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Abstract

This essay analyzes the narrative and visual tools that the Korean director, Park Chan-Wook deploys in his film that aim to dismantle this hegemonic gaze and its associated discourse by using Lacan's visual theory, Laura Mulvey's concept of visual pleasure and Kaja Silverman's approach of voice as element of masculine domination. On the other hand, it will analyze how the female subject is able to challenge the traditional phonic space in which they have been limited to a mere body element that anchors them to a passive positioning, resisting the normative relationship between female voice / body through which the woman is excluded from the ability to narrate her own story.

Keywords: gaze; voice; Park Chan-Wook; *The Handmaiden*; Korean cinema; body



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Javier Zapara Claveria

Introduction

In 1998, critical theorist Kaja Silverman published one of her most famous works *The acoustic mirror: The female voice in psychoanalysis and cinema*, which explores the concept of “female voice” in Western cinematography. For Silverman (1988), masculine hegemony is not manifested only through the gaze (where the masculine subject is the observer and the feminine is the observed subject) but also through the voice, which plays a similar role in the construction of this hierarchy of genders (p.34). This does not mean that there are no female voices within the film production but that these voices are relegated to subordinate positions. According to Silverman, the biggest difference in the appearance of female and male voices in the narration of a film is the place from which they are enunciated. The voiceover would be a significant example of this differentiation. The male voice has the privilege of appropriating a disembodied space where the narrative subject is above the story. Therefore, he not only becomes an omnipresent witness of the *syuzhet*, but also is granted the ability to materialize what is verbalized, ultimately rendering him capable of controlling all elements of the story.

At the end of the film *The Handmaiden* (2016) the character of Count Fujiwara, one of the two male characters in the film, complacently states that despite his imminent death, he will at least die with his phallus intact. This final sequence of footage in the film brings together a large part of the problematic that revolves around Park Chan Wook's filmography: the construction of the masculine desire through the male gaze and the fetishization of the female subject as a method of domination and suppression of oedipal trauma.

In this essay I intend to analyze the narrative and visual tools that the Korean director deploys in his film that aim to dismantle this hegemonic gaze and its associated discourse by using Lacan's visual theory, Laura Mulvey's concept of visual pleasure and Kaja Silverman's approach of voice as element of masculine domination. On the other hand, I will analyze how the female subject is able to challenge the traditional phonic space in which they have been limited to a mere body element that anchors them to a passive positioning, resisting the normative relationship between female voice / body through which the woman is excluded from the ability to narrate her own story.

This female sonority can be appreciated in the first sequence in the movie: In a Korean village occupied by the Japanese imperial army, a young woman stands in the middle of a muddy street under the clatter of heavy rain while holding a baby in her arms. The background sound is a chaotic mixture of rain, the crying of several babies and the cries of children playing while running away from the Japanese troops. Although the voiceover has not yet manifested, we observe how the sound mark leaves a deep sensory imprint that appeals directly to corporeality.

The girl that emerges as a focus of the sequence is Sook-hee, a thief from the city's underworld who lives with a group of burglars who are dedicated to counterfeiting coins, pieces of art and selling orphan children to wealthy Japanese families. The owner of this band, a man whose identity will be hidden under the name of "the Count", has convinced Sook-hee to work as a maid of Lady Hideko, a Japanese noble who owns an immense fortune but who lives in confined conditions in an eclectic Japanese-Victorian style mansion under the strict rules of her domineering uncle.

