



## Hallyu and Film Adaptation: *Maids of Decolonization* in Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden*

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### Abstract

*This paper offers an intermedial and intercultural reading of The Handmaiden (2016), a film adapted from Sarah Waters' Fingersmith (2002) by Park Chan-wook. Park's transcultural screen adaptation, representative of a post-colonial, hybridizing trend in Hallyu, transfers Waters' Victorian setting to the Japanese-colonized Korea during the 1930s, expanding the novel's focus on class and gender to issues of race, equality, and power. Park prompts his two female protagonists, a Japanese lady and a Korean handmaiden, to decolonize the psychic and social structures of a pro Japanese mansion in the process of becoming-maids that effectively decouples the predominant power/class relationships in its closed environment. Through their successful performance as equal participants in a satiric, self-reflexive pastiche of the Hollywood aesthetic, Park dramatizes the politics of hybridity and the politics of gender, class, and colonialism, providing a hybrid third space in the final scene of the film when the heroines sail to Shanghai. The Handmaiden demonstrates the dynamic force of Hallyu through its symbolic decolonization of Western cultural hegemony, its depiction of global and personal power shifts, and its new vision of the hybrid space.*

**Keywords:** *The Handmaiden*, Hallyu, Park Chan-wook, film adaptation, hybridity, pastiche, decolonization, postcolonialism

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## **Korean Cinema as a Dynamic Force of Hallyu**

The transnational and transcultural flows of globalization are unequal, uneven, unpredictable, and multi-directional. They have precipitated new dimensions of inequalities and problems in the neocolonial global environment and simultaneously introduced a concomitant shift in global power which can initiate the process of decolonization. It is remarkable therefore that Korea, which remained under the influence of cultural and sociopolitical imperialism throughout the 20th century, has, over the last 20 years, generated new forms of global interdependence and decolonization from the Hallyu (Korean Wave) phenomenon. Hallyu encourages a reassessment of global power and environment through a dynamic decolonizing approach, foregrounding the coloniality and the marginalization of a periphery world.

The history of Hallyu over the last two decades may be divided into two periods: Hallyu 1.0 from 1997 to 2007 and Hallyu 2.0 from 2008 to the present, usually based upon its primary genres, technologies, regional reach, primary consumers, and major cultural policies (Jin 2016, 4). Hallyu 1.0 was initiated by TV drama series and films among various Korean popular cultural genres, which were popular among fans in their 30s and 40s in East Asia. In Hallyu 2.0, Korean popular music (K-pop), video games, and animation became popular genres among fans in their teens to 20s, not only in Asia but also in Europe and North America. Thus, Hallyu has expanded from a regional to a global cultural phenomenon. This evolution of Hallyu, and especially the increasing popularity of K-pop and K-drama,<sup>1</sup> owes itself greatly to websites such as YouTube, other interactive social media platforms,

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1. For example, Psy's "Gangnam Style" music video in 2012 became the first YouTube video to reach one billion views and has influenced popular culture worldwide while extending new interest in Hallyu throughout the many countries of the world. Additionally, there is the international fame of the K-pop boy group BTS, which conquered the Billboard 200 chart in 2018 and helped realize the new phase of Hallyu 2.0, i.e., the "New Korean Wave." K-drama has also achieved tremendous popularity through its own fandom that has rapidly extended outside of Korea to worldwide viewers who easily find Korean drama episodes on Netflix, Amazon Video, and many other internet-streaming services.

and new internet streaming services. As a result, academic discourses on both Hallyu 2.0 and the “New Korean Wave” (Jin 2016, 4) in the age of social media and its products tend to focus on K-pop and K-drama. But the achievements of Korean cinema in the leading international film festivals during the period of Hallyu 1.0, especially Bong Joon-ho’s recent winning of the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival and four Academy Awards at the Oscars 2020 for his *Parasite* (*Gisaengchung*, 2019),<sup>2</sup> prompt us to re-vision the critical role Korean films have played in engineering and sustaining Hallyu’s powerful potentialities since its beginning. Park Chan-wook, the winner of the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival for *Oldboy* (2004), is one of the most influential Korean directors, and one who has been recognized within the global film world as “the virtual face of contemporary South Korean cinema” through the periods of Hallyu 1.0 and 2.0 (H. Lee 2016).

Park was welcomed by Hollywood, where he directed *Stoker* (2013) and co-produced Bong’s *Snowpiercer* (2013). Moreover, *Oldboy* was remade by Spike Lee as an American neo-noir action thriller of the same title. As seen in his film adaptations,<sup>3</sup> such as *Thirst* (*Bakjwi*, 2009) and *The Handmaiden* (*Agassi*, 2016), Park essentially challenges Hollywood hegemony with the strategy of hybridization. These two films are based on Émile Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) and Sarah Waters’ *Fingersmith* (2002), respectively. As a product of negotiation between Western and Korean cultures, Park’s

