



**THE PSYCHOPHYSICAL  
EXPERIENCE OF *Feminine Desire***

By Michela

Figure1. Cover page

The psychophysical experience: to what extent does the dissipation of feminine energy within the hybrid colonial spatial typologies of The Handmaiden (2016) reveal an architecture that remains within the subjects it shapes?





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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In *The Handmaiden* (2016), the mansion is not merely a backdrop but a controlling presence. The mansion, as an architectural component, becomes the primary stage in which power is constructed whilst challenged through spatial logic, the layout, and the inevitable eventual breach of rooms. This essay interprets Luce Irigaray's theory of the sexed subject (1987, p. 73) and spatial enclosure, drawing on Rawes's (2007) touching and sensing analysis in Chapters 5 and 6 and her further exploration of diagonals, horizontals, and asymmetry.

The building's hybrid colonial form is analysed through the lens of Orientalism (Said, 1978), while the primary discussion of sexed subjects is driven by Irigaray, as theorised through Irigaray for Architects (Rawes, 2007). The underground library is a patriarchal stage in which Hideko appears as an ornament and object; Sook-hee's arrival is a disruption of the mansion's spatial logic, refusing to become part of the interior.

The final act is an example of what Irigaray refers to as "energy dissipation" which reads as the psychophysical liberation from the male-driven topologies: systems of measurements of architectural spaces imposed on feminine desire.

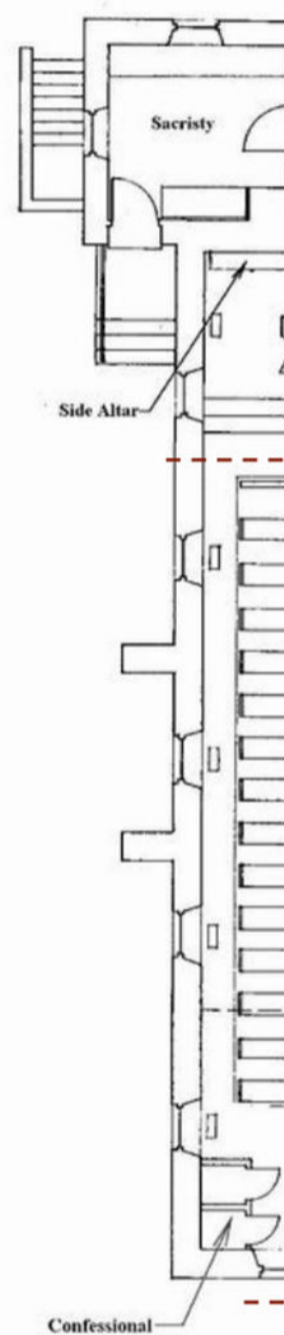
This essay concludes with the question that the film subtly poses but does not fundamentally answer: if the sexed subject exits the room in which they are essentially moulded; will they be bound to recreate the same structures which facilitate this metamorphosis, in other rooms? Arguing, that *The Handmaiden* depicts liberty as both tangible and architecturally incomplete: the room is escaped, but its geometry remains.

## INTRODUCTION

1 Park Chan-Wook's films have often explored both physical and mental themes of  
2 captivity and confinement, in which his main characters must survive and, ultimately,  
3 escape (The film itself, 2022).

4 At the very heart of the mansion there is an underground library, which includes a  
5 room covered in tatami mats that Kouzuki, Hideko's uncle, has transformed into a  
6 stage, although the structural layout resembles that of a church, as it can be observed  
7 that her uncle Kouzuki regards reading erotica as religious, and as he places himself as  
8 "God", he is essentially free to redecorate as he pleases (The film itself, 2022).

9 Hideko is obliged to read aloud, literature from her uncle's library of erotic and sadistic  
10 books, to her uncle's friends, with her body on display as both performance and  
11 illustration. Kouzuki's library is the film's most clear architectural statement: a space in  
12 which the feminine individuality is completely reduced to an ornamental piece.



