



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Games of love and lust: Performance, masquerade and trauma in *Lust, Caution* and *The Handmaiden*

Laine, T.

**DOI**

[10.1386/ac\\_00064\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ac_00064_1)

**Publication date**

2023

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Asian Cinema

**License**

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (<https://www.openaccess.nl/en/policies/open-access-in-dutch-copyright-law-taverne-amendment>)

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Laine, T. (2023). Games of love and lust: Performance, masquerade and trauma in *Lust, Caution* and *The Handmaiden*. *Asian Cinema*, 34(1), 81-101.  
[https://doi.org/10.1386/ac\\_00064\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ac_00064_1)

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

*UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)*

Asian Cinema  
Volume 34 Number 1

© 2023 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. [https://doi.org/10.1386/ac\\_00064\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ac_00064_1)

Received 30 December 2021; Accepted 11 May 2022

**TARJA LAINE**

University of Amsterdam

# Games of love and lust: Performance, masquerade and trauma in *Lust, Caution* and *The Handmaiden*

## ABSTRACT

*This article analyses Ang Lee's Lust, Caution (2007) and Park Chan-Wook's The Handmaiden (2016) as melodramas which foreground trauma as a dead-lock of identity. In both films, trauma exposes cultural and social consequences of national betrayal and colonial hierarchies, drawing our attention to politically charged predicament of suspended agency. At the same time, in both Lust, Caution and The Handmaiden, trauma as the 'affective bearing' also becomes significant with regard to how the spectator understands the expressed, cinematic world. This affective bearing is not a quality 'attached' to the film externally, but it is immanent to its aesthetic-expressive specificity which evokes direct emotional engagement in the spectator. The trauma examined in this article in both Lust, Caution and The Handmaiden bears less resemblance to attempts of representing national traumas than to matters of affective intensities experienced and understood organically from within the cinematic experience. This focus on trauma makes both films universally accessible insofar as it demonstrates not only what cinema can represent, but also what cinema can do: by means of its affective bearing a film can directly engage the spectators' emotion in a way that alters their cinematic experience.*

## KEYWORDS

Ang Lee  
Park Chan-Wook  
emotions  
affect  
cinematic experience  
paradox of love  
cinema and trauma

Delivered by Intellect to:

UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM (amsterdamnl)

IP: 146.50.145.5

On: Mon, 07 Aug 2023 11:39:24

[www.intellectbooks.com](http://www.intellectbooks.com) 81

This article presents an analysis of Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* (2007) and Park Chan-Wook's *The Handmaiden* (2016), both situated against the backdrop of the Japanese occupation in South East Asia. Even though both films are generic hybrids for mixing erotic period drama with psychological mind-game thriller, they can also be considered melodramas as they consist of oppositions as good/evil, pure/impure, and loyalty/disloyalty in a highly stylized setting, with an emphasis on exaggerated emotion. In both films this emotion is foregrounded as trauma. It epitomizes a deadlock of identity that inhibits the protagonists' ability to influence the events in which they are acted upon. And in this way trauma exposes cultural and political consequences of national betrayal in *Lust, Caution*, and colonial hierarchies in *The Handmaiden*. Both films tell us something about the colonial history in East Asia through ethnic hierarchization, not only between the colonizers and the colonized, but also among the colonized themselves. The latter strategy involves the colonizer using one dominant subaltern ethnicity to rule another to enable colonial interests (Leung 2021).

While trauma is often associated with post-traumatic stress disorders, ethnic hierarchization can be a source of trauma as well, insofar as it exposes the subaltern to injustice, to discrimination, and to humiliating situations, which are experienced as an attack on the sense of self (Comas-Díaz et al. 2019: 2). In both *Lust, Caution* and *The Handmaiden* this ethnic hierarchization is marked by gendered class division. In *Lust, Caution* it favours the wealthy and mobile collaborationist male elite, which is able to traverse between the eastern and western zones of Shanghai. In *The Handmaiden*, those male characters who obscure their Korean identity through their lifestyle and pattern of consumption are at the top of the cultural hierarchy. In both films language highlights the colonial fluidity: while in *Lust, Caution* the ability to switch from Mandarin to Cantonese and from Shanghainese to Japanese denotes the shifting of power dynamics between characters, in *The Handmaiden* fluency in the Japanese language comes with increased authority and social control (Chen et al. 2009; Brzycki and Montgomery 2019). At the same time, in both films the female characters attempt to make themselves ethnically harmless in order to avoid further trauma, which would only seem to aggravate its effects.

*Lust, Caution* is largely situated in Shanghai, the cosmopolitan epicentre of Republican China from 1928 to 1949. The city was first under the rule of European imperialists, then seized from 1941 to 1945 by Japan, which had been invading China since 1937. In post-war China, the period of Japanese Occupation was denounced as a national disgrace and cultural treason which, according to Poshek Fu, reduces the Occupation to a binary, 'moralized battleground between resistance and collaboration' by means of 'melodramatic and stereotypical images' (Fu 1997: 67). By transforming such melodramatic images into affective-aesthetic elements of trauma for both the protagonists and the spectators alike, *Lust, Caution* transgresses the boundaries between loyalty and treachery, heroism and villainy, in a way that complicates binary moralism. Similarly, *The Handmaiden* is set during the colonization of Korea by Japan (1910–45), the period which is said to have introduced 'modernity' to the Koreans under the rule of their colonial master. According to Kelly Jeong, it is an emotionally charged question whether Japan indeed introduced modernity into Korea through colonization, since it identifies Japan as the active agent and Korea as the passive recipient in the process (Jeong 2011: 1). By establishing trauma within the very fabric of colonial hierarchy in the film, *The Handmaiden* not only registers the complex historical relations between

Delivered by Intellect to:

UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM (amsterdamnl)

IP: 146.50.145.5

On: Mon, 07 Aug 2023 11:39:24

South Korea and Japan, but it also enables a possibility for a sense of renewal through the developing relationship of the main protagonists.

Both films are based on literary works and have been studied substantially as film adaptations. *Lust, Caution* has its origin in Eileen Chang's 1979 novella by the same title. Much scholarly work has investigated the differences between the complete film and the abridged version released in China, in which mainly images of suffering in wartime Shanghai had been significantly reduced, along with the sex scenes between the two protagonists. In his comparative study, Robert Chi observes that in the uncut version of *Lust, Caution* the sex scenes display much more than in Chang's novella. Even more interesting is that a subtle change in the dialogue 'holds open a distinct possibility that [Wong] does not change her mind [...]. In this latter interpretation, Wang is a failed heroine, but at least she is not a traitor' (Chi 2009: 180). Therefore, according to Chi, this kind of alteration would fit into the context of the 'binary battleground' between Chinese historical past and its present-day morals. Apart from the descriptions of sexual encounters, Chang's original story is also largely void of sentimental and romantic elements. This includes a change in the role of Yee who in the novella is 'cold and cautious throughout', but much more vulnerable in Lee's film (Lee 2008: 234, 237). According to Hsiao-hung Chang, while this 'attractification' of the villainous traitor – enhanced by actor Tony Leung as the casting choice – inspired an extremely negative reception of the film in mainland China, it can also be seen as a form of deterritorialization of history that prevents nationalistic readings of the film (Chang 2009: 46).