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2. The period of Hallyu 1.0 also corresponds with that of the “South Korean film renaissance” between 1986 and 2006, which influenced world cinema and achieved international recognitions for Korean filmmakers at the Cannes, Venice, and Berlin Film Festivals. In 2002, Im Kwon-taek won the Best Director award at Cannes for his film *Chihwason*, and Lee Chang-dong received the Special Director award at Venice for his *Oasis*. In 2004, Kim Ki-duk won the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival for his *Samaritan Girl* (*Samaria*) and the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival for his *3-Iron* (*Binjip*). In the same year, Park Chan-wook won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival for his *Oldboy*. In 2019, Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite* (*Gisaengchung*), a dark comedy, won the Palme d’Or, becoming the first Korean film to receive this award. Finally his *Parasite* won the Oscars 2020, including Best Picture, Directing, International Feature Film and Original Screenplay.
  3. Recently, Park also directed *The Little Drummer Girl*, a British television miniseries based on the novel of the same name by John le Carré that first aired on BBC One in the United Kingdom on October 28, 2018 and in the United States in November 2018.

adaptation films embody the “politicization of the hybridization process,” which Dal Yong Jin emphasizes as an important theoretical framework for the new Hallyu (Jin 2016, 4).

Over the last two decades, Korean cinema has been liberated from post-traumatic themes of colonialism by openly investigating the issues of decolonization and neocolonization without ideological anxieties and constraints. This change is exemplified by *The Handmaiden*, a film revisiting and relocating a colonized past across time and cultures with an ironic distance. Inspired by Waters' *Fingersmith*,<sup>4</sup> Park remodels the novel to a Korean colonial past, transferring a Victorian Britain to Japanese-occupied Korea of the 1930s. Along with this shift in temporal and spatial settings, he transforms two British men, Gentleman and Christopher Lily from *Fingersmith*, into Korean men who become *fake* Japanese gentlemen. Count Fujiwara and Uncle Kouzuki come to mimic the Japanese and British gentlemen. As for their female counterparts, the two lesbian British protagonists, Sue Trinder and Maud Lily, become a Korean *hanyeo* (handmaiden) and a Japanese *agassi* (young lady) named Sook-hee and Lady Hideko, respectively.<sup>5</sup> This change highlights the marginal *other* status of women under Japanese rule. On the surface level of the film text, therefore, both Sook-hee and Lady Hideko appear to be what Claire Armitstead calls “pawns in a power game [among men] that is at once sexual, mercenary and colonial” (Armitstead 2017). On a deeper level, however, Park focuses on the two women becoming agents of decolonization through the process of their becoming-maids; hence, “maids of decolonization.” Specifically, Park's maids play the roles of both victim in Kouzuki's world and of “a certain force” (Cixous and Clément 1986, 154) which can shatter the colonial system into pieces. The maid is both the repressed lady and “the man's repressed” within the conjugal couple. Yet this common relationship is resisted by Park's maid, who cannot stand Kouzuki's oppressive aristocratic society as founded

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4. Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden*, winner of the BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) Award for Best Film Not in the English Language, is “inspired by” rather than “based on” British female writer, Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*, as Waters herself acknowledges in an interview (Noh 2016).

5. Park titles the film differently, *Agassi* (young lady) in Korean and *The Handmaiden* in English.

upon the bodies of women, bodies which become “humiliating once they have been used” (Cixous and Clément 1986, 154). Sook-hee is portrayed as able to exercise a subversive force that can dismantle the colonial system, thereby becoming the agent of decolonization. In the course of the film, Park appropriates the rebellious qualities of the maids as the dynamic force of decolonization.

While thematizing decolonization through his transcultural, translocational, and transtemporal film adaptation of *Fingersmith*, Park foregrounds pastiche as well as coloniality. As a Korean pastiche of the Victorian novel, *The Handmaiden* effectively cinematizes the director’s challenge to Japanese cultural hegemony by emulating, while at the same time refuting, the Hollywood aesthetic. Korean cinema has often been analyzed as a pastiche of Hollywood conventions, but the underlying political messages in such an approach have not been fully explored. Previous studies of Park’s films have hardly attempted an in-depth discussion of the political dimension of his pastiche. As an adaptation piece, *The Handmaiden* clearly reveals Park’s purposeful reassembly of fragments and references to the source material that form a new whole for “a satiric undertow or a parodic intention” (Sanders 2016, 7). Focusing on his theme of decolonization and use of maids as the agents of decolonization, we intend to examine Park’s political messages voiced through his skillful use of pastiche. By analyzing *The Handmaiden* as a Korean pastiche, we also argue that Korean cinema has come to function as a dynamic force, not only in initiating a new phase of Hallyu but also in expanding the emerging discourses of adaptation studies in the age of globalization.<sup>6</sup>

### ***The Handmaiden* as a Korean Pastiche of Cultural Hybridity**

Hybridity is one of the most disputed terms in postcolonial theory. According to Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial theory, the concept of hybridity

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6. For an intermedial and intertextual reading of the original Neo-Victorian novel and the Korean film adaptation in terms of adaptation studies, see H. Park et al. (2019).

brings the possibility of a third culture or space as well as the resistance of the colonized against the colonizer through mimicry. Bhabha's concept of hybridity has deeply influenced Hallyu studies; the term "cultural hybridity" has replaced various theories that challenge cultural imperialism in the last 20 years (Yoon and Kang 2017, 17). The concept of cultural hybridity implies that the process of relocation can stimulate new utterances and creativity in the colonized, thereby opening up space for a political message. *The Handmaiden* fully demonstrates the political function of this cultural hybridity. Thus, the implication of *The Handmaiden* for Hallyu can be found in its subversive message on residual traces of colonialism and postcolonialities within a cultural exchange for an increasingly globalized environment.