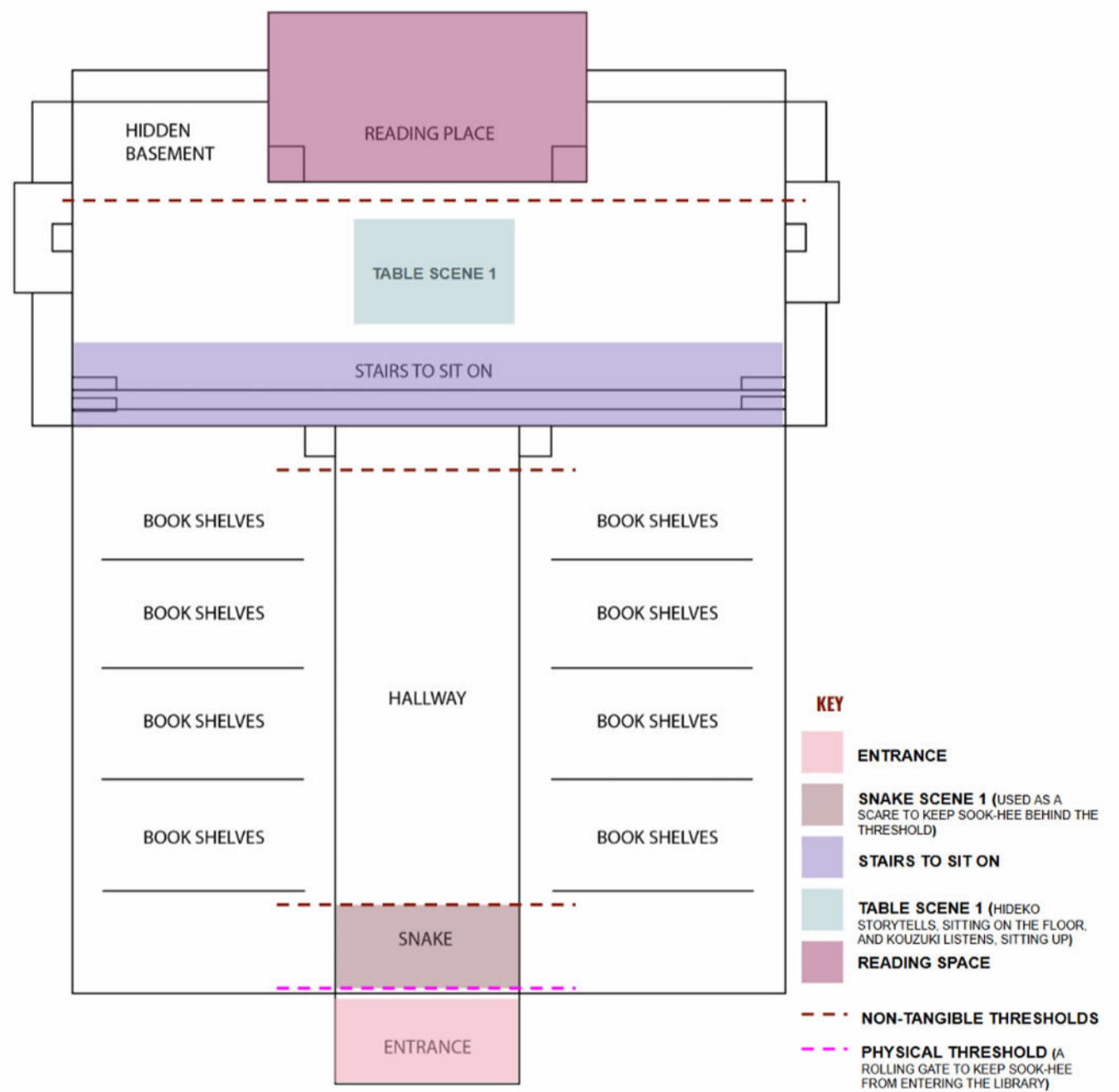
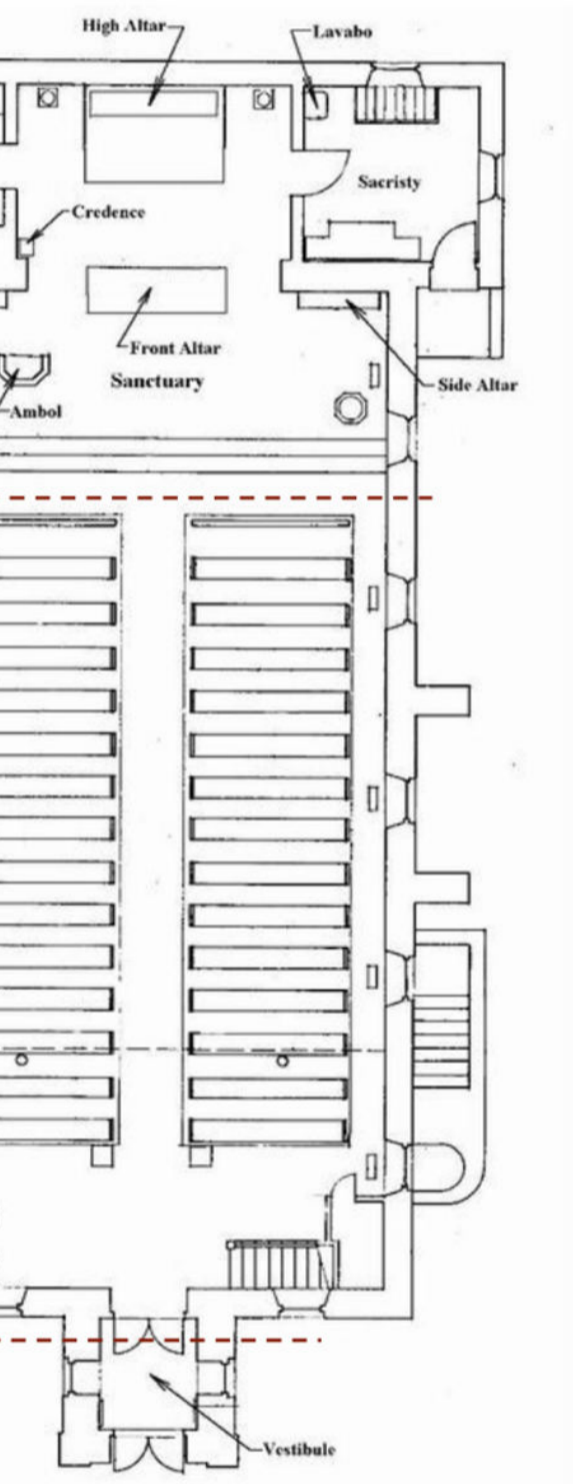


