thee bids disarm
Each vital power.*

*Speechless I gaze; the flame within
Runs swift o'er all my quivering skin,
My eyeballs swim; with dizzy din
My brain reels round*

*And cold drops fall; and tremblings frail
Seize every limb; and grassy pale
I grow; and then together fail
Both sight and sound.*

– Sappho 31

Translated by John Herman
Merivale, 1833

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

On a windswept beach in Brittany, a miserable aristocrat and her walking companion silently take turns sneaking furtive glances at each other, swallowing secrets and resentment. In an English-style mansion in Japanese-occupied Korea, a handmaiden cannot stop staring at her lady, second-guessing her nefarious plans. Although classified as different genres and produced in vastly different cultural contexts, the two films *The Handmaiden* (Park Chan-Wook, 2016) and *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (Céline Sciamma, 2019) have a great deal in common. Apart from the thematical similarities (both follow the story of a woman entering the service of another under false pretences and in both films alliances shift when the women find themselves falling for one another), both films can be considered part of a recent phenomenon within queer cinema that *New Statesman* writer Annie Lord dubbed ‘The rise of the lesbian period drama’.¹ This new subgenre also includes Oscar-candidates such as *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015) and *The Favourite* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2018), as well as the more humbly released *Colette* (Wash Westmoreland, 2018), *Wild Nights With Emily* (Madeleine Olnek, 2018), *Lizzie* (Craig McNeill, 2018), *Vita & Virginia* (Chanya Button, 2018) and *Elisa y Marcela* (Isabel Coixet, 2019). Lord notes that most of these films differ from the historical narratives that we have previously seen in LGBTQ+-cinema: rather than revelling in the seemingly inevitable tragedy of historical star-crossed same-sex lovers, they allow their protagonists agency, autonomy and sometimes even a happy ending.² My hypothesis is that in *The Handmaiden* and *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, this is at least partly achieved through their construction of and commentary on the “male gaze”. To substantiate this hypothesis, this thesis will examine the way that different “gazes” (most notably the male gaze, the female gaze and the sapphic gaze) are discussed and (de)constructed within these films. The themes of deceit, surveillance and secrecy make these films uniquely suited to such a study, as both are in large part about seeing and being seen, as well as the gendered power structures inherent in the act of looking.

Being such a recent release, virtually no scholarly work on *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* has been published at the time of writing. *The Handmaiden*, however, has garnered a humble

¹ Lord (2019).

² Ibidem.

academic response. Most of this body of work consists of adaptation studies, comparing the film to its source material: Sarah Waters' novel *Fingersmith* (2002). Among these are the works of Chi-Yun Shin, Park Heebon, Julie Sanders and Chung Moonyoung, and Seungyeon Lee.³ Other studies of *The Handmaiden* include Steve Choe's analysis of the film's melodramatic elements and moral judgement,⁴ and Francesco Sticci's examination of *The Handmaiden* as a "puzzle film".⁵

In this chapter, I will provide a brief overview of the theoretical framework at the base of this thesis, followed by a section on methodology in which I describe how I have analysed my case studies in order to answer my research question. This chapter also includes a note explaining my choices concerning the language used in this thesis. Chapters 2 and 3 contain my analyses of the gaze in *The Handmaiden* and *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, respectively, and in chapter 4, I conclude my research, and reflect on my findings.

Theoretical framework

One of the most important sources for this thesis is Laura Mulvey's 1972 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', which analyses the potential for scopophilic pleasure in classical Hollywood cinema. Scopophilic pleasure, Mulvey writes, comes from "using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight".⁶ Mulvey relies heavily on a Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalytic framework according to which the mere image of the female body, due to her lack of a penis, may trigger castration fear in the male subject, eradicating any potential for scopophilic pleasure. The male gaze is a tool to mitigate this fear so that visual pleasure can be achieved. This tool, according to Mulvey, functions in one of two ways. The first is through voyeurism: by investigating and demystifying the female image, the man regains control. In the process, the woman is often degraded, devalued and punished – opening opportunities for sadistic pleasure – or forgiven and saved by the male protagonist. The other way in which the male gaze functions to alleviate castration anxiety is by fetishization of the female image. Through a focus on the object's physical beauty, often in a way that fragments the female body, the threatening object is transformed into a reassuring one.⁷

³ Shin (2019), Heebon, Sanders & Moonyoung (2019), Lee (2018).

⁴ Choe (2019).

⁵ Sticci (2018).

⁶ Mulvey (1989a): 18-19.

⁷ Ibidem: 21-22.

The male gaze, according to Mulvey, operates on three levels. First, there is the gaze of the camera, or the person who operates it. In order to facilitate voyeuristic pleasure, this level must go unnoticed by the audience so as not to disrupt their immersion in the narrative. The gaze of the audience, the second level, is controlled to a large extent by the first. The camera dictates what the audience gets to see, from which angle, and from what distance. The third level is the gaze of one (typically male) character looking at another (typically female). This gaze is again controlled by the camera and in turn influences the spectator's gaze. For Mulvey, all three of these gazes are effectively male, even if the spectator is not. Through several filmic and narrative techniques, the spectator is encouraged to identify with the male protagonist, collapsing the spectator's gaze and the protagonist's gaze together.⁸

Although an undeniably crucial contribution to the field of feminist film criticism, a number of problems and limitations of Mulvey's theory have been pointed out since its publication, resulting in a rich body of scholarly work both supplementing and transforming Mulvey's theory to conceptualize a plethora of different gazes. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks critiques Mulvey for her uncritical reliance on "an ahistorical psychoanalytic framework that privileges sexual difference (i.e. Freud) and their failure to take racial difference into account." She also suggests that Mulvey's theory leaves little room for resistance on the part of the spectator, in particular those spectators who are systematically excluded:

Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on the phallogentric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of 'woman as image, man as bearer of the look' was continually deconstructed.⁹

Jackie Stacey, too, criticizes this lack of historical specificity and additionally comments on the heteronormativity inherent in an approach that relies on static binary oppositions:

Typical of much psychoanalytic work, feminist film criticism has, on the whole, failed to address the possible homoerotic pleasures for the female spectator. [...] Female homoeroticism is thus seen in terms of masculinity, since it can only be conceptualized within the binarism of masculinity and femininity, ignoring any specificity to such forms of pleasure and desire between women.¹⁰

⁸ Mulvey (1989a): 19-21.

⁹ hooks (1992): 123.

¹⁰ Stacey (1994): 63-64.

The core of her critique, however, lies in the dismissive attitude that Mulvey, and feminist film scholars in general, have shown towards actual cinema audiences. Many of these scholars have considered the female spectator to be “a concept and not a person,” and show little to no interest in discovering how women in the audience actually experience the films they watch.¹¹ Stacey’s analysis differs significantly from those mentioned above, in that she includes a qualitative analysis based on interviews with female spectators from the original target audience of classical Hollywood. Although my own analysis will use no such methods, it is deeply indebted to Stacey’s efforts to envision different ways of conceptualizing female spectatorship outside of the limited parameters of psychoanalysis.