In relation to cultural hybridity, Bhabha proposes another concept of "minority discourse" (Bhabha 1994, xxx) which resonates with some of the ideas put forth by the most prominent contributors to the field of postcolonial studies, such as Franz Fanon's and Gilles Deleuze's ideas of creating or inventing minorities as a new people. According to Fanon, decolonization is "the veritable creation of new men" that occurs when "the 'thing' which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself" (Fanon 1963, 36–37). Fanon's point concurs with Deleuze's notion of modern political cinema or the cinema of minorities which contributes to "the invention of a people" (Deleuze 1989, 217). As Deleuze claims, the minorities who are colonized "no longer exist, or not yet" and so they are "missing" (Deleuze 1989, 216). When applied to *The Handmaiden*, the above ideas of the three theorists offer a useful analytical framework for elucidating Park's attempt to create a Korean pastiche of cultural hybridity towards both a minority film and a modern political film. As a minority filmmaker, Park's treatment of the process of decolonization purports to explore the invention of a new people by foregrounding the two female characters as oppressed under colonial rule. They are forced to disappear after being exploited by the mechanisms of the power and system of the majority. In the film, the forces that get rid of them are represented by Kouzuki's house.

Kouzuki's manor house can be compared to a "derived milieu," such as

a Victorian mansion in a naturalist film.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, Park's films of extravagant violence show that he is influenced by naturalism in literature, essentially Zola, who describes a given milieu as "a derived milieu" to exhaust it and then restore it to the naturalist "originary world" (Deleuze 1986, 125). On the other hand, Park's works also prove that he can find a way out of the naturalist world as is done by Deleuze's great naturalist directors, who "find in it sufficient opening and creativity"<sup>8</sup> by reaching beyond this originary world. In *The Handmaiden*, Park presents this originary world of men that operates in the depths of the colonial Korean milieu to explore and dislocate it. In this light, *The Handmaiden* might be classified as a naturalist film of the naturalist image, the impulse-image, with its signs of symptoms, idols, or fetishes and of the possibilities of finding a line of exit from the director's "desire to change milieu, to seek a new milieu" (Deleuze 1986, 129), i.e., a third space as discussed by postcolonial theorists.

Kouzuki's house epitomizes "the colonial aesthetics"<sup>9</sup> that Park criticizes in his black comedy through the two fake pro-Japanese male characters: hypocritical and arrogant Kouzuki and the opportunistic and cruel Count. This point is evident in Kouzuki's acquisition of Japanese identity, his sophisticated tastes in French literature, and his "fetishizing the aesthetics of the occupying Japanese culture" (Romney 2017, 64).<sup>10</sup> Kouzuki volunteers

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7. Park, who is famous for "the Artaudian extremity of his so-called revenge trilogy, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), *Oldboy* (2003), and *Lady Vengeance* (2005)" (Romney 2017, 64) has a reputation for making naturalist thriller films of extravagant violence.

8. According to Deleuze, Erich von Stroheim, Luis Buñuel, and Joseph Losey are great naturalist directors who were successful in getting inside and at the same time outside the naturalist world (Deleuze 1986, 136).

9. This phrase is derived by appropriating Raewyn Connell's "colonial structure of knowledge" (Connell 2007).

10. Such colonial aesthetics remains conspicuous in the current preference for stronger nations in the age of globalization. For example, *Miseteo Syeonsyain* (*Mr. Sunshine*), 2018's leading South Korean television series, demonstrates colonial aesthetics. Premiering internationally on Netflix, the series has been accused of being "pro-Japanese," apologizing for pro-Japanese collaborators," and "enforcing stereotypes—portraying the Japanese as villains and the Americans as heroes" (Oh 2018). The accusation is targeted at colonial aesthetics based on pro-Japanese Kouzuki's logic: "Korea is ugly and Japan is beautiful"; "Americans are good and Japanese, bad"; "Now, America is stronger than Japan, so Americans are less evil than the Japanese."

to become a slave, exposing a Stockholm-syndrome-like latent servility in his response to the Count, who asks why he wants to become Japanese: "Because Korea is ugly and Japan is beautiful" and "Korea is soft, slow, dull, and therefore hopeless." Despising his home country, he wishes to be accepted into that of the colonizers, as represented by the Count of "noble birth," although the fake Count is hired for the lowly work of copying paintings. As the Count states, copying is his particular way of possessing beauty. Driven by the desire to imitate, he mimics British gentlemen, posing as an aristocratic playboy while his father was ironically a servant on Jeju Island. Kouzuki, who acquires a Japanese identity by working for the Japanese colonial government and marrying a Japanese woman, even poses as a Victorian imperialist gentleman. As with Rochester's ill treatment of Bertha in *Jane Eyre* (1847), he treats his Japanese wife, Hideko's aunt, as a mad woman and places her under the surveillance of the housekeeper Mrs. Sasaki, who is in fact his Korean ex-wife. These pretensions can be regarded as the symptoms of "national abjection" caused by "the self-loathing of weaker nations" (Lucca 2017, 52).