*The Handmaiden*, on the other hand, is inspired by Sarah Waters' gothic crime novel *The Fingersmith* (2002), which is set in Britain during the reign of Queen Victoria. Similarly to *Lust, Caution*, *The Handmaiden* contains sexually explicit scenes which appear to be staged for the male gaze, and which have invoked comparison to those in *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (2013). A lesbian love story also directed by a cis male filmmaker, *Blue is The Warmest Color* sparked controversy not only by its framing of female bodies with voyeuristic closeness, but also by the exploitative shooting conditions which the lead actresses were subjected to (Slern 2017). To avoid at least some of the problems that arise when a male filmmaker represents queer female sexuality, Park Chan-wook explained in an interview with *The Scotsman* (2017) that the trope of male gaze was considered already at the scriptwriting stage, that feedback was sought from the actresses to make sure they were comfortable performing the sex scenes, and that men were banned from the set while the camera was operated remotely. Furthermore, even though the themes of gaze and sexual desire in *The Handmaiden* may be built around traumatic, patriarchal structures, they can also become transformative, harbouring the potential of challenging and transgressing these very same structures. Sarah Waters herself would seem to agree with this reading when she formulated her artistic blessing to the film's sex scenes as follows: 'although [the film] portrays women trapped by male structures and trapped within the limits of male-authored text [it also] shows them escaping from those structures or using them [...] for their own pleasure' (Vibhakar 2021: n.pag.).

Trauma, then, is the thematic core in both films, rooted in colonial histories and drawing our attention to a politically charged predicament of suspended agency. At the same time, in both *Lust, Caution* and *The Handmaiden*, trauma as the 'affective bearing' (Ngai 2005: 43) is also significant as regards the spectators' understanding of the expressed, cinematic world. This affective

bearing is not a quality 'attached' to the film externally, but it is immanent to its aesthetic-expressive specificity which evokes direct emotional engagement in the spectator. In the context of melodrama, Linda Williams has argued that this genre does not merely represent but even enacts trauma by means of its spatio-temporal organization, which directly resonates with the spectators' affective sensitivities. Williams has characterized the affective quality of this genre by the notion of temporality of regret, since melodramatic fantasies are 'always tinged with melancholy of loss [...] the encounters always take place too late, on death beds or over coffins' (Williams 1991: 11). This feeling of 'too late' links melodrama to trauma insofar as traumatic experiences consist of out-of-joint feeling of being cut off from the flow of time resulting from an act of dissociation by which people distance themselves from pain. Such feeling is strongly conveyed in the last shot of *Lust, Caution* for instance, which finds its male protagonist all alone, sitting on his dead mistress's bed with his back towards the camera. Only the empty doorway is staring at him from the left side of the frame, while his frontal image is reflected in a mirror on the right. The image composition of the shot suggests a world one cannot fully inhabit after the loss of a loved one – or even the displacement of self from the physical world to inside the mirror, in the face of such traumatic loss.

When I examine trauma in this article in both *Lust, Caution* and *The Handmaiden*, I focus less on the representation of national traumas than on matters of affective intensity experienced and understood organically from within the cinematic experience. This focus on trauma makes both films universally accessible insofar as it not only demonstrates what cinema is able to represent, but also what cinema can do. It is by means of its affective bearing that film can directly engage the spectators' emotion in a way that alters their cinematic experience. First, I shall argue that *Lust, Caution* establishes trauma as its affective quality by giving aesthetic expression to 'love's paradoxes' as theorized by Niklas Luhmann. The film draws our attention to performance as a failed attempt to separate between the embodied self that is experiencing an emotion, and the impersonated self that is performing emotion, which becomes a source of trauma in the film. Secondly, in *The Handmaiden* trauma is borne out by abject masculinity as a constraint for female sexual desire. In this film it is the notion of masquerade that functions as an aesthetic-affective strategy for the escape from trauma and the reclaiming of self-determined agency. While this last prospect is missing from *Lust, Caution*, I shall show that the ending of *The Handmaiden* suggests the possibility of overcoming trauma through a relationship with an 'addressable other' (Laub 1992: 68) who can annihilate the traumatic story.

### LOVE'S PARADOXES: LUST, CAUTION

*Lust, Caution* revolves around Wong, a young woman who in 1938 flees from Shanghai to Hong Kong, where she is invited to join a patriotic theatre group. Soon after, the group's leader Kuang wants to use her talents as an actor to seduce Yee, a collaborationist of Wang Jingwei's puppet regime, in order to get him assassinated. The plan ends in disaster and Wong runs away. Three years later in Shanghai, Wang again encounters Kuang, now an official member of the Chinese resistance, who enlists her into a renewed assassination plan to kill Yee. This time Wang's advances to become Yee's mistress are reciprocated, and they embark on an intense relationship. At some point Yee arranges an appointment in a jewellery store, where Wong is invited to select a rare

Delivered by Intellect to:

UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM (amsterdamnl)

IP: 146.50.145.5

On: Mon, 07 Aug 2023 11:39:24

diamond to be mounted on a ring, the purchase of which provides the resistance with an opportunity to get at Yee without his bodyguards. But when Wong puts on the ring, she gets overwhelmed by emotion and gently urges Yee to flee, who then swiftly escapes the scene of the attempted assassination. Wong and Kuang are captured and executed on the edge of a ravine, and the film ends with a shot of Yee sitting on Wong's empty bed, emotionally in turmoil.

The way in which the film handles the affective tension between Wong, Yee and Kuang challenges the nationalist discourse of loyalty and betrayal in the context of the Japanese occupation of Shanghai. From the perspective of nationalistic passion, Wong's failed performance renders her a collaborationist herself, allowing her emotion to distract her from her love for the nation, which makes 'the weak-willed Wong [...] an insult to Chinese women and therefore an insult to China itself' (Chi 2009: 181). However, the affective quality of the scene that follows the climactic moment in the jewellery store, does not at all seem to suggest that Wong is victim of her emotion, but that she voluntarily submits to it. In contrast to the urgency accompanying Yee's dramatic exit, the ensuing sequence is noticeably calm and pensive, implying that Wong's decision to save Yee was not taken under pressure of 'hot' emotion, but is based on her emotional 'cool', assisted by thoughtful reflection and free will. This is tangibly captured by the camera following Wong, abruptly stripped of her cover identity, as she strolls the streets glancing at the shop windows. As she calls a rickshaw to take her away, a POV shot of a wildly spinning pinwheel could be seen as a visual manifestation of Wong's emotions, while her appearance remains strangely ambiguous. The melancholy score accompanying the rickshaw ride through the Shanghai streets shifts the significance of the scene towards the emotion it communicates. When the rickshaw is halted by a road block the camera closes in on Wong's facial expression, who smiles sadly as though reminiscing a lost love while her hand, adorned by Yee's pink diamond ring, reaches for a suicide pill hidden in the collar of her coat. But the flashback with which the sequence ends is of Kuang inviting Wong to join the resistance squad, suggesting that Wong's thoughts are with Kuang right before she is captured. The calmness of the scene with Wong heading towards her death sentence issued by the enemy collaborator she was supposed to seduce cold-heartedly, conveys a sense of emotional dissonance. This dissonance offers an opportunity for reflection on the power of passion and the extent to which we voluntarily choose our emotions even when this choice does not allow us to take our lives in our own hands. Furthermore, it deconstructs the nationalist/traitor distinction in the hegemonic narrative by establishing trauma as its affective bearing. This renders the film into an exercise in cinematic ethics, orienting the spectators towards reflection upon the 'historical crisis in which both the traitor-predator and the patriot-victim are trapped' (Lee 2008: 233).

*Lust, Caution* opens with a flash forward in Japanese occupied Shanghai in 1942, at the headquarters of the Chinese collaborationist government. The first shot of the film is a close-up of a German Shepherd pulling off a sad look, which evokes contradictory associations. On the one hand the breed carries the negative connotation of violence and aggression. On the other hand, the sad-faced dog conveys the sense of vulnerability, which we recognize from its expression. The sad-faced German Shepherd embodies emotional ambiguity, which becomes the affective blueprint throughout *Lust, Caution*. It becomes a dual metaphor of violence and fragility, suggesting that one's capacity of hurting others is intrinsically accompanied by one's own possibilities for suffering

and pain. The spectator, too, is invited to reflect on this duality represented by the German Shepherd's facial expression. From the very first shot *Lust, Caution* thus generates a narrative momentum the spectator is invited to invest into as the film starts to unfold in a setting that bathes in the cold, blueish hue, instilling a harsh, suspenseful mood. The scene is oddly void of diegetic sounds, and only the non-diegetic, elegant waltz can be heard on the sound track. The melody gives way to a diegetic Cole Porter tune on the radio, as the film crosscuts to an interior shot with a group of wealthy women about to play mah-jong. A series of close-ups frame the women's hands tightly as they are arranging the mah-jong tiles, rapidly switching from one camera angle to another as the game progresses. The camera stays focused on the hands while the women gossip, avoiding being aligned with the conversation. We know neither who these women are, nor what their relationship is. Yet the detached cinematography adds to the intrigue conveyed in the scene. Furthermore, the focus on the mah-jong game suggests that game-playing in the film extends to its central characters, in a situation where Yee is unknowingly played games with by Wong, who in turn herself gets caught up in her own game.