Another important source for this thesis is Jill Soloway’s notion of “the female gaze.” In their keynote address at the Toronto International Film Festival 2016, Soloway presented their answer to Mulvey’s male gaze: a female gaze, consisting of three parts. The first part is about reclaiming the body and prioritizing feeling and emotion over action, “using [the body] as a tool on set, with the intention to communicate, a feeling-seeing.”¹² Part two is about representing in visual media the experience of being watched, “showing us how it feels to be the object of the gaze.” Part three is about returning the gaze, about the object of the gaze developing a gaze of her own with which to look back at the subject and say, in Soloway’s words: “I see you seeing me.” Soloway’s female gaze is not simply a reversal of Mulvey’s male one, but both a transformation of it and a commentary on it. It is not female as the binary biological opposite to male, but as the social and cultural other:

The female gaze seeks to destroy all other gazes. She is other gaze, queer gaze, trans gaze, intersectional gaze. She is the non-gaze emanating out from the centre of not a triangle, but a circle, undivided.¹³

Methodology

Of course, Mulvey only ever claimed to account for the male gaze as it manifested itself in classical Hollywood Cinema. The goal of this thesis, then, is not to directly layer Mulvey’s theory over these 21st-century films that it was never intended to fit and thereby declare the theory obsolete. My aim is rather to critically examine how visual pleasure, female

¹¹ Stacey (1994): 56.

¹² Soloway (2016).

¹³ *Ibidem*.

spectatorship, identification and desire in a cinematic context have been theorized by and since Mulvey, and to observe the ways in which these films perpetuate and contradict those ideas. The question this thesis will strive to answer is as follows: How do the different constructions of the gaze function in *The Handmaid* (2016) and *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019)? To this end, I will combine image and text analysis to gather information from both cinematic and narrative aspects of these films. Looking at the cinematography and mise-en-scene, I will use Mulvey's three levels of analysing the gaze to examine the way the characters look at each other, as well as the way the camerawork manipulates the viewer's gaze. Whose gaze does the camera embody? Who are we thus encouraged to side with? How do different elements of story and mise-en-scene mediate the gaze, and what do they tell us about the relation of the observing subject to the observed? By analysing the dialogue in addition to the cinematography and mise-en-scene, I will attempt to distil what these films communicate about the gaze, be it male, female or neither.

A note on language

Of all the different words and phrases that describe, bluntly stated, everyone who is not heterosexual and cisgender, each has its advantages and disadvantages, depending on the context in which they are used. The word "queer" is valuable for its broadness and its resistance of binaries and can be used as an umbrella term for all issues to do with non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations. One of its problems, as well as one of its strengths, is its history as a reclaimed slur. While young people, myself included, may be perfectly comfortable identifying as queer, for people who have been on the receiving end of its derogatory use, being labelled "queer" can be traumatic. The alternative seems to be some version of the ever-expanding initialism LGBT(QIA+). However, there is no widespread agreement about which letters should and should not be included within this initialism (and thus, the community), and which identities those letters should represent, inevitably resulting in uncertainty and potential exclusion of certain groups. For these and other reasons, I will, for the purpose of this thesis, use the simpler, less specific and thus more inclusive "queer." While in scholarly writing the verb "to queer" can mean as much or as little as "to subvert," "to resist" or "to reshape," in the context of this thesis the word "queer" will always refer to non-normative sexualities and gender identities.

The word “lesbian” as it is used today, refers to a woman who is exclusively attracted to other women, yet none of the women in these movies explicitly identify this way. Furthermore, applying modern terminology such as “lesbian”, “bisexual” or “queer” to a historical, if fictional, context may be considered anachronistic. The term I have therefore chosen to use when referring to the women and relationships portrayed in my case studies is “sapphic,” which today is used by communities of lesbian, queer and bisexual women (particularly in online spaces) to refer to any women or feminine-identifying individuals who are romantically and/or sexually attracted to other women and feminine-identifying individuals, regardless of who else they are attracted to. This term seems especially appropriate for my research, as not only does Sappho predate the historical settings of both of these films, but despite her status as a symbol of female homosexuality, the term hints at the dubious practice of attempting to retroactively pin down a historical figure’s sexuality.

Chapter 2

“NO DESIRE IN HER GAZE”

Relations of looking in *The Handmaiden*

The Handmaiden is an adaptation of Sarah Waters' 2002 novel *Fingersmith*, set in 1930s Korea. The film is divided up in three parts. The first part follows Sookhee, a pickpocket from a family of thieves, as she strikes a deal with a con man who calls himself Count Fujiwara. Fujiwara plans to marry rich heiress Hideko, have her admitted into a mental asylum, and run off with her fortune. Masquerading as a handmaiden, Sookhee enters the service of Hideko, in order to aid Fujiwara in courting her. When Fujiwara and Hideko eventually elope, they have Sookhee admitted to the mental asylum in Hideko's place and Hideko steals her identity. Part two shows Hideko's abusive upbringing at the hands of her uncle Kouzuki. Fujiwara and Hideko make a plan to trade Hideko's fortune for her freedom, in which Sookhee becomes collateral damage. However, Sookhee and Hideko fall for each other and decide to double-cross Fujiwara and run away together. In part three Sookhee escapes the asylum, Hideko escapes her marriage to Fujiwara and as the two get on a boat to a new life in Shanghai, Fujiwara is captured and tortured by Kouzuki, before ultimately killing them both.

Upon its release, *The Handmaiden* was met with international critical acclaim, but in feminist circles, director Park Chan-Wook was both praised for subverting the male gaze and criticized for reinforcing it. Chan-Wook has addressed the criticism on multiple occasions: in an interview for *The Film Stage*, he told Nick Newman that he intended *The Handmaiden* to be “a film about the violence of the male gaze”, urging the interviewer, and by extension, the audience, to “forget the fact that [Chan-Wook is] a male director and [...] look at the film objectively.”¹⁴ When Hannah Ongley, in an interview for i-D, brought up the controversy, Chan-Wook listed every measure taken by the cast and crew to ensure the safety and comfort of the actresses while shooting the sex scenes, going so far as to have all male crew members leave the set.¹⁵

Although one could argue here that the gentleman doth protest too much, it is clear that the role of the gaze in *The Handmaiden* is a polarizing topic. My aim for this chapter is to map out the different gazes at work in this film, as well as the way that the narrative comments on

¹⁴ Newman (2016).

¹⁵ Ongley (2016).

those gazes. In order to do that, I will start with the male gaze as Mulvey described it. Analyzing the ways in which the spectator's gaze is manipulated and mediated, I will then examine the position the narrative takes toward this gaze, as well as any alternative models of spectatorship the film may offer. From Chan-Wook's comments it becomes clear that the director has made certain efforts to keep the male gaze at bay: at least in the sex scenes, the camera's gaze was female, as no men were allowed on set that day. Of course, for Mulvey, the camera's gaze is not exclusively determined by the gender of the person operating the camera, a female camera operator may still direct the spectator to adopt the male gaze.¹⁶

Despicable subjects: manipulating spectator identification

According to Mulvey, the camera's gaze manipulates us (the spectator) into identifying with the male character, so that our gaze merges with his.¹⁷ Jackie Stacey argues that, aside from filmic techniques, identification is also produced through narrative elements such as "the sharing of knowledge, sympathy and moral values with the protagonist."¹⁸ In *The Handmaiden*, one of the most obvious ways in which this is achieved is through the use of voiceover. In part one of the movie, we are introduced to the character of Sookhee and at multiple points, Sookhee's voice provides context to what the audience is seeing, signalling that we are experiencing this part of the film from her point of view. Part two takes the audience back to Hideko's childhood, showing her abuse at the hands of her uncle. With Sookhee suddenly absent, Hideko becomes the obvious next subject of identification. This is reinforced when certain scenes from part one are repeated, but from Hideko's point of view, and when another voiceover allows us access to Hideko's private thoughts.