Most intriguingly, Park turns Kouzuki's house into his personal empire, a colonial milieu replete with objects embodying disconcerting colonial aesthetics, such as a bronze snake statue, bells, and a giant octopus in a water tank. Functioning as a "Hollywood gothic" mansion in a chimerical hybrid of English Victorian, Japanese, and Korean elements, the house is "a palace of the cinematic imagination, transcending the realism of space and time" (Romney 2017, 65). As Park explains, the house is Kouzuki himself, a visualization of Kouzuki's inner state of mind. Thus, like Kouzuki, his house goes through the process of a naturalist degradation or decomposition into entropy during the film.

Waters' comments regarding Kouzuki's house cast an insightful light on space. According to Waters, from the viewpoints of both "psychic structures" and "social structures: public or semi-public spaces, then private, then secret spaces," his house can be characterized as a space in which "the normal order can be subverted" (Armitstead 2017). Kouzuki's study in particular, being the main stage for all the important events and situations in the film, is made all the more subversive by Park's use of anamorphic

lenses, which make remote items appear closer while squeezing information horizontally onto the screen in the form of gothic objects and fetishes. Furthermore, there is “a further sinister level in its basement—the realm of modern nightmare horror, where a classically Parkian act of revenge-fueled cruelty takes place” (Romney 2017, 65). It is in the study that right before leaving Kouzuki’s empire, Hideko and Sook-hee break all his collections of pornography, destroying the fetishes of colonial aesthetics that fill the space where he exercised his brutal hegemonic masculinity. It is the two women who attack and then escape from the degenerate symptoms that enclose the men hermetically.

As is the case with Joseph Losey, one of Deleuze’s three great naturalist directors with a predilection for Victorian milieu, Park looks for salvation from Sook-hee and Hideko. These two women perform the same roles of Losey’s women who “trace a line of exit, and who win a freedom which is creative, artistic, or simply practical” (Deleuze 1986, 139) from the closed circuit of the colonial milieu. Thus, it can be said that Park repurposes the Western naturalist cinema and its appropriation of women as a strategy of salvation from the naturalist world. It becomes a new type of Korean cinema whose aesthetic and political potentials reflect its characteristics as a cultural product of hybridity in the era of Hallyu.

### **A Faux Lesbian Thriller: Park’s Appropriation of Lesbian Sexuality**

Park’s choice of *Fingersmith* as a source text has much to do with the issues of postcoloniality that it raises. With regards to Waters’ decision to write “neo-Victorian novels,”<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Ho comments that the Victorian has become “a powerful shorthand for empire in the contemporary global imagination” (Ho 2012, 5). It can then be said that Park re-appropriates Waters’ “return to the

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11. With *Fingersmith*, the third of her trio of neo-Victorian novels, including *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), and *Affinity* (1999), Waters has accomplished “the political and critical genealogy of the genre” which places her work within “the new millennium’s rethinking of Victorian history, politics and culture” (Kaplan 2008, 42).

Victorian” as “a means of rethinking postcolonial politics and experience” (Ho 2012, 7), through another return to 1930s Korea under Japanese occupation. Yet while Waters wishes to explore women’s *transgressive* lesbian sexuality, Park’s main concern is more with colonialism. The idea of feminism in the original novel is integrated into Park’s shifting emphasis on colonialism and decolonization. Thus, although Waters agrees that the film is faithful to “the feminism of my book” (Ward 2017, 56), it cannot be seen as a faithful adaptation of the source text.

Critics tend to classify *The Handmaiden* as a lesbian thriller although Park’s treatment of the subversive force of sexual politics in the original text is far more complex than such a categorization would imply. But *Fingersmith* is not usually classified as a lesbian novel. Some critics have noted that Waters’ neo-Victorian novel does not fit easily into existing genres because of its “social and sexual politics” and its “political energy,” which goes “beyond established modes of representation” (Constantini 2006, 19). But in its plot development and ambience, *Fingersmith* is also seen as belonging to the Victorian genres of crime novel, historical fiction, and of Gothic fiction. A perusal of the text shows that Waters adopts the typical elements of Victorian novels, including swapped identities, mysterious parentages, and transgressive women, which help portray “the apparitional lesbian of the historical record and literary tradition” (Mitchell 2010, 141). The above three fictional genres tend to domesticate and purge the transgressive lesbian desire for the restoration of “the reproductive heteronormativity” on which patriarchal Victorian society relies. In *Fingersmith*, Waters exploits such an “authenticating strategy” of these genres to represent the lesbian sexuality of the female characters. Hence, *Fingersmith* is not treated as a Victorian genre novel but as a “neo-Victorian novel” or “faux-Victorian fiction” (Mitchell 2010, 141). This discussion provides insight into the genre orientation of *The Handmaiden*, inviting the appellation of a *faux-lesbian thriller* for Park’s adaptation of *Fingersmith* on the basis of the subversive sexual politics of lesbian sexuality the filmmaker appropriates for his own purposes. Park’s adaptation film can be called a faux-lesbian thriller which appropriates Waters’ lesbian fiction by using the same strategy of faux-Victorian fiction in order to exploit subversive lesbian sexuality.

