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Tear My Life Apart: The Queer Epistemology of *The Handmaiden*

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The queerness of which I speak would deliberately sever us from ourselves, from the assurance, that is, of knowing ourselves and hence of knowing our “good.” Such queerness proposes, in place of the good, something I want to call “better,” though it promises, in more than one sense of the phrase, absolutely nothing. I connect this something better with Lacan’s characterization of what he calls “truth,” where truth does not assure happiness, or even, as Lacan makes clear, the good. Instead, it names only the insistent particularity of the subject, impossible fully to articulate and “tending toward the real.”

Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*

At the start of Park Chan-wook’s 2016 film *The Handmaiden*, neither Tamako nor Lady Hideko understand the web of manipulation and lies in which they are entrapped. Both have some key pieces of awareness, but the film’s male characters work hard to safeguard the gates of their knowledge in a desperate bid to prevent females from attaining agency. Yet, by the film’s conclusion, the men realize this hallowed knowledge has prevented them from glimpsing more than a shade of the women’s true capabilities. When Tamako and Hideko finally embrace queerness, they tear down the superficial facade of knowledge that the film’s male characters had passed off for truth even as they build their own identities anew.

The film’s symbol for patriarchal knowledge is Uncle Kouzu’s beloved library. This analysis compares two related sequences staged in the library that establish the film’s argument for queer epistemology: when repressed queerness within the space of patriarchal knowledge learns to claim its negativity, it destabilizes the heteronormative symbolic structure of social reality. The first sequence introduces the audience to the guarded gates of male knowledge when Tamako enters the library to find Hideko and Kouzu studying. The first moments of this sequence linger on the open doorway, showing a weak natural light partially penetrating a previously blacked-out room. Then we see Tamako open yet another door, as if peeling back superficial layers to discover something deeper within. And, as she shuts the final door behind her, discover she does.

A track shot seems to follow Tamako's gaze first across dark bookshelves that form a sort of tunnel, then forward toward the center of the library, and finally to where Hideko and Kouzu sit staged. This prolonged track emphasizes the vastness of the room before the camera wrests control from Tamako's gaze by switching to a reverse long shot of her looking very small in the entrance.



The mise-en-scene then further develops this implied power dynamic. Though both Hideko and Kouzu sit at the heart of knowledge (for now), the fact that Kouzu sits at the table while Hideko is relegated to the floor leaves no room for uncertainty concerning who's really in power here. Not only is Kouzu higher up in the shot, but he's the only character with a book in front of him, demonstrating a connection to knowledge that indicates a power of its own. However, Park also performs the age-old trick of dressing the moral character in white and the immoral one in black, sending a clear signal to the audience that though Kouzu is in power here, he's nobody's friend.



Park then solidifies where our sympathies are meant to lie. In the next shot, paired with an ominous roll in the extradiegetic soundtrack, Hideko introduces Tamako to Kouzu as her new handmaiden. As Tamako steps forward to approach them, neither she nor the audience is prepared for the viscosity of Kouzu's reaction as it explodes forth through mise-en-scene and

sound. First, he practically leaps out of his chair, filling the entire shot with his blackness as he yells “the snake, the snake!” The sudden noise, the abrupt switch from a serene shot composition to frantic activity, and the unestablished referent of his words are designed to catch the audience off guard, instilling within them the same sort of panic Tamako must feel in that moment. Tamako gives a little start, then looks down and leaps backwards with a startling scream as we get a quick shot of a decorative metal cobra planted in the middle of the floor just in front of her. Then, we see Hideko hurry over to pull a lever, and a gate slams shut, startling the audience once again



with another bang and matching scream from Tamako. All of this happens in the space of a few seconds, and then Park returns to the wide shot of Tamako in the entryway. This time, though, a wrought-iron gate has completely blocked her off from the precious knowledge that lies within.