At no point throughout the film is the audience ever privy to the inner life of either of the male characters, and throughout the narrative, both are portrayed as unambiguously despicable people. The audience is informed of this not only through their actions, which are universally frowned upon (child abuse, enthusiastic collaboration with one's colonizers, sexual assault, torture and murder) but also through the protagonists' responses to them. For example, in a scene where Fujiwara appears to be seducing an uninterested Hideko, Sookhee is pictured gagging at the display. In another scene where Hideko attempts to poison Fujiwara

¹⁶ Mulvey (1989a): 25.

¹⁷ Ibidem: 19.

¹⁸ Stacey (1994): 242.

whilst pretending to seduce him, she rolls her eyes as he is kissing her breasts, signalling her utter disinterest. These scenes are clear examples of the act of looking being thematized in the film.

Not only are the male characters emphatically condemned by the narrative of the film, so is their gaze. This is most clearly articulated in the scenes in which Hideko is reading her uncle's pornographic manuscripts to groups of potential buyers. In these scenes, Hideko is a spectacle for the sexual pleasure of the men watching her. She is, to borrow Mulvey's term, reduced to her "to-be-looked-at-ness".¹⁹ The camera, however, tells a different story. Intercut with extreme close-ups of Hideko's expressionless face are sweeping shots of her audience that show the men uncomfortably shifting in their seats (to hide their erections, is the obvious implication). In an increasingly comical manner, the men, all dressed in immaculate white tie, are shown wincing, squirming and moaning under Hideko's impassive narration (Figures 1-3). Soon it becomes clear that not Hideko, but these men are the spectacle. Rather than following it, the camera isolates their gaze, making it visible and offering up their arousal – which signifies their complicity in the sexual abuse of a young girl – to the spectator to be ridiculed and morally condemned.

A maid and her lady: relations of looking and relations of power

In *The Handmaiden*, like in most of Mulvey's case studies, relations of looking are deeply intertwined with relations of power. As a rule, the party in control of the look is the party the audience is encouraged to perceive as having the upper hand. Although *The Handmaiden* largely follows Mulvey's premise that the protagonist's gaze propels the plot forward (although that protagonist in this case is never male), the film complicates the accompanying power dynamics. In part one, it is Sookhee who pushes the plot forward and this part is indeed centred on her gaze. As a handmaiden, Sookhee answers to Hideko, who is her superior. However, it is quickly revealed that Sookhee is deceiving and, to an extent, controlling Hideko, destabilizing the power dynamic between them. This is reflected in Sookhee's voiceover, in which she frequently expresses pity for Hideko, who she perceives to be helpless and childlike. In one scene, while helping Hideko, Sookhee muses in voiceover: "A lady is a doll for a maid. All these buttons are for my pleasure. Unbutton and pull the straps... then, the sweet things are inside." The idea that a rich lady is a toy for her handmaiden,

¹⁹ Mulvey (1989a): 25.

suggests a reversal of the power differential that seems evident between aristocrats and their staff. Later in the same scene Hideko dresses Sookhee in one of her own luxurious dresses, taking on the role of a maid as Sookhee tries on the role of a lady. Afterwards, the two take turns undoing each other's buttons and unlacing each other's corsets, further blurring the boundaries between lady and maid. To add to this, much of the scene takes place in front of a mirror, in which Sookhee admires her "makeover" as Hideko tells her she could be a lady too. It is in this moment that Hideko first blatantly flirts with Sookhee, telling her she thinks of her face before she goes to sleep at night. The accompanying shot shows the mirror, with Sookhee's reflection as she admires herself, and Hideko next to it, clearly staring at Sookhee, while subconsciously mirroring her pose. (Figure 4) With the power differential already destabilized, this shot seems to suggest that Hideko and Sookhee are the same.

Through the looking glass: mirrors and feminine identifications

Given the prominence of mirrors in this scene and throughout *The Handmaiden*, a Lacanian analysis of Sookhee's ego in relation to the unattainable ideal reflected back at her (rich, beautiful, independent) may appear as the obvious choice here.²⁰ However, I am more interested in what scenes like these tell us about the relationship between Sookhee and Hideko. Perhaps the most obvious dimension of these scenes is the way they are used as a clear visualization of the act of looking. The use of mirror reflections in a shot allows the camera to show both the subject and the object of the gaze in the same frame. In the aforementioned shot, we can see both Sookhee and Hideko *looking at* Sookhee. When Hideko makes her flirtatious remark, we witness both sides of the interaction simultaneously: Hideko smiles bashfully on one half of the screen, while the other shows Sookhee looking up at Hideko over the mirror, returning the gaze, and averting her eyes, muttering a flustered response.

Early in the film, after learning that Sookhee is illiterate, Hideko sits down in front of the mirror to show Sookhee how to write her name onto a piece of paper. Only in part two do we see this piece of paper and learn that Hideko wrote her own name. This is part of the plan to steal Sookhee's identity, but on an associative level, this scene again connects the mirror

²⁰ I am referring, of course, to Jaques Lacan's 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', which Mulvey also builds upon in 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema'. See also: Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory*.

behind Hideko to the idea that, with their names interchangeable, Sookhee and Hideko are the same; they are each other's reflection. That this metaphor goes beyond the identity theft plan is suggested by the scenes that similarly establish a connection between Sookhee and her aunt. In a flashback scene where the two are seen talking about Sookhee's mother, Sookhee is brushing her aunt's hair, and the older woman's face is only ever seen in the mirror. Significantly, Sookhee uses this memory to connect to Hideko, who has also lost her mother at a young age. In a later scene, Sookhee writes a letter to her aunt to inform her that she has joined forces with Hideko. While she is writing, Hideko hands her a golden bracelet, which Sookhee bites to test its authenticity (Figure 5). The camera then pans *through the mirror*, to a shot of Sookhee's aunt reading the letter and biting the bracelet that came with it in an identical manner (Figure 6). When comparing this to another scene in which Hideko reads a letter from Fujiwara, who then appears in the mirror behind her, but is only focused on his own reflection, never making eye contact with Hideko (Figure 7), it becomes clear that mirrors in *the Handmaiden* signify a secret feminine connection that men do not have access to. Hideko and Sookhee mirror each other, not in the Lacanian sense, but in something more akin to what Jackie Stacey calls 'intimacy between femininities'. In her analysis of female spectatorship, Stacey writes about feminist film criticism:

in much of this work there is a misplaced assumption that 'desire' in the cinema can be straight-forwardly conceptualised within the psychoanalytic model of 'erotic object choice' and, as such, is necessarily the opposite to 'identification'.²¹

With her notion of intimacy between femininities, Stacey argues for a model of looking relations in which desire and identification are not mutually exclusive. She further urges to free this model from the constricting binaries of sexual difference to make space for and explore the specificity and diversity of same-sex identification.²² *The Handmaiden* models such a relationship, with its portrayal of sapphic sexuality as a specifically feminine experience, in which desire and identification not only coexist but actively reinforce each other, and in which the sapphic gaze is its own entity, affording its own specific pleasure, rather than the masochistic attempt of a woman to access the male gaze, "[shifting] restlessly in its borrowed transvestite clothes."²³

²¹ Stacey (1994): 309-310

²² Ibidem: 64, 310.