Then the film crosscuts with to a third location, which is the interior of a military prison. In a shot illuminated by dark chiaroscuro lighting, a male character approaches the camera situated behind the bars. In this shot, the chiaroscuro lighting together with the prison bars casting a shadow over the male character's face, implies dualism with regard to his persona, comparable to the sad-faced German Shepherd from the opening scene. Next, we follow this character leaving the prison with his bodyguards, passing the said German Shepherd, and arriving at the house where the women are still playing mah-jong. We find out that this character is Yee, as he starts exchanging meaningful glances with Wong, who is one of the players. While the dialogue stays on the level of gossip, the camera associates with the exchange of looks between Wong and Yee. By so doing, the camera does not only settle on the protagonists of the film, but it also articulates crucial information about their relationship, which most likely concerns illicit, forbidden love.

The opening sequence is intriguing in many ways. Through crosscutting it gives us access to a wide range of story information, while concealing the characters' intentions and motivations. Everything that is revealed is through implicit and subtle narrative hints, which renders the film's narrative premise intangible at first sight. This projects a major enigma onto the heart of *Lust, Caution*, already conveyed in its title, which combines primal emotion with prudent forethought, rendering lust and caution 'functions of each other' (scriptwriter James Schamus quoted in Lee 2008: 235). Furthermore, the opening establishes trauma as the narrative theme of the film in a way that raises a variety of paradoxes related to the concept of love. One of the paradoxes is what Niklas Luhmann calls the paradox of 'voluntary submission' in which the persons in love become the source of their own emotion. This inherent paradox of love enables a lover to become both the 'author' and the 'object' of their personal love story (Luhmann 1988: 166). Similarly, while a traumatic event might not actually be remembered, its remembrance is often acted out instead. Thus, in trauma a person can enact a traumatic memory, even without being consciously aware of this enactment (Freud 2003: 132).

Such a paradox of voluntary submission is epitomized in a later scene of sexual intimacy between Wong and Yee. In this remarkably intense scene the camera stays close to the action, almost caressing the characters' bodies as Yee forcefully embraces Wong, who also clings to him in return. Wong then looks

off-screen, where in the markedly blurry foreground there is a weapon visible, which has caught her attention. She grasps a pillow and covers Yee's eyes with it, as though in the heat of the moment, while the true purpose of this erotic gesture is to prevent him seeing the weapon. The scene ends with a close-up of Wong crying, which is an ambiguous image. On the one hand, Wong's emotion can be seen as self-disappointment, for not having had the nerve to grasp the gun and shoot Yee. On the other hand, her crying can be seen as a symptom of *jouissance*, the French term for both enjoyment and sexual orgasm. In Lacanian thinking, *jouissance* is a transgression of the Freudian pleasure principle, which nevertheless results in pain instead of in greater pleasure (Lacan 1997: 209). In this sense *jouissance* is linked to trauma insofar as both refer to a (bodily) experience beyond representation. Furthermore, both trauma and *jouissance* are characterized by the compulsion to replicate painful events, but without a relief from these events. Thus, Wong cries because the voluntary submission to her own emotion drives her to impulsive re-enactment of *jouissance*, a process in which trauma and *jouissance* reinforce one another in a feedback loop.

In the same scene the paradox of voluntary submission can also be found in the arrangement of bodies in the cinematic space, which suggests that both Wong and Yee can conquer each other by voluntarily submitting to the other. In this context the notion of 'resistance' combines two connotations pertaining to the central emotional conflict that Wong is facing. On the one hand, Wong has to 'resist' Yee in the sense of fighting against an enemy collaborator. On the other hand, Wong has to 'resist' Yee in the sense of safeguarding herself from her feelings for him, while at the same time she must voluntarily submit to her emotions in order not to be detected as a spy. In accordance with Luhmann's description, Wong is of necessity both the author and the object of the love story between herself and Yee, for otherwise she would be exposed as an agent of the resistance to the ubiquitously prying eyes. But even Wong's fatal choice of warning Yee must be seen as an act of voluntary submission insofar as her emotion is actively chosen. It does not appear as an uncontrollable possession she is subjected to, even though her emotion not only puts herself, but also the other members of the resistance group in a lethal position. According to Robert Solomon, choice is characteristic of the emotion of love itself. Love is not some torrent of passion by which one is swept into uncertain actions, but an active decision through which one puts oneself at risk by opening up to an unforeseeable future (Solomon 2006: 204, 2007: 199). This is why Wong's 'love decision' is linked to trauma: not only does its voluntary character render her the author-object of her own love story, but also the author-object of her trauma, not to mention that caused by the fate of the other members in her resistance squad.

Wong's trauma is enhanced by the paradoxical situation that she cannot voluntarily submit to her love feelings for Kuang, who reciprocates this emotion. On the one hand, Wong must actively volunteer submitting to her emotions towards Yee, which she rather would reject. On the other hand, she must consciously resist submission to her love for Kuang, which is mutually felt and reciprocated, but which can never actualize. Therefore, the relationship between Wong and Kuang epitomizes another paradox of love, which is that its permanence is to be found only in impermanence. The ideal of love dictates love to be an eternal oath, but love can only last for a limited amount of time, insofar as love has its own dynamics that constantly 'needs to change forms and continually devour something new. [...] Love destroys

itself [by dissolving] the characteristics which have lent wings to imagination and replaces it with familiarity' (Luhmann 1988: 71, 73). *Lust, Caution* seems to suggest that Wong and Kuang are able to keep their love constant because it does not lay claim to time: it has neither a beginning, nor an end, and it is free from the waxing and waning of affection which indicate that the end of love is in sight. This means that love between Wong and Kuang can only exist beyond the boundaries of temporality, in impermanence, that is, in and through death. Therefore, the aerial shot of the dark pit opening before them in the execution scene suggests that the 'essence' of their love can only be found in nothingness, beyond the framework of meaning.

## MIRROR, MIRROR

The 'semantics of intimacy' tells us that who we love ultimately determines what we are. But it is also true that as the importance of individual identity grew in one's life, 'the more improbable it became that one would encounter partners possessing the characteristics expected' (Luhmann 1988: 131). Consequently, 'generalized indicators of love, such as merit, beauty, or virtue are cast aside in favour of an increasing personalization of the principle which will make the improbable possible' (Luhmann 1988: 24). Thus, when the leader of the Chinese resistance tells Wong that she has succeeded where all the other female agents have failed, he suggests that she has achieved the probability of the improbable. This achievement is not due to her beauty or courage, but to her 'love performance', which not only requires voluntary submission to emotion, but also a (failed) attempt to separate the embodied self that is experiencing emotion, and the impersonated self that is performing emotion. At the same time, Wong's success in performing love is also the cause of her downfall: the goal of Wong's performance is to seduce Yee, but in the end the performance itself takes over as a constitutive fabric of her actions, in a way that 'offends the prudish masculinity and the compulsion for controlled harmony at the heart of Chinese political culture' (Donald 2010: 56).