But Park's approach to lesbianism is dissatisfactory to some Korean critics who point out his failure to recognize the audience's discomfort with the three lengthy sex sequences between Sook-hee and Hideko (D. Kim 2016). They criticize that the bed scenes do not satisfy the audience's voyeuristic pleasure. It is, however, Park's intention to provoke such discomfort by challenging the audience's assumptions regarding eroticism and romance in hopes of making them see the real issues of the film that "are taking place elsewhere" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 50). The first two bed scenes are, in fact, different versions of the same love-making presented from Sook-hee's and Hideko's vantage points. The bed scene in the cabin at the end of the film is the third one. Park's depictions of sex become gradually exaggerated from the overuse of sexual gestures in the first scene, the bolder yet rather awkward acrobatic-like sexual gestures in the second scene, and the playful game-like sex in the third scene. The gradual comic exaggeration of erotic gestures defamiliarizes the whole spectacle. Park explains that he chose a scissors position for the two female protagonists because he wanted their "perfectly symmetrical appearance", a visual image of their being in an equal status (S. Kim 2016). Rather than involving the audience in the erotic spectacle itself, as it happens to the male audience in Hideko's reading performance and masquerade, he wished to make the audience feel uncomfortable amid the galleries of images and reflections of the lesbian couple, as in Madame Irma's house of illusion in Jean Genet's *The Balcony* (*Le Balcon*).<sup>12</sup> Finally, in the third scene, their equal positions form a symmetry, mirroring each other exactly like a decalcomania. Thus, the bed scenes prove that *The Handmaiden* is not a lesbian thriller, but instead a faux-lesbian thriller.

Approaching this film as a faux-lesbian thriller reveals Park's distinct differences from its source material. In *Fingersmith*, Waters focuses on "the very process by which lesbian desire becomes invisible to history and fiction" (Mitchell 2010, 141). By contrast, Park draws attention to "homosexuality"<sup>13</sup>

12. In his notes for the staging of the play, Jean Genet states that the stage of *The Balcony* is presented as "the glorification of the Image and the Reflection" (Genet 1956, 12).

13. Park used the terminology of homosexuality rather than lesbianism, although he deals with lesbianism in the film. This implies that he is not concerned with female sexuality *per se*. (H. Lee 2016).

or, more specifically, lesbian sexuality, as a force compelling the two women to find a way out of Kouzuki's empire. Waters confirms that Park's heroines "are appropriating a very male pornographic tradition to criticize and attack the tradition and at the same time to find their own way of exploring their desires" (Armitstead 2017). Thus, while Sue and Maud in Waters' faux-Victorian lesbian fiction reclaim the Briar manor house as "a site for [the] tradition of lesbian desire" or "a private feminized space" (Mitchell 2010, 140),<sup>14</sup> Sook-hee and Hideko in Park's faux-lesbian film embark on a journey toward liberation, a line of flight to a third space, instead of returning to Kouzuki's house. A related difference between the two works is that while Waters' protagonists are guiltily conscious of other people's gazes, Park's do not show any shame or guilt in their transgressive passions as "advanced women" (Deleuze 1986, 139). As with Losey's women, Sook-hee and Hideko are "outside the originary world of the men" (Deleuze 1986, 138). Therefore, they successfully perform their roles in initiating and sustaining the process of decolonization.

### The Lady's Masquerade and Theatricality

Park's focus on gender and class issues in *The Handmaiden* can also be elucidated in terms of Hideko's masquerade. When Sook-hee screams furiously at the end of Part One, "Right from the start, she had always been a rotten bitch!" the audience realizes that Hideko has successfully performed the role of an innocent victim up to that point in the plot. Part Two then presents her backstory from her perspective, exposing that she has orchestrated the whole process of the deceptive play. She is not an innocent virgin but a "great female villain" in the Japanese pastiche of the Marquis de Sade's *Juliette* she is reading. Her duplicity reminds the audience of Juliette, whom Jane Gallop calls "the new superhuman woman" (Gallop 1981, 105).

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14. Sue and Maud have rejected their inheritance, which is a main factor in the plot of the Victorian novel, in favor of earning their own income by writing erotic fiction in their private feminized space, anticipating Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own."

Hideko's performance illustrates Luce Irigaray's definition of masquerade as "the manifestation of femininity" (Irigaray 1985, 133). As such, Hideko's masquerade reflects men's desire. Her simulation of sex with a wooden male puppet in the film, which Waters praises as "a very fine scene" (Armitstead 2017), epitomizes a masquerade that she performs essentially for male desire at the cost of her own. Moreover, her action can also be interpreted as a form of resistance rather than of total submission to the patriarchal authority. The duality of her masquerade is supported by Jacques Lacan's view on the act of copulation, according to which her grotesque airborne ballet with the phallic symbol of the puppet appears to be "entirely propelled into comedy" (Lacan 1985, 84). As Judith Butler aptly articulates, the male audience member who "has" the Phallus requires Hideko, the Other that lacks the Phallus, to confirm and "be" the Phallus (Butler 1990, 44). Hideko is surely compelled to "appear" to be the Phallus (Butler 1990, 46), by performing the masquerade. Although this process requires a renunciation of her own desire, her masquerade ultimately signifies both "a radicalization of the 'comedic' dimension of sexual ontology" and a feminist strategy of "unmasking in order to recover or release whatever feminine desire has remained suppressed within the terms of the phallic economy" of Kouzuki's theater (Butler 1990, 47). Without a doubt, Hideko's masquerade is exaggerated "to the point of absurdity, comedy," resonating with Deleuze and Félix Guattari's idea of "an exaggerated Oedipus" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 10). The prospective Japanese buyers of Kouzuki's pornographic books squirm comically with lust in their seats, and their reactions to Hideko's readings amplify the comic effect. These absurd dynamics lead Hideko's haughty exaggeration of male pornography to trigger within her "a molecular agitation in which an entirely different sort of combat is being played out" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 10).