²³ Mulvey (1989b): 33

Possessing beauty: art and the gaze

As will become clearer in chapter 3, art plays an important role in both *The Handmaiden* and *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, particularly as it pertains to the gaze. Whereas the prevalence of the theme is immediately obvious in *Portrait*, its presence in *The Handmaiden* is more subtle, and primarily linked to the male characters and their gaze. Hideko's uncle Kouzuki is a collector and dealer of art, including the aforementioned pornographic manuscripts. Because he both wants to possess and sell the pieces in his collection, he hires Fujiwara to create forgeries of his artworks. This is Fujiwara's way into the estate. Additionally, he also gives Hideko painting lessons, which he utilizes to seduce her.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger points out the historical connection between art and possession, particularly in the context of sexualized looking. When discussing a painting King Charles II had commissioned of his mistress, he writes:

It shows her passively looking at the spectator staring at her naked. This nakedness is not, however, an expression of her own feelings; it is a sign of her submission to the owner's feelings or demands. (The owner of both woman and painting).²⁴

This phrasing implies that to own a painting of a woman equals owning the woman herself, and indeed, in a later essay Berger writes: "If you buy a painting you also buy the look of the thing it represents".²⁵ It is worth pointing out that the stairway of Kouzuki's mansion is decorated by several paintings depicting Hideko in different stages of her life, presumably commissioned by Kouzuki (Figure 8). Of course, Fujiwara does not possess any paintings of Hideko, but he does use his artistic skill to get access to her, with the intent of ultimately possessing her. In one scene, while talking to Kouzuki, Fujiwara paints a quick female nude onto a small piece of paper which he then uses to roll a cigarette (Figure 9). As he lights it, he explains: "this is my unique way to possess beauty," again establishing the connection between possession and art, even going so far as to imply that once a beautiful woman is painted, her beauty can be consumed.

During one of the painting lessons, Fujiwara is seen drawing a series of tiny portraits of Sookhee (Figure 10). When committing Sookhee to the mental asylum, Hideko gives the orderlies her locket, containing one of these portraits where a picture of her mother used to be (Figure 11). She tells them it belonged to Sookhee's late mother, confirming to them that

²⁴ Berger (1972): 52.

²⁵ Berger (1973): 83.

Sookhee is the rich heiress and Hideko her maid. Although Fujiwara may not have drawn Sookhee with the intent of possessing her, it is yet another instance in which art is used as a tool to rob a woman of her freedom. In the same way, Kouzuki's collection of artworks functions as a symbol for Hideko's captivity. In a later scene, just before escaping Kouzuki's estate with Fujiwara's help, Hideko shows Sookhee her uncle's library. Confronted with the art that has been so instrumental to Hideko's abuse, Sookhee starts furiously tearing and cutting up artworks, ripping books and manuscripts off the shelves and tossing them into a pool of water, spilling bottles of ink and paint on top of them (Figure 12). This vengeful destruction of Kouzuki's library symbolizes Hideko's newfound freedom. It also powerfully reverses Sookhee's motivation from conspiring with Fujiwara to have Hideko locked up, to setting her free and destroying the signifiers of her imprisonment. This connection of art with captivity and of its destruction with freedom will be explored further in the next chapter.

“At least I get to die with my penis still on”: castration and the failure of the male gaze

As I have demonstrated so far, *The Handmaiden* models a sapphic gaze that contradicts Mulvey's psychoanalysis-based perception of possibilities for female spectatorship. However, that is not to say that psychoanalytic iconography is entirely absent. In fact, not only is the male gaze actively ridiculed, but its Freudian origins, too, are played with in various ways. Fujiwara and Kouzuki could each be read as a personification of one of the two shapes Mulvey's male gaze can take in order to mitigate castration fear, and for each of them, this ultimately leads to their demise. Kouzuki, with his obsession with sadist pornography, his underground torture chamber and his violent punishments of Hideko, embodies voyeurism and its association with sadism. He spends his final moments urgently interrogating Fujiwara about his wedding night with Hideko, asking whether she resisted and whether Fujiwara used force, attempting to experience Hideko's violent devaluation vicariously through Fujiwara's account. Fujiwara on the other side, embodies fetishistic scopophilia. His initial failure to subjugate Hideko with his gaze is clearly deeply alarming to him, as this exchange with Kouzuki makes clear:

Fujiwara: “I look at the eyes of women. Only the eyes. They look away, avoiding my eyes, but they come back.²⁶ Tonight, if I try to get in someone's bed, only one person will resist. [...]

²⁶ This citation is taken from the English subtitles on Netflix, however in Japanese, Fujiwara's exact words are “Onna-tachi wa watakushi o sakete, shisen wa sorashimasu, kedo mata sugu ni modottekimasu”, notable here is the use of the phrase “shisen wa sorashimasu”, which means “to avert one's gaze.”

When our eyes met accidentally, Hideko did not look away. I had to be the one to look away.”²⁷

Kouzuki: “Will Hideko be in your lewd dreams tonight?”

Fujiwara: “Her visit would honour me, but I don’t think I could consummate, because her body would be as cold as a waterfowl.”

Kouzuki: “That is the result of long training.”

Fujiwara: “I heard you’re engaged to her. If my eyes are not mistaken, you haven’t consummated with her. Her eyes don’t show any desire. It means she’s like a dead spirit.²⁸ Go easy on her training, unless you like making love to a corpse.

Rather than even considering the possibility that Hideko is simply not attracted to him, Fujiwara concludes that Hideko’s immunity to his gaze means she is dead inside. As the first part of this exchange demonstrates, Fujiwara takes pride in his perceived ability to seduce any woman with only his eyes. To accept that there is a woman whom he cannot possess in this way is to undermine his own masculinity, to be rendered impotent, a symbolic castration. Instead, having decided that Hideko cannot be seduced, he proceeds to fixate on her physical beauty, transforming her into a reassuring object rather than a threatening one. In the end, however, it is Fujiwara’s failure to perceive Hideko as a threat that results in his capture by Kouzuki.

Both men, like the male gaze they embody, are driven by castration fear, a point that is made clear at multiple points throughout the movie. The entrance to Kouzuki’s library (which, apart from Hideko and her aunt before her, women are forbidden from entering) is marked by a very phallic statue of an upright snake, which Kouzuki himself states “marks the bounds of knowledge”. When this boundary is broken, in the scene where Sookhee destroys the library,

²⁷ In Japanese: “Futo me ga atta toki ni, Hideko-oujou-sama wa shisen o sorashi ni wa narimasen deshita. Mou shiro, watakushi no hou ga sakete shimatta koto desu.” Note again the use of the phrase “shisen o sorashimasu”, this time in the negative past tense (“shisen o sorashi ni wa narimasen deshita”). When referring to himself, however, Fujiwara uses the word “sakete” which simply means “to avoid”. Roughly translated he says: “Hideko did not avert her gaze, rather it was up to me to avoid her.” This alternate translation is significant because, more than the Netflix version, this translation carries a hint of fear, as Fujiwara has to not only look away, but avoid Hideko (or her gaze) altogether.