The Count's plan is to make Sook-hee convince Lady Hideko to marry him, and then lock her in a mental sanatorium and divide her fortune. After a sequence in which we see the first night of Sook-hee (now forced to use the Japanese name Tamako) in Hideko's mansion, the film offers a flashback to her hometown. In this sequence, we hear Sook-hee's voiceover for the first time, narrating her life as a thief. Sook-hee's voice is delimited by a fixed corporeality on the physical subject when the figure of the actress appears on the screen. This idea is also reaffirmed when we see that the sound frame of the scene is configured by the sound of the weeping of a multitude of babies, creating a direct relation between female corporeality and its maternal identification. This sequence connects with the idea of Silverman (1988), who states that:

The female voice must be sequestered (...) within the heart of the diegesis, so far from the site of enunciation as to be beyond articulation or meaning. It must occupy an "unthinkable point in the interior of thought" an "inexpressible [point] at the interior of the enunciation," an "unrepresentable [point] at the interior of representation." There is, of course, only one group of sounds capable of conforming precisely to these requirements-those emitted by a newborn baby. This, then, is the vocal position where the female subject is called upon to occupy whenever (in film or in theory) she is identified with noise, babble, or the cry (pp. 77-78).

In the second part of the film, narrated from Lady Hideko's perspective, we observe the same patterns, in which the voice of the female subject has concomitance with a specific body. In the first scenes, we see Lady Hideko when she was a young girl that recently arrived in Korea. This sequence is connected to the end of the first part by establishing an acoustic nexus that links the screams of Sook-hee (when it is revealed that she has been betrayed, apparently, by Hideko and she is going to be locked up in an asylum) and the cries of Lady Hideko due to the physical abuses from her uncle. In this scene, Hideko is beaten by her uncle for having dared to talk back to him,

and he punishes her by introducing a metal bead in her mouth while hitting her knuckles with three other beads. In both scenes, we observe that the feminine voice resonates stridently, and the physical subjects of its enunciation are confined and punished.



Figure 1

The first time we hear the voice-over of Lady Hideko, she narrates the traumatic event of her aunt's suicide who had been forced, for years, to read from pornographic book for nobles and rich men. Although we attend Hideko's childhood events, the narration is constructed from the present (or the future) using an acousmatic narrative. However, this temporal distancing between the present subject and the past subject does not imply, at first glance, any change in the paradigm of the confinement of the female voice in the traditional filmic narrative since there is still a correlation between the female sound and the body. In addition, as in the case of Sook-hee with the babies, there is an attempt to identify the feminine and motherhood by showing the young Hideko carrying a doll in her arms.

Is, therefore, Park Chan Wook reproducing the voice strategies from the traditional western male cinema? If we restrict our analysis to Silverman's perspective, we might fall into the error of thinking that the mere absence of a female voice-over, disembodied and incapable of creating subjectivities for the spectator, is enough to affirmatively answer to this question. However, strategies of feminist resistance exist beyond taking over the space of the omniscient narrator. As Ana Forcinito (2013) points out very aptly:

Silverman's approach resides in the possibilities of transgression of the sound-body desynchronization, that is, the de-corporealization of the voice so that voice can be resituated (voiceover) and resignified as transcendent. However, there are instances of the voice, connected to the body of that voice, and repeating the norms of language and grammar that transgress them when expressing precisely the convulsions of the voice that tries to enter the chain of meanings of the paternal norm (p. 34).¹

These "instances of the voice" can be found in *The Handmaiden* through the empowerment of narrative discourses by its female protagonists. If we look at the way in which the voice-overs guide us through the story, we find that despite of being a voice embodied in a physical subject, the female narrators can breach the symbolic order established by the patriarchal system. "*You think I'm Tamako, a poor Korean handmaiden. But my real name's Nam Sookee. Raised by Miss Boksun, top purveyor of stolen goods. I was able at age five to tell a real coin from a fake*"

Sook-Hee appeals to a singular "you" using the pronoun 당신 은 (dangsin), that traditionally had been used to express "you" in a cordial manner, and that today is practically restricted in conversations where there is a high level of trust and affection, mainly among the members of a marriage. However, the use 당신 은 (dangsin) in oral language can also suppose a communicative strategy to express a clear degree of hostility towards the receiver. The use of this pronoun and a

certain contemptuous tone mark a clear distance between the narrator and the viewer, who experiences a direct allusion and rebuking.