Staged by Kouzuki as a way of identifying himself with de Sade, the infamous despotic libertine, Hideko's reading sessions are full of theatricality. Wearing a kimono and an expressionless, thickly powdered mask-like face, she is fetishized as "[Park's] white cat" (C. Park 2016, 140) who provides a theatrical performance for the male guests' voyeuristic pleasure, all the while under Kouzuki's violent and oppressive control. At the

same time, she becomes quite powerful during such readings, paradoxically exploiting her own situation of being exploited. The theatricality gradually spawns a liberatory and subversive power which she uses to challenge male authority by forcing her audience, that is, Kouzuki's customers, to capitulate to the mimetic illusion of her performance and thereby perform for her own pleasure. When Hideko finds a *new face*—Count Fujiwara—among the male audience, she displays her ability to even seduce him as her “brave knight” whom she can exploit as her would-be rescuer. The theater in Kouzuki's study is, therefore, transformed into Hideko's house of illusion. Similar to the hostess Madame Irma in *The Balcony*, Hideko becomes her own hostess, while the male characters in *The Handmaiden* turn into “pathetic, unwanted voyeurs; misusing, abusing and misunderstanding what women really want” (B. Lee 2016).

Hideko's masquerade and histrionic power generate a subversive disturbing tension in Kouzuki's theatre that requires her to mirror his mirroring in order to affirm his identity and uphold his male fantasy. She refuses the role of a submissive, suppressed victim, and instead, reacts against the power of the dominant One as a threatening agency. But she still needs a *certain force* in tracing a line of exit from the mirroring frame, i.e., in carrying out *sortie* (exit, departure), a key concept in Hélène Cixous which stresses movement in the passage out of a system that always heads toward the other.

### **The Handmaiden as a *Certain Force***

In orchestrating her escape plan, Hideko uses Count Fujiwara, the fake nobleman, in such a way that his plot of stealing her inheritance is changed into her own plan of *sortie* from Kouzuki's house. The Count initially contrives the scheme by appropriating Victorian stories of mad and hysterical women. But it does not take him long to realize that Hideko cannot be easily seduced into his trap. His encounter with Hideko's impertinent gaze in the study immediately forces him to change his original plan, changing from the role of her seducer to that of her rescuer. She in

turn modifies his revised scenario by asking him to employ a poor, illiterate Korean girl as her maid, with the aim of committing her to the mental hospital in her stead. But Hideko comes to realize later that she needs the maid more as her rescuer than as her changeling, thus emphasizing the scenario of *sortie* when performing the scenario.

In analyzing how Sook-hee emerges as a *certain force*, it is imperative to understand the mechanism of male pornography in the film text in light of Lacan's concept of the *objet a*. According to Lacan, male pornography exploits women and women's bodies as objects and as inferior doubles of the Other, the Woman, and the lady who only exists within the male fantasy for the exclusive purpose of sexual arousal. In *The Handmaiden*, no sexual relationships are formed between the two men and the Japanese ladies. Notably, Park's male characters tend to have sexual relationships with "servant-girls" who "are there only as fantasy objects, like animals" (Cixous and Clément 1986, 150). It is revealed that Kouzuki sleeps with his Korean housekeeper but not with his Japanese wife, Hideko. The Count has sex with Junko, Hideko's former servant, but not with Hideko. Junko then is fired for being seduced by the Count, and Sook-hee replaces her. Sook-hee is also meant to be eliminated after being used as Hideko's changeling, destined to a similar fate as Dora (the name of the maid given by Freud to his analysand in his Dora case). But Cixous argues that Dora is "a certain force" that dismantles the structure of coupling, though Clément insists that Dora never seems to be a revolutionary character and that Cixous fetishizes her (Cixous and Clément 1986, 157).

On discovering the shocking male pornography in the study, however, Sook-hee is appalled by Kouzuki's society of aristocratic Japanese gentlemen founded on the bodies of women as fetishes. Her loathing prompts her to initiate a destruction of Kouzuki's collection of pornographic books, demonstrating her strength as a *certain force* that can demolish his empire into pieces. It is in this process that the maid becomes a heroine who can break open Kouzuki's house. As the *newly* born woman, Sook-hee's subversive power leads Hideko to attack her closed and repressive environment and *sortie* from it.