But why? There’s always the obvious answer: women with the power of knowledge at their disposal constitute a threat to patriarchy. But that prompts the question: what makes smart women such a threat to male agency? And why does Kouzu seem to fear Tamako entering into his sanctum of “truth” but not Hideko? Lee Edelman offers one answer: “queerness exposes the obliquity of our relation to what we experience in and as social reality, alerting us to the fantasies structurally necessary in order to sustain it and sustaining those fantasies through the figural logics, the linguistic structures, that shape them” (6–7). So, let’s start with the easier question and work backwards. Kouzu fears having Tamako in his library because she’s capable of queering it. Of course, he doesn’t know she’s gay, but in this context, her gayness is merely a symbol for her ability to queer things, to harm the fantasies that prop up his social reality. He certainly does recognize this. In other words, Kouzu sees Tamako as an outside contaminant. Hideko has been strictly raised since girlhood to accept patriarchy at face value. At this point she’s still fully under Kouzu’s control, so she poses no threat to his masculinity. Even if she suddenly realized that she didn’t have to put up with Kouzu, she’d still be unable to escape his clutches alone—such is the vastness of his masculine power and web of connections. But, Tamako? Who knows where she’s been? As a free agent from the outside world, she must know some things that Kouzu doesn’t. This assumption inherently contains the potential for Tamako’s knowledge to leak into the environment Kouzu has so carefully curated, queering it through the introduction of perspectives that threaten the pseudo-enlightened Japanese worldview he curates within his household.

Unfortunately for Kouzu, Tamako does one better than queering the intellectual space around his precious Hideko; she queers Hideko herself. This is where the other definition of queerness comes in. Through Tamako, Hideko’s identity finds a way to slip out of the mold Kouzu forced it into, and the new form it takes contains an ingredient incomprehensible to the film’s male characters: lesbianism. In a roundabout way, this answers the other question I posed: patriarchy must fear smart women not because one smart woman can bring it down, but because one smart woman tends to create more smart women, allowing a chain reaction through which ever-increasing numbers of

women are able to construct an identity outside the vocabulary and comprehension of even the most eloquent patriarchy simply by following the example of women around them. Throughout the film, both male leads remain completely oblivious to the way in which the girls' love subverts their modes of control.

The last step towards making this conjecture salable is to explain how living out her queerness changes Hideko's identity so much that she becomes incomprehensible to men. After all, it wasn't her choice to be gay; when I say that Tamako "queers" her, I mean that she helps Hideko realize a previously latent identity that changes how she sees the world, not that she somehow "converts" her to homosexuality, as the tired dyadic-cisgender-heterosexual narrative goes. On identity construction, Teresa de Lauretis writes that "the representation of gender is its construction" (3). So, when Hideko begins living out her gayness, she is at the same time changing how she represents her gender. Since lesbianism isn't one of patriarchy's limited options for expressing femininity, her gender is consequently pulled off patriarchy's railroad tracks and into the world of the expanded possibilities provided by queerness. And, as De Lauretis tells us, the mere fact that she is representing her gender outside the bounds of patriarchy means that she is starting to build up a new gender, and thus identity, in that negative space too.

We see the result of this late in the film, the next time Hideko and Tamako return to the space of knowledge that Kouzu had once prevented Tamako from accessing. This sequence starts with a shot of the two women sitting across from one another in the library. Both are dressed in dark colors, which

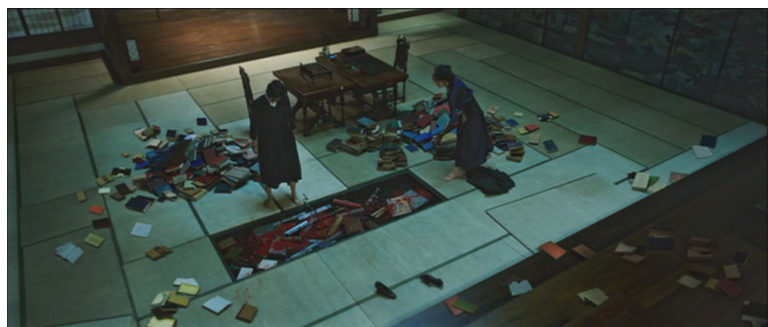


here serves not as a moral commentary, but rather as a recognition of their status as disruptors of (the patriarchal) social order. Kouzu is not present; through queerness, the women have found a way to displace this guardian, leaving the gate open. The knowledge he's tried so hard to keep Tamako from accessing and Hideko from appreciating, for fear of what they might do with it, is now theirs for the taking. But, as Tamako flips through one of his books, she's horrified by its depictions of women as two-dimensional sex objects. Tamako thus realizes the extent of Hideko's suffering and watches tears start to form in her lover's eyes.