This strategy is part of a fractalization process and the articulation of the story in *mise en abyme*, which will not be revealed (and even then, only partially) until the end of the first part, a moment in which we discover the trap that is laid under the narrative. But in this first part Sook-hee is presented as a diegetic narrator, that is, a narrator who is part of the story (homodiegetic) and, through this function, the viewer is allowed to enter into her subjectivity. With this idea, I intend to demonstrate how Park Chan Wook very consciously subverts the classic strategies of visual domination in the western male cinema as a way of disarticulating these practices.



Figure 2: While the male gaze is hierarchically articulated, the female gaze is represented obliquely throughout the film.

But Returning to Sook-hee’s voice from now, we perceive that the next time she articulates the voice-over, we are witnessing a change of register in tone of speech. In this scene, Sook-hee is positioned behind a large window looking at the painting classes that the Count teaches Hideko, and the voice-over begins to narrate while the viewer observes the scene from the same position in which Sook-hee stands. *“The lady sits, shy and trembling. The gentleman is persistent. The perceptive maid has stepped out for a moment. All is well, Sook-hee. Everyone is performing their roles so damned well.”*

The monologue is violently interrupted when the maid, hidden behind the windows, spots the Count obscenely touching Hideko on her thighs while she tries to get away from him,

demonstrating an openly hostile reaction. This interruption in the monologue is articulated by a strong verbal outburst. It is at this moment when the internal conflict of Sook-hee explodes, and she must wrestle between what she wants to do to be free (by deceiving Hideko) or recognize that she is in love with her and dismantle the plan. The use of this aggressive vocabulary coincides with the moment in which Sook-hee interrupts the scene to stop the sexual abuses of the Count. To this end, she passes through the main door of the house, which is strictly forbidden for the use of the maids. We see therefore that this verbal disruption in the narrative that paralyzes what “must happen” for the sake of the plan coincides with a physical action indicating that Sook-hee is not only capable of subverting the roles established by the Count, but also able to manipulate the narrative against the viewer.

In the next scene, we hear the voiceover of Sook-hee when she catches Hideko and the Count being affectionate with each other (the viewer still does not know this is a charade). As in the previous sequence, the voice no longer seems to address the viewer and continues being an internal monologue. However, the voice enunciated at this time reveals that the maid returns to the original plan and tries to justify her deception towards Hideko due to her affair with the Count. *“I need to think. I need to become rich, sail off a distant harbor, eat food I scarcely recognize, but my fill of glittering baubles, and... not think of Hideko. Never think of Hideko.”*

Despite Sook-hee’s anger, the sequence ends with the two female protagonists having sex. This awakening of lesbian sexuality for both supposes a great level of empowerment through the exploration of their bodies and their queer performativity and implies a point of inflection in the narrative since from this point, Sook-hee makes the spectator believe that she is continuing with the Count’s plan to marry Hideko, despite the fact that she is in love with her.

“In the end, Hideko accepted the proposal provided that I come to Japan too. The Count, after feigning annoyance for a bit, nodded his head. On the day her Uncle left to visit his mine, the Count pretended to go back to Japan, and hid nearby.”

As we will see later, this only supposes a strategy of concealment since from the sex scene the two female protagonists conspire on two levels: intra-diegetically (against the Count and against the uncle of Hideko) and extra-diegetically (against the spectator). To prevent the viewer from discovering that they are allies in the plot, Sook-Hee’s voice-over leaves the monologue to speak directly to us again. *“You thought Hideko a lamb. Lamb, my arse. I tell you, right from the start, Mis Izumi Hideko... had always been a rotten bitch.”*

I have already pointed out the acoustic connection between this sequence and the beginning of the second part (told from Hideko’s perspective) and I consider that this is a small clue about the alliance between the women. However, the intentional lack of information provided within the narrative for the viewer renders it practically impossible to figure out. In the same way, the use of the adjective “rotten bitch” by Sook-hee to define Hideko discourages the viewer from admitting the possibility of collusion since it shows a (false) conflict between them. I believe that in this case, we actually witness a resignification of the term because when the spectators hear it, they immediately assume that it is associated with the betrayal suffered by Sook-hee, when, in fact, we are the ones being deceived.