The scene of Sook-hee and Hideko's pre-dawn flight from Kouzuki's

house is presented in distance in Part One and then in proximity in Part Two. Absent in the original novel, this scene is Park's invention that captures a natural and spontaneous sense of liberation experienced by the two women. Now, they search for a new life as two women in love with each other, not as lady and handmaiden. Their non-hierarchical relationship is emphasized by their nearly identical outfits. Sook-hee finally saves Hideko from her confined, boring life. When the two women later board the boat rowed by the Count, they hold hands and are absorbed in each other, while the Count is out of focus; he no longer exists.

### **Becoming-Maids and Decolonization**

*The Handmaiden* has been favorably reviewed in the West as the most commercially and artistically successful Korean *queer* film, nominated for both the Palme d'Or and Queer Palm at the Cannes Film Festival. But its domestic critical reception has not been so positive since its release in 2016, due largely to its alleged lack of historicity and ideological sensitivity in handling the theme of colonialism. Responding to the accusation of castrated historicity in the film, Park states that "a historical perspective is not completely excluded" in his attempt "to understand the pro-Japanese group in the specifically conditioned setting" (H. Lee 2016). As for why he chose the 1930s, Park explains that this period saw the existence of an heiress and a handmaiden as part of the legacies of the traditional feudal order and strict class system, while being modern enough to have a Western-style mental institution for the treatment of transgressive and disposable women. The film then simply tells the stories of the four particular individuals living in the 1930s, when Korea was undergoing modernization and Westernization as well as colonization. Park relocates this period into the oppressive milieu of Kouzuki's empire rather than directly addressing an independence movement and colonial social realities. This offers historical, political, and social insights into both the self-loathing of weaker nations and Korea's complicated relationship with Japan.

Korea's modernization had begun by the time Japan annexed Korea in

1910, and it continued under Japanese military rule as a gendered project, as is also the case of the “gendered processes of industrialization” during the 1960s under the Park Chung-hee regime (Moon 2005, 6). More recently, globalization in Korea might also be seen as a deeply gendered project, based on the exploitation of gendered subalterns. Rhacel Salazar Parreñas describes the politics of reproductive labor in globalization, calling gendered subalterns, such as migrant women, “servants of globalization” (Parreñas 2015), or “maids of globalization,” proposing that the maids of colonization, modernization, and globalization have been exploited as disposable instruments to clean up the undesirable products of society. Along with globalization, the process of modernization in Korea has also been driven by the opposing forces of (neo)colonization and decolonization. Although women are expected to perform the roles of *maids of modernization* in a state as perpetual minorities, it is the process of becoming-minor that offers the subversive potential to escape and attack the closed circuit of colonization; through the process of becoming maids, women can become agents of decolonization. Because they are missing people in the system of Kouzuki’s manor house, women have to invent themselves through the process of becoming, decoupling themselves from hierarchical couples.

Many critics, including Waters, have expressed discomfort regarding Park’s representation of Sook-hee and Hideko as equals. Waters admitted some dissatisfaction “in the representation of the two beautiful young women making love that insists on a less idealised representation of physical intimacy between women” and found their mirror-like positions, lacking the differences between a lady and her maid “rather troubling” (Armitstead 2017). Such discomfort can be attributed to a binary approach at the core of Western modern metaphysics that requires disparate entities: East/West, man/woman, One/Other, colonizer/colonized, lady/maid. These dyads do not keep a dialectical relationship between equal terms, but operate rather in oppositional tension according to the strategies of power and exclusion that grant privilege to one term over the other, implying a hierarchy between the two. The One can only see itself by mirroring, signifying the coupling of the subject with the Other. This mirroring can be regarded as the One’s privilege. Thus, the concept of the mirroring explains the colonizing mechanism

between stronger and weaker nations.

As Cixous argues, “it’s on the couple that we have to work if we are to deconstruct and transform culture” (Cixous 1981, 44), since the hierarchical couple is a product of the hierarchical male/Western/colonizer fantasy. From this point of view, the relationship between Hideko and Sook-hee, a Japanese lady and a Korean handmaiden, begins as a hierarchical opposition. But as the two women undergo the process of decoupling from the hierarchical couple, Park demonstrates the dynamics of decolonization in their relationship. *The Handmaiden* portrays “a journey to gradually narrowing the gap” between Hideko and Sook-hee in terms of their class, age, and national/racial identity, as Park noted in an interview about the film (S. Kim 2016). This journey is itself a process of decoupling, a process of becoming-maids which leads to the scene of Hideko’s kneeling down to retie Sook-hee’s shoelace at the end of the film. Park uses various binary strategies to underline this theme of decolonization or the deconstruction of hierarchy between Korea and Japan. Indeed, their differences diminished by using two titles for the film—*Agassi* and *The Handmaiden*, by casting Korean actors for Japanese characters, and by having the protagonists code-switch between Japanese and Korean languages.

The process of Hideko’s and Sook-hee’s decoupling from the enforced hierarchical relationships parallels their process of becoming-maids, becoming-*object a* instead of the hypothetical Other, woman, or lady. The two women function as mirrors for each other before accomplishing the mirroring between themselves on equal terms. As they explore and exchange the roles of lady and maid in Hideko’s bedroom, Sook-hee and Hideko experience this gap between them as pleasure rather than anxiety, witnessing their doubles in each other’s identity as orphans, maids, and minorities. Hideko’s long gloves and tightly fastened dresses symbolize the Western imperial occupation of Asia, “the image of a tightly laced, corseted female figure” serving as “the accepted visual shorthand for the notion of the literally and metaphorically repressed Victorian woman” (Primorac 2018, 435). Dressing and undressing the lady is the maid’s job, and it is a play that Sook-hee, the maid, enjoys: “All these buttons are for my amusement.” Both the lady and the maid enjoy buttoning and unbuttoning, dressing and

undressing each other as they shift their roles, looking at their reflections in the mirrors. This interplay is the process of becoming-maids which subverts the hierarchical class relationship of the other (lady) and the *object a* (maid), the Japanese lady and the colonized Korean woman.