Emphasis on the notion of performance throughout the film is the reason why mirror is an important recurring motif in *Lust, Caution*. However, the first 'mirror shot' is not of Wong but of Yee inspecting his appearance before he enters the room with the mah-jong playing women in the film's opening. It is through an oval mirror which enables his switching roles from a scrupulous counter-intelligence officer to a considerate husband and a passionate lover. At a later moment Wong performs a similar role switch when preparing to leave for the fated rendezvous at the jewellery store. In the safety of her room, she takes off the wedding ring from her imaginary marriage and takes out a trench coat – an archetypal signifier for a classic spy – while we witness the action through the reflection in a large dressing mirror. These two mirror shots reflect one another to some extent, suggesting that Wong and Yee are mirror images of each other and for each other, both operating from a false image. Both Wong and Yee attempt to charm the other by a façade, only to end up being deceived by their own emotions for each other, beaten at their own game. Both Wong and Yee are traumatized by each other, alternating between being subject and object of trauma in their reciprocal game of love.

This 'mirror structure' from the opening sequence is repeated with variations in several other scenes in the film. One such moment occurs after Wong has reinserted herself as 'Mrs Mai' into Mrs Yee's social circle in Shanghai. We witness Yee inspecting his reflection in the hallway mirror, but in this

shot his expression is noticeably distressed, while the mirror frame suggests the disintegration of his sense of self. His expression quickly brightens as he learns about Wong's presence, whom he subsequently visits in her room. An elegant image composition places Yee in the doorway to the left in the background of the image, looking at Wong who is centralized in the foreground, sitting on her bed and turning away from Yee, while a diagonally placed mirror reflects her image frontally towards the camera. In contrast to the previous, disintegrated mirror shot of Yee, in this shot he is the epitome of self-possession. Furthermore, the triangularity in the image composition expresses a staged relationship in which Yee's façade is drawn to the façade put up by Wong, while her 'authentic self' observes the 'drama of passion' as if through the mirror. At the same time their emotions are not counterfeit but genuine, which results in both Wong and Yee experiencing the inability to dissociate themselves from the roles they have been assigned to: Wong as a spy and an assassin employed by the Chinese nationalist regime, Yee as a torturer and an executioner for the Japanese-dominated puppet regime to which he belongs. This is why Wong's trauma is both caused by and related to Yee's trauma and vice versa, in a reciprocal cycle of hurting and being hurt that constitutes their affair.

This is how *Lust, Caution* dramatizes the paradox of increasing the probability of the improbable. The film shows what happens when two opposite sets of experience are forged together by mutual deception. Similarly, the scene of Wong and Yee's first lovemaking is partially shot through a mirrored headboard, suggesting that their love affair only exists in and through the impossibility of its occurrence. It exists in a mirror image, while its effects are not experienced in the abstract, impersonated body, but in the concrete, personal body. Furthermore, it is interesting that in this scene of their love-making the moment of Yee's climax is cut to a brief close-up of the familiar German Shepherd, which once more strengthens the association of this character with the canine complete. This associative circle is closed with the final close-up of Yee's facial expression, simultaneously animated with emotional pain and cold toughness. The affective bearing of this final shot thus resists its assimilation with a one-dimensional story of good versus evil in the context of the Japanese occupation of China. But it also communicates the traumatic realization that his lover's death made his survival possible, as Yee's life can only continue in the inevitability of Wong's death.

## IN THE MOOD

For an espionage thriller-melodrama, *Lust, Caution* is remarkably unassuming in its formal and stylistic organization, largely void of explicit violence. The scene in which Yee's subordinate Tsao is killed is one exception, which drastically changes the mood of the film. Tsao is a former acquaintance of Kuang, who has unwittingly helped to infiltrate Wong to the Yee household. Tsao discovers that Kuang and his mates are not who they claim to be, and he confronts the squad with the intention of blackmail. This scene starts off in a despondent mood, with the defeated resistance squad silently dismantling their headquarters. Wong steps outside onto the balcony, where birdsong and loud chirping of crickets prevent her from hearing Tsao's entering. The camera first stays with Wong as we notice through a windowpane how Tsao comes in as a blurry figure, then it throws Wong out of focus as she realizes what is going on, her fabricated identity fading away.

A violent, highly mobile scene follows, during which Kuang attempts to stab Tsao but only injures himself, and Tsao attempts to fight back bleeding all over the place. Towards the end of the scene Tsao falls down the stairs but is still alive. The scene comes to its conclusion when Kuang descends and breaks Tsao's neck, only to meet Wong's horrified gaze. She then quickly escapes into the night and the sequence fades into black. Many critics have argued that this scene is counterproductive to the stylistic and expressive intentions of the film (i.e. Purvis 2018). But this stylistic dissonance could also be epitomizing hidden trauma as the undercurrent of the film, unexpectedly surfacing in this scene. It exposes the unhealable wound that motivates the actions of the characters and incessantly returns to haunt them. This scene of violence is what Cathy Caruth describes as 'an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs' (1996: 5), expressing a gritty reality that has not yet been fully available to consciousness.

Yet *Lust, Caution* primarily functions through what Robert Sinnerbrink calls the aesthetics of mood, through affectively relevant 'mood-cues' which we apprehend as emotionally charged (2012: 148). In *Lust, Caution*, colour is among the most salient mood-cues and more specifically the colour blue, which is clearly the predominant hue in the film's *mise en scène*. The generic association of this blue hue is with contemporary thriller, where it often conveys a sense of gloomy coldness. By contrast, in *Lust, Caution* the emotional association of the blue is with melodrama and the haunting mood of regret. It reflects the always-elusive outcome of the desired event, which is why the film is best defined as a 'failed tragedy'. It confronts its characters with a tragic universe, but ultimately denies them any sense of resolution (Elsaesser 1994: 27). Such pathos of regret disturbs the sense of progress between past, present and future, similarly to traumatic experiences, which 'become freeze-framed into an eternal present in which one remains forever trapped [...] past becomes present, and future loses all meaning other than endless repetition' (Stolorow 2003: 159).

With this cinematic world imbued in the blue mood of regret, the scenes of Wong and Yee's sexual encounters are in striking contradiction. The first one takes place after Wong has casually hinted to Yee that his wife has given her a reprieve from mah-jong to go to the movies. Heavy rain weather gives Yee an excuse to have his driver pick up Wong, but instead of bringing her to the movie theatre, the driver drops her off in front of an apartment building, where Wong is supposed to wait for Yee. Not suspecting that Yee is already in the apartment, Wong goes to close a window in the room. She suddenly catches Yee's reflection in the windowpane and reacts with a jump scare – a premonition of the events to follow swiftly – after which she quickly regains her composure and carries out her performance. This is a silly game of seduction, which ends abruptly when Yee violently attacks Wong, hitting her with his belt buckle, and raping her.

At this point the camera moves outside, as if taking distance from the shocking events which we nevertheless witness from behind the window, in the pattering rain. The mood change in the scene is not only due to its disturbing action, but also to the disorderly mobile frame, and the lack of nondiegetic music, which renders the sounds of pattering rain and Wong's painful cries all the more pronounced. The scene ends with an extreme high angle shot of the room, where Yee observes Wong lying on the bed in an unresponsive state, while a ray of warm yellow light enters the scene diagonally from the right side of the image. From a nationalist perspective, the rape scene reproduces a

misogynist, clichéd trope in which a nation is symbolized by a woman, so that when Wong is raped the nation she represents has been invaded and violated too. From the perspective of colour design, the scene can be interpreted in terms of the film's title. The introduction of warm yellow – a complimentary colour to the previously dominating cool blue – symbolizes the dangerous lust which now has penetrated cautiousness. This is why Wong and Yée's other scenes of consenting sexual intercourse bathe in warm yellow light, contributing to the mood of emotional heat that engulfs both characters. But warm yellow can also be interpreted more abstractly as trauma penetrating the fabric of reality. Therefore, the affective-aesthetic tension that oscillates between lust and caution, love and trauma, also extends to the cinematic mood of the film as conveyed in its colour design. This is dynamically experienced as we engage with the film. Its complexity renders *Lust, Caution* a cinematic multilevel event that immerses the spectator through the logic of paradox which is simultaneously real and fabricated, imaginary and tangible, similar to the traumatic love between its protagonists, which is why the film defies readings based on nationalist and gender stereotypes.

### THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF LOVE: *THE HANDMAIDEN*

The three-part structure of *The Handmaiden* evokes an association with Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) consisting of multiple accounts of one event, each of which is presented to the spectator with equal degree of truthfulness. Its central character is Lady Hideko, a wealthy Japanese heiress confined to a mansion where her abusive Uncle Kouzuki forces her to read sadomasochistic pornography aloud to his aristocratic male clients, while dressed in a traditional geisha costume. Yet the first part of the film is told from the perspective of Sook-hee, a pickpocket hired to become Hideko's handmaiden by 'Count' Fujiwara, a Korean conman and art forger. His ploy is to marry Hideko and then to send her off to a psychiatric institution in order to seize her fortune. The setting of this power play is an isolated, richly decorated mansion, which combines two architectural styles, Victorian and Japanese. The Victorian elements not only function as a nod to the original novel by Waters, but they are also characteristic of Korean society at the time, as it was supposed to have been modernized by assimilating elements of British culture during Japanese rule in the late nineteenth century (Suwa 2019: 280).

The mansion functions as a microcosm of shifting colonial power dynamics, reflected in strategies of cultural appropriation and the use of language. The most powerful figure in the film is Uncle Kouzuki, who is Korean, but who has internalized the language and culture of the Japanese colonial power so profoundly that he has become a colonizer himself. However, this makes him vulnerable for Fujiwara's scheming, when the latter strategically uses Japanese to deceive Kouzuki into believing his double-crossing ploy. By contrast, the only main character who is Japanese by birth, Lady Hideko, prefers to speak Korean, as Japanese is the language of pornographic literature she is forced to read aloud by her uncle-in-law (Shin 2019: 5). The extent of her predicament is visually communicated through the omnipresent shoji screens, the Japanese sliding doors which separate the different sections of the mansion, and which consist of narrow vertically constructed stiles evoking an association with prison bars. A paradox, then, lies at the heart of *The Handmaiden*, as it is Hideko, though Japanese, who due to her age and gender is actually more than others entrapped in double structures of (cultural) colonization.

The film's opening sequence starts off with an establishing shot of Japanese soldiers storming down a rain-soaked alley chased by some bare-foot children. The scene is observed by Sook-hee who is holding a child in her arms, which she promptly hands over to Miss Boksun, the 'director' of her orphanage of thieves. With a noticeable gesture, Miss Boksun takes a green butterfly hairpin out of her hair and hands it over to Sook-hee as if in return. Next, we witness a car driving through a gorgeous landscape bathing in warm light, with Sook-hee inside closely examining the hairpin, while she is heading towards her destination. Shortly after having settled in her modest quarters, Sook-hee is awakened by Lady Hideko screaming in her sleep. She tells Sook-hee the story of her aunt who hanged herself from a branch of a cherry tree outside Hideko's window, the ghost of the aunt still haunting the mansion. The opening sequence ends with Sook-hee calming Hideko with spoonfuls of sake and a lullaby, which functions as a sound bridge to a flashback revealing Fujiwara's plan: how to use Sook-hee to persuade Hideko to fall in love with him.

Similarly to the opening of *Lust, Caution*, this sequence avoids explicit narration or character introduction. It can even be considered as a moment of unreliable narration, seemingly confirming the identity of Sook-hee's character as the 'handmaiden' in the film's title. Only with the first flashback it is revealed that she is working in partnership with a conman, and just masquerading as a handmaiden to infiltrate the Kouzuki household. However, it could be said even this narrative information is unreliable, as it appears to give us truthful access to Sook-hee's motivations, thus persuading the spectators of Fujiwara's malicious swindle. There is more to this intrigue than meets the eye. One central prop in *The Handmaiden's* opening is Miss Boksum's butterfly hairpin, prominently brought to our attention in multiple close-ups. A flashback reveals that the hairpin is actually a lockpick, before the prop disappears from the picture like a cinematic red herring. It only gains narrative significance in the third plotline in which it makes its return. The hairpin is therefore best characterized as a privileged object, its butterfly motif being a symbol of transformation. It is also a token for Sook-hee's identity, connecting her to her past as a pickpocket. And finally, it has an important function in the narrative action as an object which she extracts from her hair when the fire breaks out in the psychiatric ward she has been committed to, allowing her to pick the locks on her chains and to escape.

## STAGING TRAUMA

As in *Lust, Caution* a number of elements suggest that trauma lies at the heart of *The Handmaiden*, but unlike in *Lust, Caution*, this trauma has to do with female sexual desire, aching to break free from the shackles of abject masculinity. Such inherent trauma is already conveyed in the narrative premise of the film, where a young woman is raised to be married to her sadistic uncle-in-law, so that he may purloin her fortune. But there is also the visual juxtaposition between lush greenery surrounding the mansion, which sunlight never enters. There is Hideko herself, appearing as a ghost-like figure haunted by her own tormented thoughts. According to Pierre Janet, in trauma part of one's personality becomes inflexible, stopping its development (quoted in van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 177). It could be argued that in *The Handmaiden* the sexual part of Hideko's personality has stopped developing, due to her childhood trauma. It is only with the help of Sook-hee that Hideko

Delivered by Intellect to:

UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM (amsterdamnl)

IP: 146.50.145.5

On: Mon, 07 Aug 2023 11:39:24

can imagine an alternative, positive future scenario and to realize an act of termination for her trauma. Furthermore, the notion of masquerade seems to function as an important strategy for this reclaiming of agency, facilitating consummation of Hideko and Sook-hee's mutual desire, which in turn enables re-assertion of their self-esteem.

However, regardless of these hints at trauma as the narrative theme of the film, Sook-hee's plotline does not explicitly communicate this apart from one scene in Kouzuki's library, which we are invited to enter together with Sook-hee, and where Hideko and Kouzuki are conducting their 'reading practice'. An establishing shot centralizes Sook-hee at the threshold of the library, before cutting to an abrupt close-up of Kouzuki shouting 'Snake, snake!', scaring Sook-hee to the core, after which she takes a quick step backwards. Her point of view shot reveals the sculpture of a snake in a strike position, marking the 'bounds of knowledge' which Sook-hee should not cross, before a steel scissor gate door is slammed shut in front of her. Behind the bars of the gate, Sook-hee is confronted by Kouzuki's piercing gaze, as he reaches for a white pill and pops it into his mouth, revealing his black tongue. A recurring narrative element, the snake is an obvious metaphor for toxic masculinity, but it is also a dual symbol of transformation and stagnation, which is why the sculpture must be destroyed before Hideko and Sook-hee can escape Kouzuki's mansion.

The startling nature of the library scene produces a 'mood dissonance' in the otherwise tranquil first part of the film, in which traumatic reality is only implicitly suggested. To this purpose the hybrid setting – the Victorian/Japanese mansion – plays an important role. The Sook-hee plotline stays mostly within the Victorian setting, which is richly decorated with ornamental wallpaper, detailed chandeliers, regal portraiture, octagonal staircases and opulent furniture, with an occasional bonsai tree arrangement breaking the stylistic harmony. This lavish setting is often brought into view through a wide-angle tableau shot centralizing some thoughtfully placed decorative object, by a doorway or draped curtains. The deep-planned verticality achieved by such an image composition suggests a division between past and present, inside and outside, rendering visible the traumatic discontinuity of Hideko's temporal and spatial experience. At some other occasions, the camera lingers through the setting, not perceptually associated with any subjective point of view in the cinematic world, but nevertheless recognizable as a presence within the diegesis. It is as if this inner vision of the camera itself, at times observing Hideko and Sook-hee like a pursuer from behind a shoji screen, conveys the sense of trauma that is haunting Hideko. This oppressive setting together with the introvert, haunting presence of the camera makes that the *mise en scène* of *The Handmaiden* parallels Hideko's mental subjectivity, expressing the impact of traumatic events that she is unable to put to rest.