²⁸ In Japanese: “Kanojo no manazashi ni wa yokubou ga mienai. Sore wa tamashii ga shinda moto jan dakara.” Whereas the subtitles say “her eyes don’t show any desire”, rather than the Japanese word for “eyes”(“me”), Fujiwara uses the word “manazashi”, which means “look” or “gaze”. Note also the use of the word ‘mienai’, which is the negative of the verb ‘to see’. Since Japanese uses pronouns sparingly, this can mean both “I do not/cannot see” or “it is not/cannot be seen”. A more accurate translation of this line then, would be “I see no desire in her gaze” or “There is no desire to be seen in her gaze.” The last sentence more or less literally translates to: “That is because her spirit has died.”

she also beheads the snake statue – an obvious castration metaphor (Figure 13). In the movie’s penultimate scene, Kouzuki tortures Fujiwara by amputating his fingers – another hint threatening castration. Fujiwara’s last words, having poisoned both Kouzuki and himself with his (phallic) mercury-laced cigarettes, are “at least I get to die with my penis still on.” He uses the word *chinchin*, an informal Japanese word for “penis” that is also used to describe a tinkling, jingling or ringing sound, such as that of a whistle or a small bell. In the final scene, directly following this one, Hideko and Sookhee have sex using ben wa balls. These small silver balls feature prominently in one of Kouzuki’s manuscripts. The story, titled ‘The Sound of Bells on a Windless Night’, describes two sapphic lovers inserting the balls, which have bells inside of them, into each other’s vagina, resulting in a clear, high-pitched ringing sound. The sound, which can also be heard in the final scene of *The Handmaiden* as Sookhee and Hideko make love, can easily be described as a tinkle or a jingle or, in Japanese, *chinchin*. This final scene, then, can be read as a nod to the classic threat of lesbianism to the male heterosexual imaginary: the idea that sapphic sexuality will render the phallus (and thus the man) obsolete. It is the ultimate metaphorical castration: the phallic power of the penis eradicated to the cheerful soundtrack of a soft, clear ringing on a windless night.

Chapter 3

“RETOURNE TOI”

The sapphic gaze in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*

Portrait de la jeune fille en feu takes place in late 18th-century France and tells the story of Marianne, a young painter who is hired to paint a portrait of a young woman named Héloïse in order to solidify her arranged marriage to a Milanese nobleman. Because Héloïse refuses to pose for her portrait, her mother enlists Marianne to accompany her daughter on walks, during which Marianne is to memorize Héloïse’s features, so that she can paint them in secret. As the two women get to know each other, Marianne starts to feel guilty about her deceit, and decides to show Héloïse the finished painting. When Héloïse disapproves, Marianne destroys the painting and decides to start over. Héloïse’s mother threatens to send Marianne away, but Héloïse interjects, saying that she will pose for Marianne. Héloïse’s mother reluctantly agrees and leaves for Italy. Over the following days, the two grow closer and a romantic relationship forms, which is inevitably ended by the return of Héloïse’s mother, and the marriage arrangement that can now be completed.

That the gaze is an important theme in the film is evident, again, from both the subject matter and the film’s reception. *The Guardian*, for instance, called it “a film in which every covert glance feels weighted with meaning, both a commentary on and celebration of the power of the female gaze.”²⁹ *Portrait* wastes no time leading up to this premise: the very first scene revolves around women looking at women. Young girls’ hands carefully drag bits of charcoal across paper, their eyes intently watching the scene before them. We see them look before we see what they are looking at: Marianne sits, posing before a backdrop, but she is not a passive object of their gaze, she is both model and teacher, instructing her students how to look, and what to look at, inviting and directing their gaze. Whereas Mulvey’s triangle of male gazes was already complicated in *The Handmaiden*, in *Portrait* it falls apart: not only was the film written, directed, and predominantly shot by women, it also stars almost exclusively women. There is a grand total of two male speaking parts, one at the beginning and one at the very end of the film. Combined, they account for four lines of dialogue and about 75 seconds of screen time and, perhaps more importantly: not a single frame is shot from a man’s point of view. This means that, whereas in *The Handmaiden*, the spectator was strongly discouraged from

²⁹ Mumford (2020).

identifying with the male characters, in *Portrait* there are simply none to identify with. Instead, the spectator's gaze is largely shaped by Marianne's. Thus, the camera's gaze, the characters' gaze and the spectator's gaze are all effectively female. Of course, this does not mean that the male gaze is entirely absent in this film: it is commented on rather explicitly in a number of ways. In this chapter I will examine that commentary, as well as the female gaze and the sapphic gaze that *Portrait* represents.

“You’ll see her when you think of me”: the image replacing the woman

In the previous chapter, I discussed the significance of art in the plot of *The Handmaid*, particularly in its relation to the gaze. As the title *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* gives away, art plays an even more important part in this film, and so, too, does its connection with possession and captivity. Much like in *The Handmaid*, art in *Portrait* has the power to rob a woman of her freedom: Héloïse's portrait is to be sent to a nobleman in Milan, who will marry her if he likes the portrait. To use John Berger's words once again: by purchasing the painting, he is purchasing the ability to *look at* Héloïse, and with it, the ability to *possess* her.

In her article “Men Looking at Women through Art: Male Gaze and Spectatorship in Three Nineteenth-Century French Novels”, Julia Starr describes a scene in which a man gazes upon a portrait of his forbidden lover.³⁰ She argues that “the painting serves as a replacement for his absent loved one” and later concludes: “Indeed, the fetishistic transference of sexual desire from ‘real women’ to art objects is an insistent theme of French nineteenth-century literature.”³¹ In *Portrait*, this idea of the image of the woman as a stand-in for the woman herself is very present as well. At first, we see it appear in a kind of reversal: Héloïse's mother says the nobleman will marry Héloïse only if Marianne's portrait of her is to his liking. The portrait's purpose then, is to ignite a desire in Héloïse's future husband. The image must seduce him so that he will wish to replace it with the real thing. Héloïse jokingly refers to this fact while posing: when Marianne instructs her to remove the shawl that covers the neckline of her dress she says: “You have my future husband in mind”. Héloïse's situation is not unique, her mother was married off in a similar fashion. As she informs Marianne about her task, a portrait of her, painted by Marianne's father, hangs on the wall above them.

Contemplating the image of her younger self, Héloïse's mother remarks: “The portrait arrived

³⁰ Starr (1993): 9.

³¹ Ibidem: 30.

here before me. When I first entered this room, I found myself facing my image hanging on the wall. She was waiting for me.” The portrait did not replace her, it preceded her, welcoming her to a new life she clearly did not want. Along with her fond descriptions of warm, colourful Milan, where the portrait was painted, contrasted to the cold isolation of her current home, it seems that for Héloïse’s mother, too, her portrait signifies imprisonment.

Starr’s understanding of the trope of the image replacing the woman is a very gendered, unequal one: men using paintings of objectified women for sexual pleasure when the real woman cannot consent. *Portrait*, however, also offers a different, more reciprocal version of this dynamic. On one of their last days together, while naked in bed, Marianne is drawing a small portrait of Héloïse, reminiscent of the larger painting. The following conversation occurs:

Héloïse: “Who is that for?”

Marianne: “For me.”

Héloïse: “You can reproduce that image to infinity.”

Marianne: “Yes.”

Héloïse: “After a while you’ll see her when you think of me. [pause] I’ll have no image of you.”

Marianne: “You want an image of me?”

Héloïse: “Yes.”

Marianne: “Which one?”

Héloïse: [gesturing to Marianne’s currently naked body] “That one.”

Marianne then proceeds to draw a self-portrait in a page of Héloïse’s book, with the help of a hand mirror, cleverly positioned in front of Héloïse’s genitals (a detail I will come back to later in this chapter). Contrary to her portrait of Héloïse, this self-portrait pictures Marianne in an overtly sexual way: the provocative pose modelled by Héloïse, the emphasis on the flushed cheeks, her nudity (Figure 14). However, she is the one portraying herself in such a way, meaning she actively consents to Héloïse’s sexualized look – more than that, she is giving her the look, the memory, of her naked body as a parting gift.