For this reason, in the second part that is narrated from the perspective of Hideko, the spectators assume (again) that what they are going to hear and see is real, since the conflict (the supposed betrayal of Hideko towards Sook-hee) has been revealed to them. In this part, the voice plays an even more important role than in the first, not only at an extra-diegetic level but also in acquiring great relevance for the internal development of the story. We discover that Hideko, since

she was a girl, has been trained to read erotic books in order to stimulate the sexual fantasies of the male audience that attended these evening events organized by her uncle, who was among the rich and powerful class of Korea and Japan. These books are housed in an extensive library that Hideko's uncle keeps closed and only allows men to access. Hideko and her aunt are the only women allowed to enter this space, and solely with the purpose of performativizing these books through a sexualized reading for the enjoyment of the attendees. Although the none of the titles of these books are ever mentioned, in one of these performances, Hideko's uncle declares that the text chosen that night belongs to the style of the Marquis de Sade. This shows us that the criticism towards the masculine domination model is not only centered in the Japanese Imperial context in Korea but is also understood as an historical articulation sustained primarily through the means of cultural production, in this case, literature.

Since she was a child, Hideko has been instructed to read these books following strict rules of diction imposed by her uncle so that her voice satisfies the listeners of the narrations. The fact that Hideko has access to these books, and therefore access to the dominant male culture, gives her a privileged space that must be disciplined to avoid the overflow of the female voice and therefore its empowerment. For this reason, the reading must follow strict codes of intonation and pronunciation, and the uncle is in charge of transmitting and imposing them. Before Hideko, her aunt was in charge of reading these books, so we must understand this fact as a symbol of the transmission of the legacy of male oppression through the voices of women themselves.



Figure 3: Female voice, male gaze.

The female voice generates a double effect of pleasure and terror in men: the sexual pleasure of the voice that narrates the sexual act and corporealizes it, but in which lies the threat of the castration of the masculine subject. In a very revealing sequence, we see Hideko's aunt teaching her the words and anatomy of the human body through a book with illustrations. At a certain moment Hideko must pronounce the name of the sexual organs and, in a gesture of complicity, aunt and niece cannot contain their laughter, and the uncle assaults them for it. The simple connection between sexuality and a small (and acoustic) gesture of female pleasure through laughter generates the repudiation of the dominant male element. In the subsequent sequence we see Hideko reading, for the first time, one of the erotic books that her uncle collects. However, her diction, ragged and lacking in sensuality, angers his uncle who reacts aggressively and reproaches her for sounding like a dog licking food. Then he forces her aunt to read so that Hideko can learn

from her. When the aunt begins to read, the scene intertwines with one of the reading sessions that the uncle organizes.

This reading, full of eroticism enjoyed by male assistants, contrasts with the gestural frigidity with which the aunt recites the novel (and is symbolized by the contrast between the warm interior of the room and the snow falling behind it). We see here the strong oppression that arises from the imprisonment of female sexuality and from the forms through which it is forced to performativize. This tension is finally resolved with the suicide of Hideko's aunt who decides to hang herself from a cherry tree. When we see her corpse hanging on the rope, Hideko's voice-over returns to the film:

“Everyone wanted to cut it down, but my uncle refused. He said this tree from Mountain Fuji had absorbed my aunt's soul. The servants whispered it was due to the tree's high cost, but I think my uncle was right. You can tell from the cherry blossoms, which turned brighter and bloomed longer.”