The minorities who are colonized no longer exist, or exist only in the condition of minority, as Fanon's things and Lacan's *objet a*. By becoming-minor, the colonized can both exist within and resist a colonial society. Thus, paradoxically, the process of decolonization by which minorities invent themselves as people is that of becoming-minor. By cinematizing such discourses in terms of gender, *The Handmaiden* portrays the creation of new women, or to borrow Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément's words, "newly born women"; the two female protagonists have become newly born through the decolonization process of decoupling themselves from their masters. Cixous especially asserts the subversive force of the servant-girl who as "the hole in the social cell" (Cixous and Clément 1986, 150) can resist the colonial system by exerting a revolutionary force. It is Waters' subversive sexual politics that Park appropriates in his film by foregrounding the two women's becoming-maids in order to challenge cultural imperialism and deploy the ongoing process of decolonization. In this sense, Park's film can be regarded as a modern political film which attempts to invent a new people by depicting the process of the characters becoming-minor, or becoming-maids of the Japanese lady and her Korean handmaiden, and transforming into newly born women.

### **The Maids' Crossing over the Sea toward a Third Space**

The process of becoming-maids is not one of mimesis. Rather, it is generative of a new way of being. Both Hideko and Sook-hee have to go through the process of becoming-maids, marking a phase of a larger process which Deleuze and Guattari (1986) call "deterritorialization." In other words, their becoming-maids process generates a dynamic force for the creation of new people who can resist the authority of the hierarchical colonial empire represented by Kouzuki's house.

In the film, Kouzuki threatens to put Hideko into the basement. However, it is the Count who is eventually brought to such a retreat of Gothic horror as her would-be-brave knight, and who experiences the sort of revenge typical of Park's films. The guillotining of the Count's fingers recalls a torture scene in de Sade's *Julliette*, in which "the eroticism will be transposed...to create a violent exteriorization of cruelty" (Artaud 1958, 99). This scene is replete with Park's exaggeration of macho eroticism. It exaggerates, expands, and foregrounds that eroticism to the point of violent and fatal pleasure. Ruthlessly ridiculing the male characters in his film, Park highlights the comic effect of his "exaggerated Oedipus" and the female characters' strategy of "deterritorializing Oedipus" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 10). In a like manner to Franz Kafka's "Letter to the Father," they send a letter to Kouzuki, refusing to return to his empire. Finally, the two male characters are entombed in the blue smoke-filled underground that entangles them in their own becoming of degradation and death.

The final scene of *The Handmaiden* manifests Park's desire to re-purpose the original novel as he searches for a generative dynamic of decolonization in the two women's *sortie*. While the return of Waters' two heroines to the Briar house in the novel's ending shows that movement away from the Victorian social system is impossible, the ending of Park's film confirms that Kouzuki's house cannot prevent the two women from moving toward a third space. In the final sequence, Sook-hee and Hideko are aboard a ferry, travelling toward the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai, a hybrid space of West and East in the 1930s. They are crossing the sea between Japan, China, and Korea, a "metaphorical and real space of globalization" (Ho 2012, 173). In other words, they are traversing the third, in-between, "hybrid" space of the colonizer and the colonized (Bhabha 1994, 55). In doing so, they perform their own deterritorialization or decolonization. The ending is notably contrasted with the opening sequence of the film, which shows Japanese soldiers attacking Korean children. On the ferry, all the passengers, including a group of Japanese soldiers, appear to celebrate their journey on a line of flight from the empire together. The film, therefore, begins by alerting the audience to an oppressive colonial context and ends with liberation and decolonization. Indeed, it might be that Hideko, now disguised as a Korean

man with the name Kim Pan-dol (ironically the Count's real Korean name), and Sook-hee would join the national liberation movements in Shanghai where the Korean government-in-exile was based.

This reading of Park's *The Handmaiden* as a Korean pastiche of cultural hybridity attempts to demonstrate that the Korean filmmaker can expertly channel the dynamics of hybridity into a cinematic investigation of the politics of gender, class, and colonialism. From a broad historical perspective, his endeavor may offer insights into the future direction of the Hallyu phenomenon under the ethos of globalization. Unlike the economic globalization that worsens the gulf between developed and developing nations, the world-wide spread of popular cultural products from South Korea should be aimed at enhancing cross-cultural communication among their consumers without a hierarchical positioning of each other. In this sense, Park's transcultural film adaptation for the decolonization of dominant Western and Hollywood cultural hegemony contributes to sustaining Hallyu's virtual potentialities. More importantly, the film initiates a new role for Korean cinema in creating a third hybrid space as the creative field where we can search for a new vision of Hallyu.

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