If the art object can replace the woman for the purpose of sexual pleasure, it follows that it can do the same in the context of anger and rage. Starr mentions a scene in which a

protagonist destroys his own art. She links this to sadism, a punishment of the female image.³² In the previous chapter I discussed the destruction of art in *The Handmaid*, but that did not include portraits of the protagonists. In *Portrait*, the topic comes up again, though not in the way Starr describes. On her first night in Héloïse's home, Marianne stumbles upon the unfinished portrait of Héloïse that another painter before her attempted. She returns to it after having finished her own painting, clearly guilt-ridden, and inspects the faceless image with a candle, accidentally setting it on fire (Figure 15). Rather than extinguishing the flame, Marianne watches as it consumes the painting. The next day, she tells Héloïse the truth and shows her the finished portrait. When Héloïse criticizes the painting, Marianne wipes out the face with a cloth (Figure 16), buying both Héloïse and herself five more days of freedom. Neither of these instances in any way signify a desire to punish Héloïse. If anything, Marianne wants to help her, (much like Sookhee in *The Handmaid*), even if only postponing the inevitable.

After Marianne finishes the second portrait, when the two are admiring the finished product together, they have the following exchange:

Héloïse: "This time I like it."

Marianne: "Perhaps because I know you better."

Héloïse: "Perhaps I've changed."

Marianne: "Perhaps."

Héloïse: "You didn't destroy the last one for me. You did it for you."

Marianne: "I want to destroy this one too."

Héloïse: "Why?"

Marianne: "Through it, I give you to another."

Héloïse: "It's terrible! Now you possess me a little, you bear me a grudge."

The implication, here, is that having painted (and loved) Héloïse, Marianne now possesses her. That is, until she gives away the painting, and thus Héloïse, to someone else. Héloïse gets angry, pointing out that Marianne is no longer on her side, because for one person to possess another is to deny the other autonomy and agency, something Héloïse is desperately trying to

³² Starr (1993): 16.

retain. We see this earlier in the scene where Heloïse reads the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to Marianne and Sophie, the maid.

“Turn around”: the Orpheus myth, agency and resistant reading

The reference to the ancient myth is quite telling, as it is the ultimate cautionary tale about the destructive power of the male gaze, particularly in its relation to art. As Maurice Blanchot points out in ‘The Gaze of Orpheus’, it is Orpheus’ art that gives him the power to enter the underworld to retrieve his Eurydice.³³ However, it is also through his art, and his gaze, that he loses her again:

Orpheus's error seems then to lie in the desire which moves him to see and to possess Eurydice, he whose destiny is only to sing of her. He is Orpheus only in the song: he cannot have any relation to Eurydice except within the hymn. [...] Yes, this is true: only in the song does Orpheus have power over Eurydice.³⁴

One of the recurrent criticisms of Mulvey’s original essay on the male gaze is the lack of space it leaves for resistance. In her chapter titled ‘The Oppositional Gaze’, bell hooks describes a particular look shaped in situations of oppression, specifically contextualized in the history of slavery. She calls it “the oppositional gaze”: the gaze of slaves looking back at their masters. The lack of space for a resistant look in Mulvey’s work, hooks argues, stems from its failure to account for racial difference:

Reading Laura Mulvey’s provocative essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ from a standpoint that acknowledges race, one sees clearly why black women spectators not duped by mainstream cinema would develop an oppositional gaze.³⁵

Of course, this term specifically applies to the experience of black women in the US context, and one cannot seamlessly apply the same theory to a French film about upper-class white women. However, what hooks teaches here is relevant for all forms of oppression. She goes on to quote Stuart Hall:

³³ Blanchot (1982): 171.

³⁴ Ibidem. 172-173.

³⁵ hooks (1992): 122.

in all relations of power ‘there is necessarily the possibility of resistance’, he invites the critical thinkers to search those margins, gaps and locations on and through the body where agency can be found.³⁶

Hearing the story of Eurydice’s demise, Sophie is furious. In the conversation that follows, this search for agency is clearly reflected:

Sophie: “That’s horrible! Poor woman. Why did he turn? He was told not to do that, but did, for no reason!”

Marianne: “There are reasons.”

Sophie: “You think? [to Héloïse] Read it again!”

Héloïse obliges.

Sophie: “No, he can’t look at her for fear of losing her. That’s no reason, he was told not to do that.”

Héloïse: “He’s madly in love. He can’t resist.”

Marianne: “I think Sophie has a point. He could resist, his reasons aren’t serious. Perhaps he makes a choice.”

Sophie: “What choice?”

Marianne: “He chooses the memory of her. That’s why he turns. He doesn’t make the lover’s choice, but the poet’s.”

Héloïse: [re-reading] “*She spoke a last farewell that scarcely reached his ears and fell back into the abyss.* [pause] Maybe she was the one who said: ‘Turn around’.”

Héloïse’s interpretation is a powerful lesson in resistant reading. Here is a story about a helpless woman destroyed by her husband’s love, and Héloïse, refusing to accept the character as a passive victim, finds a way to give her agency. Of course, this also extends to the way the story clearly parallels her relationship with Marianne. Through her art, Marianne, like Orpheus, has the power to destroy Héloïse’s life, trapping her in an underworld of sorts. But Héloïse, both helplessly in love and fiercely independent, refuses to be her passive victim. Foreshadowing their argument I analysed earlier in this chapter, Héloïse makes it clear here that posing for Marianne is her choice. That she, like Eurydice, is the author of her own demise, a sacrifice made willingly for the prize of one more glance at her lover’s face.

³⁶ Ibidem: 116.

Reflections of Héloïse's and Marianne's different interpretations of the Orpheus myth can be seen throughout the entire film in the different approaches to the gaze that are modelled for the viewer. For the purpose of illustrating this, I will refer to these approaches as "the lover's gaze" and "the artist's gaze," corresponding to what Marianne called "the lover's choice," and "the poet's choice."

A tale of two paintings: the artist's gaze and the lover's gaze

In her description of fetishistic scopophilia, Mulvey describes the cinematic practice of fragmenting the female body for the male gaze through the use of close-ups, flattening the female image.³⁷ Starr recognizes the same practice in the male artists in her case studies. She refers to Mulvey, describing how these close-ups "tend to flatten and iconize women while denying their three-dimensional individuality," and points out how a painter in her case study examines the individual body parts of a potential model, "fragmenting her into a series of poses."³⁸ This type of gaze is also reflected in Marianne's first portrait of Héloïse. Because she cannot get Héloïse to pose, this portrait comes together in parts. On her walks with Héloïse, she observes certain body parts, documenting them in separate sketches (Figure 17), stringing them together through a reliance on universal conventions and rules. In one scene, while studying Héloïse's ear, Marianne recites instructions in her head, presumably ones she learned from her father or in painting lessons. When presented with the end result, a collage of stolen glances, Héloïse is unimpressed:

Héloïse: "Is this how you see me?"

Marianne: "It isn't only me."

Héloïse: "What do you mean, not only you?"

Marianne: "There are rules, conventions, ideas."

Héloïse: "You mean there's no life? No presence?"

Marianne: "Your presence is made up of fleeting moments that may lack truth."

Marianne demonstrates here what I refer to as the artist's gaze. It is cold and analytical, based on universal ideas and rules, concerned with truth and details, not with presence or life. The

³⁷ Mulvey (1989a): 20.