I consider relevant to dwell on the fact of suicide because I believe that it marks an essential turning point in understanding the subsequent development of events. The figure of the absent mother is a constant in both Hideko's and Sook-hee's lives. Both lost their mothers at very early ages and barely harbor memories of them (only partially in the case of Sook-hee). Even though Hideko's aunt can fulfill the role of mother, her premature death means, for both cases, the loss of the maternal referent and, from my perspective, the point of inflection that allows them to subsequently obtain their freedom. With this I do not intend to suggest that the maternal figure is an obstacle to the empowerment of the female subject, however in both cases the absent mother

reproduces the patterns that the sexist society expected of them and thus hinders access to new subversive subjectivities.

However, it is not only the absence that allows this empowerment; the suicide of Hideko's aunt represents a very radical final act of being able to take action upon her own body. At the end of the first part of the film, before the wedding between Hideko and the Count, we see how she and Sook-hee pass by the cherry tree, from which a rope hangs. The reason for this image is not revealed to the viewer from the perspective of Sook-hee despite, as will be seen later, that she did know the reasons (new evidence that the accusative narrator intentionally conceals information). It is not until the end of the second part that we discover that Hideko had tried to emulate her aunt by committing suicide in the same way. The rope in the tree serves, thus, as a node that connects both perspectives of history as an anamorphic mirror that restores the narrative deformation. The connection between mother-rope-suicide can be read through Deleuze's idea of *fold*, which holds the notion that each subject contains the world imperfectly and through which "subjectivity becomes an ongoing negotiation of things perceived, both consciously and unconsciously, within and outside the body." (Conley 2010, 114) It is the action of unfolding these folds that constitutes the subject and its different subjectivities. For Deleuze, the female is subjected to a system of representation based on rationalism and logocentrism (although this last one element is the central axis of this essay, the rationalist also appears retrospectively throughout the film, represented in its maximum instance in the medical institution of psychiatry) but there remains the possibility to decode and deterritorialize the flows of desire through modes of resistance against the heteronormative structure. The sexual encounter between Hideko and Sook-hee allows articulating this process of deterritorialization and subjectivization, which, in accordance with Deleuze's reading of Foucault (1988) "derived from power and knowledge without being dependent on them." (p. 101)

Hideko has acquired that knowledge through the books that her uncle forced her to read, however it is a knowledge stripped of power since she cannot articulate it because of her condition as a woman. However, it is the queer union with Sook-hee that allows both women to break from this confinement, on the one hand through the exploration of the body—and therefore a new way of expressing their subjectivity—and on the other, through the destruction of heteronormal and traditional patriarchal knowledge. This last act is carried out through the most powerful and cathartic scene of the movie. Once they confess their love, Hideko and Sook-hee decide to betray the Count and escape together, but first they destroy the entire library that contains all the erotic books that Hideko's uncle had collected. While they are tearing up the place volume by volume, we hear, for the last time, Hideko's voice-over: *"The daughter of a legendary thief, who sewed winter coats out of stolen purses. Herself a thief, pickpocket, swindler. The saviour who came to tear my life apart. My Tamako. My Sookee."*

Just at the end of these words, Sook-hee violently cuts off the figure of the serpent that guarded the entrance to the library, implying that the destruction of this phallic symbol means the end of the oppression of the heteropatriarchal *logos*. After this scene, the third part of the film begins where there is no voice over. It is not very clear if this part returns to the traditional male gaze to the film. We could understand it in this way since the spectator has been expelled from the female subjectivity of the two protagonists, having achieved their liberation from the spectator. The absence of voiceover reinforces the idea that the female voice is no longer confined and does not even look for empowerment since it has achieved the emancipation and the female characters are now beyond the reach of any subject that tries to impose a look upon them. We see, therefore, that in spite of the fact that the feminine voice never reaches the transcendence of the extradiegetic narrator, it becomes capable of confront the male voice through a strategy of concealment of the

narration by using an acousmatic narrator that is enacted retrospectively and is intentionally elusive.