In that moment, her mind's made up; if this is the "knowledge" of patriarchy, then we don't need it. We're beyond it; and now that queerness has opened our eyes, there's no going back. Thus, she takes Edelman's path. Destroying books is widely perceived as a crime against future generations, but "fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized" (Edelman, 29). The scene is silent except for Tamako's barely controlled emotions and the tearing of paper as she rips into the book she's holding. The editing gives us a series of quick shots—with erratic, shaky cinematography—that emphasize the emotion of the action. We also get brief shots of both the astonishment in Hideko's eyes and the determination in Tamako's as she prepares to battle the power/knowledge of patriarchy to protect her girlfriend.

As Tamako storms off towards the imposing bookcases, she's only a small figure in the mise-en-scène and, when she reaches her target, she's at first able to do little more than throw the books harmlessly onto the floor. But a quiet, extradiegetic theme has also entered the scene, its combination of piano and low strings (likely double bass and cello) setting a dramatic mood that's both resolute and emotional. It starts off so faint it scarcely registers, but as it gradually crescendos to a pulsing forte, Tamako's actions become more and more aggressive. We see her shred books and scrolls with her bare hands, rip into them with a knife, and eventually level display cases and cast entire shelves to the floor. Just like the force multiplier of women teaching each other how to build a female identity outside of patriarchy, she starts out slow, but she steadily increases her momentum and damage with all the inevitability of a mounting revolution.

Park's filming here also offers a queer resistance to the smoother, less visually emotional narrative to which the audience is accustomed. The shots come quickly and from different perspectives. Sometimes Park skips ahead through time, and other times, he does a quick cut that covers the space of scarcely a second, intentionally disjointing the moment further. Through all of it, Hideko follows Tamako, watching events unfold in emotional awe—until she decides to join in. In a wide shot, we see her kneel down beside Tamako as she helps to dislodge a floor panel covering a small pool of water. The colorful books that Tamako has cast down are piled up around them, and in subsequent shots, Tamako sweeps them into the water with such force that it inspires Hideko to truly fight back. With clear apprehension, she casts red ink onto the drowning books, finally breaking free from the notion that the patriarchy they preached was an unchangeable part of her life. Once she's rebelled in this small way, her confidence blossoms, and she joins Tamako in stomping the books into the water, the red dye giving the illusion of patriarchal “knowledge” bleeding out under a storm of remorseless blows from a queerness too long denied.



But Tamako realizes that there's one more thing to be done to break the influence of this curated truth once and for all. Park gives us a close-up profile of Tamako's lower body that tracks her on a

path parallel to the one she's walking. In the center of the shot, and thus of the audience's attention, is the dull, gray, edged rod she's clutching in one hand as if it were a sword. As Tamako walks, Hideko reenters the scene through an extradiegetic voiceover, referencing Tamako as "the savior who came to tear my life apart." The camera zooms in on Hideko before cutting to a floor shot that



centers a familiar object. Through the camera, which is slightly canted upwards, we see Tamako raise her blade above her head, then bring it down, beheading in a single blow the metal snake that had once marked the boundaries of her knowledge.

Edelman interprets Lacan's revised "truth" as being, "like queerness, irreducibly linked to the 'aberrant or atypical,' to what chafes against 'normalization'" (6). This is the lesson that Kouzu, trapped in his hyper-curated world of regularity, never learns, as well as the reason why Tamako and Lady Hideko are not content simply to obtain the knowledge he's been holding back to repress them. While that may have been the intent that initially motivated their search for agency, that search yields a far more valuable result: a new way of representing their gender so powerful that it sunders the illusions of patriarchy, revealing it to be only a shadow of a greater real beyond the comprehension of any misogynist. Thus, for these two women, queerness brings something "better" than simple freedom: agency over the representation of their genders and identities, "impossible fully to articulate and 'tending toward the real'" (Edelman, 5). ☞

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