³⁸ Starr (1993): 12.

artist's gaze does not need permission, it is one-sided and impersonal, unattached. Under the artist's gaze, the woman is an object, a fetish, a muse. It was the only gaze available to Marianne when painting Héloïse in secret, but it is not necessarily her own.

The lover's gaze that *Portrait* offers up as an alternative, is more akin to what Jill Soloway has called "the female gaze." This "seeing-feeling," as Soloway described it, is concerned with returning the gaze and representing the experience of being the object of the gaze.³⁹ These elements are explicitly discussed in one of the scenes where Héloïse poses for Marianne. In an attempt to address the anger and hurt that Héloïse still feels towards her, Marianne starts analysing out loud how Héloïse's mannerisms betray her emotions:

Marianne: "When you're moved, you do this with your hand."

Héloïse: "Really?"

Marianne: "Yes. And when you're embarrassed, you bite your lips. And when you're annoyed, you don't blink."

Héloïse: "You know it all."

Marianne: "Forgive me, I'd hate to be in your place."

Héloïse: "We are in the same place. Exactly the same place. Come here. [Marianne walks over] Step closer. Look. When you look at me, who do I look at? When you don't know what to say you touch your forehead. When you lose control, you raise your eyebrows. And when you're troubled, you breathe through your mouth."

In this exchange, Héloïse voices a pivotal point which Mulvey neglects to address, but which is recognized by Soloway, and hooks before her: the act of looking is rarely one-sided. The knowing object of the gaze is always also the subject of her own gaze. When Orpheus looks at Eurydice, she looks back and sees just as much. When Héloïse sees Marianne sketching an image of her as a keepsake, committing her to memory, like Orpheus' last glance at Eurydice, she requests an image of Marianne, Eurydice's parting look. When Héloïse approves of Marianne's second painting, Marianne suggests it is because she knows her better. Héloïse suggests it is because she has changed. This painting represents what I will call the lover's gaze. Contrary to the artist's gaze, the lover's gaze is warm and emotionally involved, it is reciprocal, and this requires vulnerability on both sides. It is concerned with familiarity and

³⁹ Soloway (2016).

love, and rather than clinging to false universalities, it embraces specificity and, at least in this iteration, it is specifically feminine, and specifically sapphic.

Through the looking glass (again): the sapphic gaze returns

Jackie Stacey is interested in the specificity of feminine relations of looking, but also recognizes the very common problem with studying it: “how to argue for a feminine specificity without falling into the trap of biological essentialism.”⁴⁰ One way in which she circumvents this trap is to conceptualize the specificities of female homo-erotic spectatorship outside of the psychoanalytical framework in which female homosexuality is inevitably masculinized.⁴¹ As mentioned in the previous chapter, for Stacey, identification and desire are not mutually exclusive. She argues:

Indeed, it is precisely in same-sex relations that the distinction between desire and identification may blur most easily, and, moreover it might be suggested that therein lies their particular appeal.⁴²

To bring home this point, I would like to return, as I did in the last chapter, to the function of mirrors.

Mirrors appear twice in *Portrait*. Marianne poses in front of one for the first portrait, using herself as a body double for Héloïse, a reference for basic anatomy and the folds of the dress. (Figure 18) The second instance, which I would like to discuss in more detail, is the scene where Marianne draws a self-portrait in Héloïse’s book, using Héloïse’s body as an anatomical reference, and a small mirror to see her own face. This mirror, as mentioned before, is positioned in front of Héloïse’s vulva, held in place by her thighs. (Figure 19) Even in Freudian terms, this is a powerful visual descriptor of what separates the sapphic gaze from the male gaze: the male gaze looks at the vulva and sees lack, castration, horror. The sapphic gaze looks at the vulva and sees herself. Whereas the male gaze inevitably objectifies and others, the sapphic gaze is always directed into a mirror. This also means that the sapphic gaze is necessarily equal and reciprocal: one cannot look into a mirror without the reflection returning the gaze. And indeed, Héloïse always returns Marianne’s gaze.

When Marianne rushes out after the two lovers have said their goodbyes, Héloïse follows her and echoes Eurydice’s words: “Retourne toi” (turn around). Marianne turns to see her lost

⁴⁰ Stacey (1990): 368.

⁴¹ Ibidem: 370.

⁴² Stacey (1994): 315.

love in a wedding dress. Mirroring an apparition that Marianne has seen earlier in the film, Héloïse looks ghostly, as Eurydice in the underworld, the white of her dress stark against the surrounding dark. (Figure 20-21) In the epilogue Marianne finds a portrait of Héloïse at an art exhibition. She is older, with a child at her hip, but still looking back with the same defiance (Figure 22). In the book she is holding, her finger marks page 28, the page that Marianne drew her self-portrait on, showing that, even now, even when they are apart, Héloïse is still *looking back*, returning Marianne's gaze.

Chapter 4

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to answer the question: How do the different constructions of the gaze function in *The Handmaiden* (2016) and *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019)? The gazes I have studied can be roughly categorized into the male gaze and the sapphic gaze. In *The Handmaiden*, the male gaze largely functions in the way that Laura Mulvey described it: it seeks to objectify the female body in order to eliminate castration fear and achieve scopophilic pleasure. It does this through voyeurism, as is embodied in Kouzuki's character, and through fetishism, which Fujiwara represents. Although the male gaze is clearly present in *The Handmaiden*, it only really operates on the level of the character's gaze. Whereas in Mulvey's case studies, the camera's gaze manipulates the spectator's gaze to merge with that of the male characters, the camera's gaze in *the Handmaiden* does the opposite. Aided by narrative techniques, it works to disconnect the spectator's gaze from the male gaze and encourages the viewer to identify with the female characters instead. Contrary to Mulvey's premise then, the male gaze in *the Handmaiden* does not control the plot. Indeed, the fact that the male gaze is so strongly connected to the almost caricatural villains of the film may suggest that the true villain of this story is the male gaze itself. Its profoundly humiliating defeat comes at the hands of the sapphic gaze: a female gaze that combines identification and homo-erotic desire.

In *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, however, the male gaze as Mulvey conceptualized it is much less present. What I have named "the artist's gaze" can certainly be considered a more masculine-coded gaze, though its cold, analytical reliance on universal rules and conventions is more reminiscent of an Enlightenment model of masculinity than a Freudian one.

Nevertheless, it certainly overlaps with Mulvey's male gaze in the way it objectifies and fragments the female body. In what I have called "the lover's gaze", we can see this film's version of a sapphic gaze. Although the lover's gaze is not exclusively homo-erotic – Eurydice arguably wielded it when she bid Orpheus farewell – it is unquestionably feminine. Like the sapphic gaze portrayed in *The Handmaiden*, it collapses desire and identification and celebrates equality and specificity. Like Jill Soloway's female gaze, this sapphic gaze is reciprocal, it knows that when it sees it is also being seen, and like hooks' oppositional gaze, it is not afraid to look back defiantly.

Although I admittedly remain puzzled at the prevalence of Freudian theory in the field of feminist film criticism, and wholeheartedly second Stacey's plea for a departure from scholarship that hinges on binary oppositions in which gender, genitals and sexuality are constantly conflated, the aim of this thesis is not to declare Mulvey's essay obsolete. I recognize the ubiquity of psychoanalytic iconography as a narrative device, particularly in the period of cinema that Mulvey concerns herself with, and as seen in *The Handmaiden*, that particular cinematic language persists to this day. What I do hope to have proven here is that cinema today (and arguably, to the resistant spectator, this always been the case)⁴³ offers the female spectator alternative opportunities for desire, identification and pleasure far beyond what Mulvey described.