The Maze of the Gaze

However, despite the importance of the voice, the central element around which all deconstruction of masculine narrative hegemony revolves is the gaze. As we can read in Jonathan Crary's essay (1990) *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, visuality and modes of seeing do not respond to a positivist nature but are a historical construction, the result of social, technological and ideological factors of a specific time and place. The emergence of different means of visual reproduction such as the camera obscura, the stereoscope and the phenakistoscope implied a new relationship between the subject (what he calls *observer*, and not viewer) and the image. The emergence of different means of visual reproduction such as stereoscope and the phenakistoscope involved a new relationship between the subject (what he calls observer and not viewer) and the image. The new techniques of projection deprived the physiological eye of its presumption of infallibility in its relation to reality and is now one more element in the construction of artificial images, unfolding a whole new paradigm that returns (perhaps from the baroque) to a problem based on "questions about the body and the operation of social power." (p. 3)

That is why it is during this crisis when a "more adaptable, autonomous, and productive observer was needed in both discourse and practice – to conform to new functions of the body and to a vast proliferation of indifferent and convertible signs and images. Modernization affected a deterritorialization and a revaluation of vision." (Crary, 1990, p. 49). The emergence of this subject capable of establishing a dialogical relationship with the visual object triggered a series of events

with the intention of making it manageable. This allocation of specific spaces creates docile and complacent subjects and determine positions in terms of class, race and gender. Along this line of thinking, Laura Mulvey has analyzed how western commercial cinema has developed forms of identification that connect the viewer with the male protagonists of the film through desire and the male gaze.

The magic of the Hollywood style at its best (and of the entire cinema, which fell within its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure. Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order. In the highly developed Hollywood cinema, it was only through these codes that the alienated subject, torn in his imaginary memory by a sense of loss, by the terror of potential lack in phantasy, came near to finding a glimpse of satisfaction: through its formal beauty and its play on his own formative obsessions. (8)

For Mulvey, the woman is defined as the filmic spectacle in itself when she becomes the object of desire of the masculine gaze. This look also generates a type of scopophilic pleasure that is articulated when the viewer has the ability to observe this object of desire without being seen, but without losing control of what he observes. It is from these dynamics that voyeurism arises as the action of the spectator to infiltrate within filmic narration as an “invisible guest.”

Park Chan Wook, who has stated on several occasions that his interest in film production began with Hitchcock, and who feels a deep admiration for *Vertigo*, uses in *The Handmaiden* the same voyeuristic strategies as his master. The film is a labyrinth of gazes, where the protagonists are observed and observers at the same time but though we attend shots and sequences that closely resemble Hitchcock’s scopophilic cinema, the Korean director uses these strategies to subvert the

traditional codes of fetishization of the female subject. In Hitchcock's cinema, there is a direct identification between what the protagonist sees and what the audience sees. In *The Handmaiden*, although we are still "the invisible guest," these strategies are not hidden but are revealed to create a split between the viewer (either male or female but operating with the male gaze) and the female object. Voyeurism and fetishization are mechanisms through which men can face the threat that women represent, in Freudian terms, as an element of castration and absence.

In Park Chan Wook's film, the viewer is displaced to an unstable position where they are self-conscious of intruding upon the narrative. In several shots, we see how the camera is placed behind the action, usually behind the female characters and using the handheld camera technique. This ambivalent procedure maintains the female characters in a viewable position yet sets the spectator in a position of voyeurism that is stripped of the domination usually linked to it. The camera (and therefore the gaze) is able to penetrate the private places where the female subject is, but is forced to be hidden, manifesting the odd nature of its presence.

As Silverman and Ann Kaplan point out through a Freudian analysis of the image, along with voyeurism, fetishism is the other form of male domination through the gaze that aims to ward off the threat of castration posed by the mere presence of the woman on stage. To overcome this stage of fetishization, Park Chan Wook aligns the viewer with the feminine look and only through this perspective is it possible to fit together the fragmented pieces of the narrative. The film is divided into three parts; in the first, we adopt the point of view of Sook-hee, while in the second, the point of view of Lady Hideko, and finally in the third, both the acoustic narration and the female gaze disappear. I will focus on the first two parts in order to then be able to respond to the sudden change in the last one.