Figure 2 Comparison of a church floor plan and Kouzuki's library floor plan (annotated by author).

## THE LIBRARY AS A STAGE AND THE ORNAMENTALISM OF THE SUBJECT.

Graeme Booker's (2025) lecture of 'The Story of the Interior' drew attention to Le Corbusier's statement, which is 'a perversion to create an atmosphere in a room', a modernist take that decoration, sensationalism, and fabricated ambiances essentially corrupt coherent spatial order.

Kouzuki's library inverts this logic entirely. It is a space of nothing but atmosphere, a theatre of sensations carefully arranged, a room in which feminine desire and interiority have become a showroom for the pleasure of the male audience.

The word "ornamental" carries a double weight, as David Cannadine (2001) argues in *Ornamentalism*, with the British Empire having domesticated the exotic through pageantry and hierarchy, rendering it visually accessible and socially ordered, Kouzuki's library acts out Cannadine's critical theory at the scale of a room: Hideko is made an ornament, dressed, positioned, and displayed as a spectacle that is all at once colonial and patriarchal.

As Rowes argues in symbolic thinking, architectural practice's structure space through systems (for example, thermodynamics) that fail to quantify "the psycho-physical experience of female desire" (Rowes, 2022, p. 65). The library accurately translates this exclusion through its layout: the audience's gradual seated arrangement, Hideko's sunken reading position (see Figure 4), and the controlled sightlines are all a spatial argument about the hierarchy of the sexed subjects, who measures, who is measured and who is created, simply, to be seen.



*Figure 3: Non-tangible & physical thresholds (annotated by author).  
Figure 4: The performer and the observer in parallel (annotated by author).*

Hideko's trauma is more than just psychological; it is also spatial, as she's been bound to this room since she was a toddler, shaping her personality.

Which is reinforced by the film's portrayal of Sook-hee's initial exclusion from the library: not yet allowed inside since she has not yet been moulded into what the space requires (see Figure 7).