It is within this setting that other symbols of Hideko's trauma are hidden, such as a string of three metal beads, a length of rope, and a collection of hand gloves, which Sook-hee discovers when going through Hideko's closets. These hidden items are references to traumatic events in Hideko's life, concealed in her somatic memory. Their meaning is revealed in the second plotline of the film, which is from Hideko's viewpoint. The transition from Sook-hee's to Hideko's plotline has a complex temporal structure, which visualizes different layers of time, bringing them into dialogue as it were. It starts with Hideko's handing over her own medallion as if it belonged to

Sook-hee, when she is admitted to a psychiatric ward in Hideko's stead. The medallion contains a miniature portrait of Sook-hee herself, secretly made by Fujiwara, which Hideko claims to be a portrait of Sook-hee's mother 'before she went mad'. The camera zooms in on this portrait in a close-up, which then dissolves into a graphic match with a profile shot of Sook-hee, whose (untrustworthy) voice-over contemplates Hideko's deception, calling her a 'rotten bitch'. The shots of Sook-hee struggling with the psychiatric nurses in the present are 'crosscut' with shots of young Hideko struggling in the grasp of her governess in the past, crying that she is 'not a rotten bitch'. Finally, the narration settles on the past, where Kouzuki takes out a string with four metal beads. He inserts one bead into young Hideko's mouth before ruthlessly striking her outstretched hand with the instrument, her palm facing down.

Not only does this transition in plotline establish Kouzuki as the source of Hideko's trauma, it also suggests that trauma is something that Hideko and Sook-hee share, rendering their desire for self-determination intertwined in a way that bypasses their social inequality. Rather than telling a mere (love) story based on mutual (sexual) desire, *The Handmaiden* is about shared desire for mutually enriching self-determination, which enables both Hideko and Sook-hee to break free from patriarchal constraints. But before this can happen, their trauma needs to be exposed. This takes place in Hideko's plotline, starting with a series of varied flashbacks, ranging from young Hideko receiving reading lessons from her aunt with erotic literature as learning material while closely observed by Kouzuki, to Hideko's aunt hanging from the blooming cherry tree with Hideko herself observing the scene surrounded by servants. There is also Hideko personating an 'illustration' from a sadomasochistic story in which she is suspended in mid-air while fastened to a life-size wooden puppet as her 'sex partner'. The scene forcefully draws our attention to her traumatic entrapment ensuing from her deadlocked agency, her state of being literally used as a puppet by puppeteer Kouzuki.

We also learn about Kouzuki's obliging Hideko to attend at the readings in which her aunt recites erotic literature to cigar-smoking male clients in an elegant Japanese setting. This results in her taking over in this role after her aunt's suicide. In one flashback, Hideko simultaneously enacts both the role of dominatrix and submissive in the story she is reading, strangling herself with black leather gloves, which we associate with her uncle's brutality. In another flashback in Hideko's plotline, she is taken to the 'basement' by Kouzuki after she has become suspicious about some aspects of her aunt's 'suicide'. The basement is a dark and scary space, but what Hideko witnesses there is not explicitly shown to us. Only a reaction shot of her horrified face invites us to imagine the horrors she is confronted with. This is accompanied by strange off-screen underwater sounds, which in a later scene makes us associate the basement with an 'erotic' painting in one of Kouzuki's books, featuring an octopus-like sea monster.

Both the black gloves Hideko is constantly forced to wear as a persistent reminder of events in her childhood, and Kouzuki's basement designed for emotional and physical torture, function as emotion metaphors for Hideko's trauma. The gloves hide the visible marks on her hands, which testify of Kouzuki's violent brutality towards her as a child. But their shiny blackness also evokes an association with the tar-like substance that sticks to Hideko's skin by its sheer substantiality. Sara Ahmed has found the notion of 'stickiness' an apt metaphor for affects that surface as a result of hidden histories

between individuals (2004: 90). So metaphorically speaking, the black gloves represent the affective stain left on Hideko's skin where Kouzuki has touched. They have the cumulative value of trauma over the many years of abuse, while Hideko's possibilities of acting upon the situation were highly restricted due to her age and gender. This is why Sook-hee triumphantly flings the black gloves into the ocean as she and Hideko are safely on their way towards Shanghai, shedding off the stained skin in a symbolic gesture. Similarly, the hidden basement epitomizes what Laura Brown refers to as 'secret trauma', occurring to girls and women behind closed doors, at the hands of those they depend on, and to which they accommodate (1995: 101). Accommodating to the source of her psychic trauma, Kouzuki's everyday assaults on her personal integrity and physical safety, is exactly what Hideko has done to survive the repetition of domestic violence and brutality.

### MASQUERADE AS RESISTANCE

After the series of flashbacks opening the second plotline, the narration unfolds from an earlier moment in the story, revolving around the original pact Hideko initially made with Fujiwara. A major part of Hideko's plotline consists of retelling the cinematic events from Sook-hee's narrative, which could be seen as an aesthetic expression of the repeated traumatic occurrences of Hideko's (childhood) abuse. Amongst the events retold is Hideko and Sook-hee's first sexual encounter, which Charlotte Richardson Andrews (2017) describes as ironic and intentionally staged. This ironic intentionality makes that the sex scenes become instances of masquerade, which can potentially resist the patriarchal framework. Masquerade is a concept introduced by Joan Riviere ([1929] 2000) to define a (feminine) mode of being for the (male) other, by which a woman renounces her subjective agency to become an image of femininity for the male gaze. But as Mary Ann Doane has argued, the practices of masquerade can also hold the patriarchal frameworks at bay, creating room for the acknowledgment of their fabricated nature: 'The masquerade doubles representation: it is constituted by a hyperbolization of the accoutrements of femininity' (1991: 26).

Following from this idea I argue that the sex scenes in *The Handmaiden* function as masquerade on two levels. On the one hand, by performing a masquerade of Hideko and Fujiwara's impending wedding night, Sook-hee and Hideko construct an alternative space beyond the constraints of abusive patriarchy. On the other, the quasi-pornographic style of these scenes destabilizes the male gaze embedded in porn film conventions. The effect is defamiliarization of a viewing system in which men are defined as subjects of active looking, and women are reduced to passive objects to-be-looked-at (Mulvey 1975). In Sook-hee's plotline the scene starts with Hideko inviting her to come into her bed, because she 'feels a nightmare coming'. The camera flies to a bird's-eye view, with Sook-hee and Hideko's backs turned towards each other, then hovers closer as they turn face to face. While the dialogue conveys the pretext that Sook-hee tutors an inexperienced Hideko for her wedding night, Sook-hee takes out a lollipop and puts it in her mouth before she kisses Hideko very gently on the lips, be it with a pronounced 'smack'. A playful score starts on the soundtrack as Hideko starts kissing her in return, while camera moves upwards in a circular motion. The framing switches between long shots and extreme close ups of the action as Sook-gee discovers Hideko's body as if in amazement at its beauty, and the scene ends with a close-up of

Sook-hee between Hideko's legs, stuttering as she describes Hideko's vagina as 'S...s...spellbindingly beautiful'. The whole dialogue, and especially the stuttered spoken lines, provides comic relief for the scene, which enhances its quality as a masquerade. Jia Tolentino writes that in the sex scenes Hideko and Sook-gee 'are consciously performing for each other [...] extracting the particular sense of silly freedom that can be found in enacting a sexual cliché' (Tolentino 2016: n.pag.). In terms of masquerade, the 'sexual clichés' enacted by Hideko and Sook-hee become 'tools' of sexual self-expression, which in turn become a source of self-determination for them both.