As the focus of my research was on analysing the gendered dimension of the gaze, I was unable to examine the colonial aspects of *the Handmaiden*'s historical setting, and the way in which this may have shaped looking relations in the film. Apart from the Orpheus myth, which was explicitly discussed in *Portrait*, this method also prevented me from going deeper into the intertextual references present in either film. Here lie opportunities for further research. Additionally, due to the limited scope of this thesis, there is not much I can conclude about the emerging genre of lesbian period drama at large on the basis of these two films.

Part of my motivation for examining these case studies is my strong belief in the importance of telling queer stories in historical settings. Due to the demonization of queer sexualities and identities throughout most of western history, the majority of our historical narratives about queerness are defined by tragedy. For many queer people in those contexts, to survive was to be invisible. Furthermore, the inclusion of queerness in scholarly historical research tends to be met with criticism and anxieties about historical accuracy and anachronism.⁴⁴ Existing research on Sarah Waters' oeuvre has examined the role of historical fiction in addressing this problem.⁴⁵ In an article about Waters' novel *Tipping the Velvet*, Mandy Koolen writes:

Although historical fiction has been charged with being ahistorical and critiqued for fostering identifications across time – a move that queer historians such as Halperin argue results in “gay chauvinism, a homosexual essentialism” – queer historical novels do the important work

⁴³ Stacey (1990), Smyth (1995).

⁴⁴ Coyne Kelly & Pugh (2009): 2-4.

⁴⁵ Koolen (2010) & Mitchell (2013).

of filling in gaps in the historical record by speculating about past experiences of same-sex desire that have been erased or neglected in many historical studies.⁴⁶

While scholarly writing on historical film as a genre occasionally mentions a similar potential in cinematic portrayals of the past, more research is needed into the specific opportunities that period drama offers to fill this historical void. Invisible or not, it is of vital importance to queer individuals to know that stories like theirs have always existed, even if they have not yet been told.

⁴⁶ Koolen (2010): 373.

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Appendix



Figures 1-3: Kouzuki's potential clients (including Fujiwara, Figure 2) listening to Hideko's reading. *The Handmaiden*. Park Chan-Wook. (2016) Moho Film & Yong Film.



Figure 4: Hideko flirts with Sookhee via the mirror. *The Handmaiden*. Park Chan-Wook. (2016) Moho Film & Yong Film.



Figure 5: Sookhee tests the gold bracelet. *The Handmaiden*. Park Chan-Wook. (2016) Moho Film & Yong Film.



Figure 6: Sookhee's aunt tests the gold bracelets, seen via the mirror. *The Handmaiden*. Park Chan-Wook. (2016) Moho Film & Yong Film.



Figure 7: Fujiwara appears in the mirror as Hideko reads his letter. *The Handmaiden*. Park Chan-Wook. (2016) Moho Film & Yong Film.



Figure 8: Paintings of Hideko in the hallway. *The Handmaiden*. Park Chan-Wook. (2016) Moho Film & Yong Film.



Figure 9: Fujiwara draws a reclining nude on the paper he rolls his cigarette with. *The Handmaiden*. Park Chan-Wook. (2016) Moho Film & Yong Film.



Figure 10: Fujiwara draws tiny portraits of Sookhee. *The Handmaiden*. Park Chan-Wook. (2016) Moho Film & Yong Film.



Figure 11: Fujiwara's portrait of Sookhee in Hideko's locket. *The Handmaiden*. Park Chan-Wook. (2016) Moho Film & Yong Film.



Figure 12: Sookhee destroys Kouzuki's library. *The Handmaiden*. Park Chan-Wook. (2016) Moho Film & Yong Film.



Figure 13: Sookhee beheads the snake statue at the entrance of Kouzuki's library. *The Handmaiden*. Park Chan-Wook. (2016) Moho Film & Yong Film.

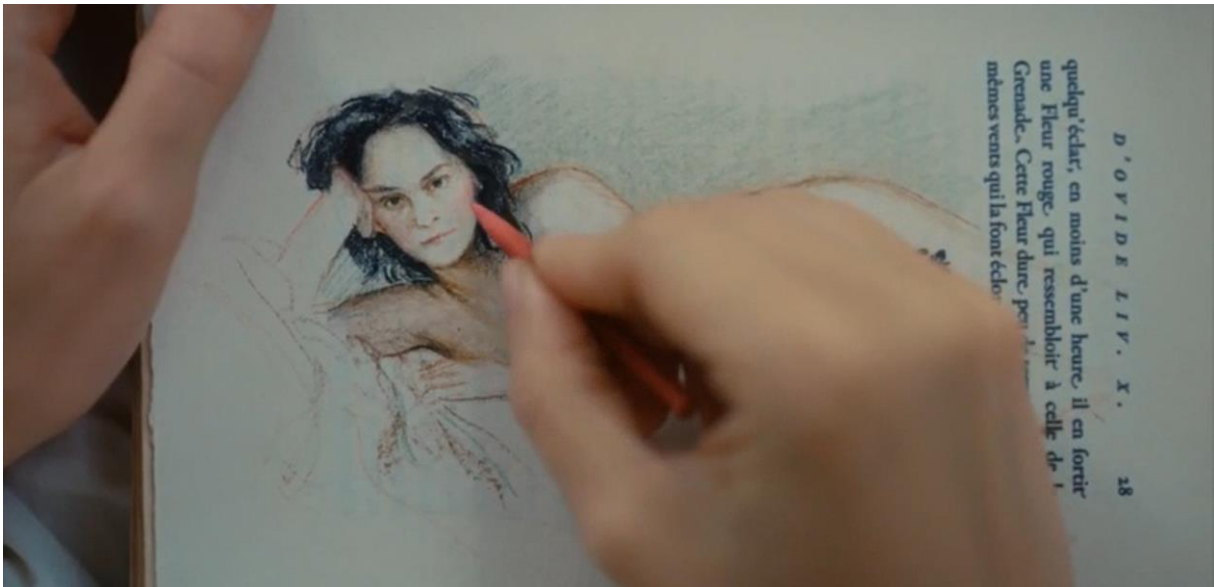


Figure 14: Marianne's self-portrait. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. Céline Sciamma. (2019) Lilies Films.



Figure 15: Marianne accidentally sets the unfinished painting of Héloïse on fire. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. Céline Sciamma. (2019) Lilies Films.



Figure 16: Marianne destroys her painting. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. Céline Sciamma. (2019) Lilies Films.



Figure 17: Some of Marianne's sketches of Héloïse. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. Céline Sciamma. (2019) Lilies Films.



Figure 18: Marianne uses herself as an anatomical reference. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. Céline Sciamma. (2019) Lilies Films.



Figure 19: Héloïse poses with a mirror for Marianne's self-portrait. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. Céline Sciamma. (2019) Lilies Films.



Figure 20: Marianne's apparition: Héloïse in her wedding dress. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. Céline Sciamma. (2019) Lilies Films.



Figure 21: Héloïse in her wedding dress tells Marianne to turn around. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. Céline Sciamma. (2019) Lilies Films.



Figure 22: The portrait of Héloïse in an art gallery. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. Céline Sciamma. (2019) Lilies Films.