The uses of different points of view is not a particularly new strategy in cinema. However, in *The Handmaiden* the formulation of an asymmetric narrative acquires a greater transcendence when we see the dissociation that exists between what is represented and what is narrated. Unlike the literary narrative, in the audiovisual always serves as a representation, even if it is the representation of a narrator telling a story. In both Sook-hee and Lady Hideko's point of view, we witness the superimposition of (acousmatic) narration over the visual representation. If, as we saw earlier, the acousmatic enunciation responds to a strategy of feminine empowerment; does the same thing happen with the image?

Regardless of the point of view in which we find ourselves, we run into certain limits in knowing the history in its entirety. This is not only due to the borders of subjectivity but also to a concealment strategy imposed unknowingly upon us by the protagonists. We must bear in mind that they tell the story from a moment after the events, and therefore everything that is displayed on the screen is merely what they want us to see. It is for this reason that identification with the female perspective is the only way we can have access to sequences of intimate scenes.



Figure 4: In the film, the scopophilic gaze is reappropriated by the female characters.

In the first part, we started the story thinking that everything is a plan between the Count and Sook-
hee to fool Hideko and keep her money; however, at the end of this part we discovered that those
who are really in cahoots are Lady Hideko and the Count. For this reason, we began the second
part from the perspective of Hideko, thinking that this twist returns us to a position of control over
recent reveals and events, and that thanks to Hideko we have obtained the necessary pieces to
continue our assembly of the plot.

However, at the end of the second part we find out that it was the two female characters who were allies and everything was a ploy to get rid of the Count and the uncle. This resolution is only reached when the two women are able to confess their love (and their treachery) to each other and openly acknowledge their position of domination by man and decide to transform themselves from passive objects to active agents. The union of Hideko and Sook-hee implies that the spectator must ally with the queer perspective of a lesbian relationship to solve the anamorphisms of the distorted story.

In the third part, as with the voice, the female point of view also disappears to return to a traditional form of visual representation. I think with this strange return to the male gaze, Park Chan Wook tries to make clear the differences between the traditional mechanisms in contrast to the subversive forms that he presents in the first two parts of the film, with the aim of making the viewer aware of this strategy and therefore understand the coercive mechanisms of the gaze. In short, he takes the observer from his place of privilege and forces him to be involved in alternative ways of looking.

The last part, lacking a subjective point of view is clear from all complex visual strategies that the film had provided to us. The spectators are no longer part of the feminine subjectivity and now must decide if they accept the masculine gaze revealed before them. However, despite opting for the return of the male look, Hideko and Sook-hee have escaped control of this and we can only see their victory through the symbolic plane (the full moon, the perfect geometrical shapes that the feminine bodies form) but never again from the optical plane.

I consider that, with this operation, Park Chan Wook tries to warn the spectator that he is aware of his own narrative and epistemic limits when approaching the female question from a privileged

position of male director-observer. My interpretation is that the Count represents part of the internal conflict of the director since this is a character that manipulates two women to play submissive roles at his will. The director somehow, incarnates the figure of the Count and in some way the film is his way of redeeming himself from the filmography tradition to which he belongs. Within the movie, the Count also achieves a certain degree of redemption by dying under his own conditions, getting the viewer to take some pity on him and turning, ultimately, Hideko's uncle into the true antagonist of the movie. I am aware of the problem that arises from the exposure of the female body and the sexual scenes, which seem to satisfy more the erotic fantasy of heteronormativity about lesbian sex. The justification that the sexuality of the female protagonists follows a heteronormative pattern can be partially solved by the fact that everything that Hideko knows about it was learned from the (heteropatriarchal) books that her uncle forced her to read. I consider, however, that this does not completely settle the problem; despite the director's efforts to expose new forms of visibility to express queer subjectivities within the screen, it seems that he is not capable in the same way of finding formulas to performatize these bodies in the sex scenes, and it seems that this is condemned to be a voyeuristic object for the viewer.

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