In Hideko's plotline, the lovemaking sequence is preceded by a scene in which Hideko performs one of her readings, involving an erotic encounter between two women using Ben Wa balls to facilitate sexual pleasure, which appears to leave Hideko excited herself. This is cut to Sook-hee exposing Hideko's breasts while the camera circles above the two lovers in a bird's-eye view. The framing is more mobile than in the previous account of the event, as if the camera movement were more expressive of the throes of passion Hideko and Sook-hee have fallen into. Furthermore, while the previous scene was cut before Sook-hee proceeds to perform cunnilingus on Hideko, we now stay up, close and personal with the lovers. This is the moment when the nondiegetic score starts off on the sound track, but the music is strikingly different from the previous, playful melody. The affective character of this music is romantic, which changes the emotional significance of the scene towards love. Yet the scene does not lack in humour, such as when Sook-hee emerges from between Hideko's legs, out of breath and her face wet with Hideko's arousal fluid, uttering the line 'Shall I teach you more, miss?' The scene ends with Hideko and Sook-hee grasping each other's hands, embracing each other in the 'scissors' position previously described in Kouzuki's book, while the camera zooms out to a long shot, framing the two lovers within a frame. The differences between the first and the second lovemaking scene suggest to me that sexual attraction between Sook-hee and Hideko is not a masquerade after all, and could even be interpreted as resulting from love. But this interpretation is complicated by a compelling alternative view, which shows Hideko literally enacting her own trauma in a parallel way to the stories in Kouzuki's books. Furthermore, given all the unreliable twists and turns in the film's narrative, we as spectators cannot be sure at this point whether Hideko's impetus in the scene is genuine or merely another act to lure Sook-hee deeper into her web.

The scene in which Hideko and Sook-hee escape the mansion is also repeated in both plotlines, but with important differences. In Sook-hee's plotline, the escape sequence starts with Kouzuki leaving the mansion, after having told Hideko to 'remember the basement'. We then witness Sook-hee and Hideko hurrying through the mansion, sliding the shoji screens open in symmetrical, almost ritualistic gestures, before passing by the cherry tree shedding its petals. However, our attention is not drawn to the floating petals, but to the hangman's noose suspended from the tree, while no narrative explanation is given for its placement there. An aerial camera shot follows Sook-hee and Hideko running through a green field towards a waterway, where they are met by Fujiwara in a rowing boat. In Hideko's plotline, the escape sequence is preceded by the scene with her suicide attempt, which explains the noose. The framing of this scene confines Sook-hee strictly to the off-screen space, so that we cannot see her waiting underneath the cherry tree, ready to catch Hideko as she drops herself from the branch, with the noose around her neck.

In a darkly comical scene, they both confess swindling the other, while Sook-hee still holds up Hideko to prevent her from strangulation. After Kouzuki's departure, Hideko takes Sook-hee to his library, where the outraged Sook-hee starts tearing down books and parchments from the shelves, ripping them up as she does. A bird's-eye view of the destruction accentuates the blood-like stains of red ink Sook-hee throws on Kouzuki's books, before she starts removing the floor panels in the library, revealing an underground water source. At first, Hideko merely observes the destruction as if dwelling in some trance-like state. Her emotional paralysis finally ends and she pensively joins in throwing red ink and dumping books into the water, until the destruction climaxes with Sook-hee smashing the snake sculpture to smithereens with a fierce blow.

The scene with the destruction of Kouzuki's library fulfils multiple narrative functions. First, it is hard to question the authenticity of the emotional energy conveyed in the scene, which establishes the relationship between Hideko and Sook-hee as genuine. Secondly, insofar as the library functions as a form of traumatic memory that persists without end, it must be destroyed for Hideko to have access to and recover her past. It is significant that the scene is wedged in between Hideko's suicide attempt and retelling the escape from the mansion, as it demonstrates that Hideko's overcoming trauma is characterized by her working out a slightly different story to us, the spectators. Hideko and Sook-hee destroying the library thus becomes the action of telling the story of the library differently, after which it can be assimilated into narrative form and transformed into representation (Bennett 2005: 23). Chi-Yun Shin makes a similar observation when she writes that the destruction of the library 'counterbalances the film's fetishistic rendering of Hideko's recital scenes that subject her to male guests' gaze' which makes the scene 'a highly cathartic as well as transgressive moment in the film' (2019: 9).

Sook-hee plays an important role in this transgressive moment, almost as if she were volunteering the emotion Hideko herself is unable to feel. As they escape the mansion, Hideko is first unable to cross the shallow, knee-height stone wall surrounding its garden, until Sook-hee piles up their luggage to build a stepladder for Hideko to mount. As she takes a leap of faith, her jumping across the wall is smoothly match cut to a close-up of laughing Hideko running through the greenery towards freedom. This elegant transition feels like a sudden burst of joy, and the camera now stays with Hideko and Sook-hee instead of following them from afar, as it was in the previous account of their escape scene. In this scene, Sook-hee literally fulfils the function of providing a safety ladder Hideko can use, as she takes her crucial step towards self-determination and overcoming trauma. Therefore, the beauty of the scene lies in the way it communicates a vision of love, in which the lover supports the loved one as an essentially independent individual, instead of playing the role of some omnipotent rescuer.

Towards the end of the film, Sook-hee and Hideko board a ferry to Shanghai, with Hideko disguised as a man to evade being found by Kouzuki's henchmen, while it is Fujiwara's fate is to end up being tortured in Kouzuki's basement, where his fingers are cut off one by one. Similar to the rape scene in *Lust, Caution*, the torture scene in *The Handmaiden* can be read as an allegory of a willing subservient of the colonizing powers violating a subordinate of the occupied nation. However, by persuading Kouzuki to let him smoke, Fujiwara simultaneously commits suicide and murder with his mercury-laced cigarettes, so that at least he can die with his penis intact. Both *sadaejuu* – a

Korean term for a person who voluntarily subjugates to the colonial power – are thus left fundamentally powerless, ‘which ironically underlines the impotency of the male characters in the film’ (Shin 2019: 6). Meanwhile, Sook-hee and Hideko face the risk of their real identity being uncovered, for in case Hideko had to speak, her voice would betray them. By ‘silencing’ Hideko and allowing Sook-hee as her ‘subaltern’ to speak, the scene affords Sook-hee an agency which conclusively situates the two characters on an equal level.

The film ends with an epilogue taking place in an ocean liner cabin, with an underwater soundscape similar to the one in Kouzuki’s basement. However, this sound is quickly drowned by the jingling of Ben Wa balls, familiar from the earlier reading scene. In its last shot the camera flies upwards to focus on the moon, which through a graphic match dissolves into the painting on the door that separated Sook-hee’s bedroom from Hideko’s living quarters in the Kouzuki mansion. As Richardson Andrews (2017) points out, the ending conveys a sense of transformation from trauma to pleasure which might be blatantly simplistic. At the same time, the ending highlights Sook-gee, a Korean thief, coming together with Hideko, a Japanese noblewoman, facing one another straight-on, as equals (Shin 2019: 11). This mutual affirmation encapsulated in the ending implies a cathartic possibility, in which the past and the present are integrated in such a way, that it enables both Hideko and Sook-hee to loosen up the grip of their traumatic experiences and to reset their compass for the future.