The library is a fully functional institution that reproduces bodies willing to serve it. Only those who have previously been moulded by its spatial morphology are allowed in. Complementary to this argument and while taking into account race, the bond Hideko and her uncle have is, in a morbid way, that of a debtor and a creditor. Furthermore, multidisciplinary scholar Anne Anlin Cheng theorises rather passionately that ornamentalism:

*"is not just about having a person made into a thing...it is also about the condition of life and possible intimacy within objectness. It is about how personhood might be indebted to objects"* (Cheng, cited in Gómez-Upegui, 2021).

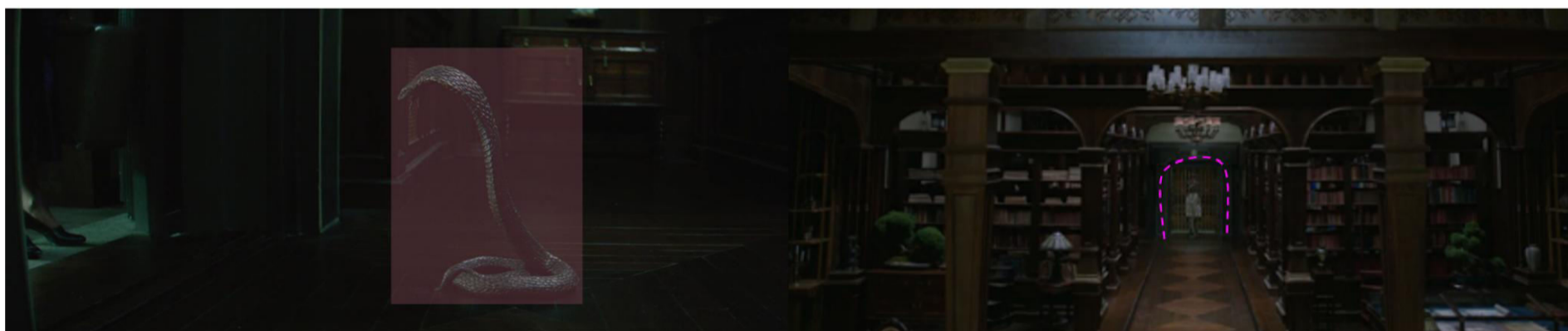


**Figure 5:** Kouzuki looking from above. Source: Park, C. (dir.) (2016) *The Handmaiden* [Film]. South Korea: CJ Entertainment.

## SPATIAL DISRUPTION BY THE UNFORMED SUBJECT AND THE PERMEABLE THRESHOLD

Sook-hee's arrival outside the mansion's spatial structure differs both architecturally and biographically. Touching upon Rowe's fifth chapter, on touching and sensing, she expands on Irigaray's claim that the sexed subject is not pre-formed and then placed in space but formed through spatial encounter, "intersubjective boundaries and contiguous relations between inside and outside spaces" (Rowes, 2022, p. 57)

### APOTROPAIC (SCARECROW) AND PHYSICAL THRESHOLDS



**SNAKE SCENE 1** (USED AS  
A SCARE TO KEEP  
SOOK-HEE BEHIND THE  
THRESHOLD)

**PHYSICAL THRESHOLD** (A  
ROLLING GATE TO KEEP  
SOOK-HEE FROM  
ENTERING THE LIBRARY)

*Figure 6: The snake as an apotropaic symbol (annotated by author).  
Figure 7: The rolling gate (annotated by author).*

Sook-hee has not passed through the mansion's threshold system; therefore, she remains unformed and has yet to grasp her spatial subjectivity. Her presence produces what Rowes, following Irigaray, refers to as a continuous relation: a horizontal rather than hierarchical style of spatial encounter.

She does not interact with the mansion in the same manner that its male tenants do, as analysed in Figure 4: parallel and vertical; Sook-hee provides the intersubjective relationship, destroying the room's spatial grammar which is constructed to objectify from within. Moreover, Rowe's take on diagonals, horizontals, and asymmetry strengthens this notion of Sook-hee's disruption, as the mansion's visual language is structured around symmetry and vertical authority: master over servant, stage over audience, and coloniser over colonised. Sook-hee's relationship with Hideko evolves laterally, taking a diagonal logic, shown through corridors, sleeping quarters, and the transitional borders of rooms rather than at staged centres.