## REFERENCES

- Ahmed, Sara (2004), *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, New York: Routledge.
- Anon. (2017), ‘Director Park Chan-wook shows his sensitive side with new film *The Handmaiden*’, *The Scotsman*, 11 April, <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/film-and-tv/film-interview-director-park-chan-wook-shows-his-sensitive-side-new-film-handmaiden-1452066>. Accessed 27 April 2022.
- Bennett, Jill (2005), *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bote, Joshua (2016), ‘*The Handmaiden* deconstructs male gaze within lesbian love story’, *Daily Californian*, 31 October, <https://www.dailycal.org/2016/10/31/the-handmaiden/>. Accessed 29 December 2021.
- Braudy, Leo (1972), ‘Hitchcock, Truffaut, and the irresponsible audience’, in A. J. LaValley (ed.), *Focus on Hitchcock*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, pp. 116–27.
- Brown, Laura S. (1995), ‘Not outside the range: One feminist perspective on psychic trauma’, in C. Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 100–12.
- Brzycki, Melissa and Montgomery, Stephanie (2019), ‘*The Handmaiden* and colonial Korea: An interview with Dr. Kelly Jeong’, *East Asia for All*, 28 August, <https://www.eastasiaforall.com/home/2019/8/28/the-handmaiden>. Accessed 27 April 2022.
- Caruth, Cathy (1996), *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Chang, Hsiao-hung (2009), ‘Transnational affect: Cold anger, hot tears, and *Lust, Caution*’, *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 35:1, pp. 31–50.
- Chen, Bouy, Hwang, Ching-Chane and Ling, L. H. M. (2009), ‘*Lust/Caution* in IR: Democratising world politics with culture as a method’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 37:3, pp. 743–66.

Delivered by Intellect to:

UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM (amsterdamnl)

IP: 146.50.145.5

On: Mon, 07 Aug 2023 11:39:24

- Chi, Robert (2009), 'Exhibitionism: *Lust, Caution*', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, 3:2, pp. 177–87.
- Comas-Díaz, Lillian, Nagayama Hall, Gordon and Neville, Helen A. (2019), 'Racial trauma: Theory, research, and healing', *American Psychologist*, 74:1, pp. 1–5.
- Doane, Mary Ann (1991), *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, London: Routledge.
- Donald, Stephanie Hemelryk (2010), 'Tang Wei: Sex, the city and the scapegoat in *Lust, Caution*', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27:4, pp. 46–68.
- Elsaesser, Thomas (1994), 'Ingmar Bergman: The art cinema', *Sight and Sound*, April, pp. 22–27.
- Freud, Sigmund ([1920] 2003), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings* (trans. J. Reddick), New York: Penguin Books.
- Fu, Poshek (1997), 'The ambiguity of entertainment: Chinese cinema in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, 1941 to 1945', *Cinema Journal*, 37:1, pp. 66–84.
- Jeong, Kelly Y. (2011), *Crisis of Gender and the Nation in Korean Literature and Cinema: Modernity Arrives Again*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Lacan, Jacques (1997), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (ed. J. Alain-Miller, trans. D. Porter), New York: W.W. Norton.
- Laub, Dori (1992), 'Bearing witness or the vicissitudes of listening', in S. Felman and D. Laub (eds), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York: Routledge, pp. 57–74.
- Lee, Ang (2007), *Lust, Caution*, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China and USA: River Road Entertainment, Haishang Films, Sil-Metropole Organisation and Shanghai Film Group.
- Lee, Leo Ou-fan (2008), 'Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* and its reception', *boundary 2*, 35:2, pp. 223–38.
- Leung, Lisa Y. M. (2021), *Ethnic Minorities, Media and Participation in Hong Kong: Creative and Tactical Belonging*, London: Routledge.
- Luhmann, Niklas (1988), *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* (trans. J. Gaines and D. L. Jones), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Miller, Laura (2016), 'The Handmaiden: Park Chan-wook takes on Sarah Waters' brilliant, intricate novel *Fingersmith*', *Slate*, 20 October, <https://slate.com/culture/2016/10/park-chan-wooks-the-handmaiden-based-on-sarah-waters-fingersmith-reviewed.html>. Accessed 29 December 2021.
- Mulvey, Laura (1975), 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, 16:3, pp. 6–18.
- Ngai, Sianne (2005), *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Park, Chan-wook (2016), *The Handmaiden*, South Korea: Moho Film and Yong Film.
- Purvis, Martin (2018), '*Lust, Caution*', *Film Sufi: Devoted to the Discussion of Film Expression*, 14 July, <http://www.filmsufi.com/2018/07/lust-caution-ang-lee-2007.html>. Accessed 29 December 2021.
- Richardson Andrews, Charlotte (2017), '*The Handmaiden*', *Another Gaze*, 19 May, <https://www.anothergaze.com/review-the-handmaiden/>. Accessed 29 December 2021.
- Riviere, Joan ([1929] 2000), 'Womanliness as a masquerade', in A. Tripp (ed.), *Gender*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, pp. 130–38.
- Shin, Chi-Yun (2019), 'In another time and place: *The Handmaiden* as an adaptation', *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*, 11:1, pp. 1–13.
- Sinnerbrink, Robert (2012), 'Stimmung: Exploring the aesthetics of mood', *Screen*, 53:2, pp. 148–63.

- Slern, Marlow (2017), 'The stars of *Blue is the Warmest Colour*: On the riveting lesbian love story', *Daily Beast*, 11 July, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-stars-of-blue-is-the-warmest-color-on-the-riveting-lesbian-love-story>. Accessed 27 April 2022.
- Solomon, Robert C. (2006), *About Love: Reinventing Romance for Our Times*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Solomon, Robert C. (2007), *True to Our Feelings: What Our Emotions Are Really Telling Us*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stolorow, Robert D. (2003), 'Trauma and temporality', *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 20:1, pp. 158–61.
- Suwa, Akira (2019), 'What makes it neo-Victorian?: *The Handmaiden* and the double internalisation of cultural colonisation', *Victoriographies*, 9:3, pp. 280–97.
- Tolentino, Jia (2016), '*The Handmaiden* and the freedom women find only with one another', *New Yorker*, 29 October, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/the-handmaiden-and-the-freedom-women-find-only-with-one-another>. Accessed 29 December 2021.
- van der Kolk, Bessel A. and van der Hart, Onno (1995), 'The intrusive past: The flexibility of memory and the engraving of trauma', in C. Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 158–82.
- Vibhakar, Isha (2021), 'How is lesbian desire represented on screen?', *Epigram*, 27 February, <https://epigram.org.uk/2021/02/27/lesbian-desire/>. Accessed 27 April 2022.
- Williams, Linda (1991), 'Film bodies: Gender, genre, and excess', *Film Quarterly*, 44:4, pp. 2–13.
- Wright, Colin (2021), 'Lacan on trauma and causality: A psychoanalytic critique of post-traumatic stress/growth', *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 42, pp. 235–44.
- Yoonsoo Kim, Kristen (2016), '*The Handmaiden*'s explicit lesbian sex is shaking up Korean cinema', *Complex*, 19 October, <https://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2016/10/park-chan-wook-the-handmaiden-lesbian-sex-scenes>. Accessed 29 December 2021.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Laine, Tarja (2023), 'Games of love and lust: Performance, masquerade and trauma in *Lust*, *Caution* and *The Handmaiden*', *Asian Cinema*, 34:1, pp. 81–101, [https://doi.org/10.1386/ac\\_00064\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ac_00064_1)

## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Tarja Laine is assistant professor of film studies at the University of Amsterdam and adjunct professor at the University of Turku, Finland. She is the author of *Reframing Trauma in Contemporary Fiction Film* (Lexington, 2023), *Emotional Ethics of The Hunger Games* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky* (Berghahn, 2015), *Feeling Cinema: Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies* (Bloomsbury, 2011) and *Shame and Desire: Emotion, Intersubjectivity, Cinema* (Peter Lang, 2007). Her research interests include cinematic emotions, film aesthetics and film-phenomenology. In addition, she works as a visual artist, after graduating from Wackers Academy of Fine Arts (Amsterdam) in 2018.

Delivered by Intellect to:

UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM (amsterdamnl)

IP: 146.50.145.5

On: Mon, 07 Aug 2023 11:39:24

Contact: University of Amsterdam, Turfdragsterpad 9, 1012 XT Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

E-mail: T.Laine@uva.nl

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5588-4566>

Tarja Laine has asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.

---