Weakening the mental thresholds of Hideko, as Jonathan Hill suggests, the "modernist space is contaminated by matter...through which sexed subjects and bodies are (re)constructed" (Hill, cited in Rowes, 2022, p. 57). Using Hill's take on contamination by matter theory, this difference in room decorum could essentially signify that Sook-hee's disruption by arrival could also be on a cultural level; as described by director Park:

*"Hideko's room is located in a Western-style wing, so she...lives the life of a Western lady. In contrast, the maid's room next door is in the Japanese style."*  
(Park, 2016, p. 4)

## THE FINAL ACT AS THE DISSIPATION OF ENERGY, LIBERATION, REENACTMENT AND THE UNCHANGING ROOM

1 The final act portrays the two ladies in a ship's cabin, reenacting one of the erotic tales  
2 Hideko was forced to read in the library. Rowes, following Irigaray, argues that the  
3 feminine desire is a type of energy whose dispersal is incapable of being kept inside  
4 "rational" man-written topologies (Rowe 2022, p. 65). Which could read the scene as  
5 the suppressed energy being released on its own terms, free of masculine control. This  
6 is the dissipation that Irigaray proposes, not the complete emancipation but the  
return of energy to the subject from which it was taken. However, the framing  
challenges this reading. The camera's attention has not disappeared; rather, it has  
relocated, Park's wide view exposing the lady's bodies, similarly arranged as the stage  
in Kouzuki's library (Mendick, 2025).

The essay's main dilemma becomes, at this point, somewhat unanswerable: if the  
sexed subject exits the room in which they are essentially moulded, will they be bound  
to recreate the same structures which facilitate this metamorphosis in other rooms?

The Handmaiden does not provide reassurance, despite Hideko leaving her uncle's  
library and the dissipation of energy being genuine. Irigaray's theory, to an extent,  
does not seem to provide freedom from spatial conditioning; rather, it argues that  
subjects are constantly being moulded by space, always battling the thresholds via  
which they are created.

What has changed is the orientation: the same geometry, but differently populated,  
now aimed toward female desire, rather than against it.



## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, it can be argued that the presence of a colonial hierarchy in the mansion's architectural layout is evident within the design of the Japanese wing, the 'East', and the Victorian wing, the 'West'.

To begin with, Handmaiden does not resolve Irigaray's spatial conflict; on the contrary, it lives inside it. Irigaray writes in *Between East and West* (2002, p. 54) that "in the East, the woman has long been the first and even the sole sexual and spiritual initiator...desire is often awakened by the woman."

This individuality is systematically broken down through the mansion's spatial framework, and as Hideko occupied the eastern wing, she was stripped of this initiatory power; her body is reconfigured towards Western patriarchal spectatorship



*Figure 8: The east and west wings (annotated by author)*

Conder's hybrid design (see Figure 8) reflects and combines two systems of power; however, through this combination, the colonial and the sexed subject do not live in parallel, but they coexist within the same structure.

Although it can also be argued that the final act subtly reclaims what the house has taken: the same geometry, but this time orientated towards female desire. The room persists. What changes is who it's designed for.

The architecture, in a sense, persists not only in the form of a building but also as a slaughterhouse, where, within its walls: the never-ending processing cycle of a sexed subject is bound to either resist, reproduce or endure the embedded typology of the structure within them.



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## FIGURE REFERENCE LIST

Figure 1: Nyarko, M. (2026) Cover page [Image]

Figure 2: Comparison of a church floor plan and Kouzuki's library floor plan (annotated by author).

Figure 3: Non-tangible & physical thresholds (annotated by author). Source: Park, C. (dir.) (2016) *The Handmaiden* [Film]. South Korea: CJ Entertainment.

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Figure 7: The rolling gate (annotated by author). Source: Park, C. (dir.) (2016) *The Handmaiden* [Film]. South Korea: CJ Entertainment. (2025). Available at:

Figure 8: The east and west wings (annotated by author). Source: <https://brunch.co.kr/@isooeye/59> [Accessed 22 March 2026]