

Closed Tight

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“Art is only good at the moment it’s done. After that it’s dead. It’s just so much dead shit. Artists are like people trying to board their shit.”

—Mary Gaitskill, “Daisy’s Valentine”

A small Japanese woman sits solemnly on a stage, looking straight ahead, her face tranquil and calm, a pair of scissors lying seductively next to her. A crowd lingers, curious, hesitant; the first person steps onto the stage, bends to pick up the scissors, and then cuts. He is followed by others; the crowd, at first unsure, now approaches the woman with determination. One participant cuts a large rectangle out of her left sleeve; another takes a button. One man raises the strap of her bra, places the cold metal underneath. Snip.

Steven Shainberg’s 2002 film *Secretary* seems innocuous at first. Lee Holloway, a nervous young woman played with quiet ferocity by Maggie Gyllenhaal, has just been released from a mental institution. She doesn’t appear to be completely recovered: she retains an adolescent awkwardness despite her age, and she still occasionally injures herself when she’s distressed. In an attempt to assimilate into the adult world, she takes a typing class and finds a job as a secretary to E. Edward Grey, an overpowering but insecure lawyer played by James Spader.

At first their relationship is strained. Lee’s childish habits, vague incompetence, and unfashionable wardrobe put Edward off, while Edward’s domineering personality both alienates and illicitly attracts Lee. Some forty or fifty minutes into the film, however, things take a dramatic turn. Edward catches Lee in the act of cutting herself; flustered, she hastily hides her scissors, razors, bandages, and iodine and pretends to organize her desk. He calls her

into the library and tells her never to cut herself again, and then takes a Polaroid photo before dismissing her.

This impromptu display of compassion instills some confidence in Lee, but, the next day, Edward inadvertently breaks her down again by berating her for her typographical errors. When she can't hold back her sniffles, Edward realizes what he's done and calls her into his office. There, he orders her to lean over his desk and read the mistyped letter. She complies, utterly bewildered. Suddenly, he spansks her. She turns slowly to look at him, pained and confused. Ignoring her expression, he orders her to continue, and spansks her harder and faster before collapsing on top of her, panting heavily, as her grunts turn sexual. She touches his hand with a needy desperation before he collects himself and tells her to straighten herself up.

When she examines her bruised bottom in the restroom's full-length mirror, the camera zooms in on her face, which expresses trepidation, apprehension, and catharsis all at once. The screen fades into a blinding, incandescent white.

Secretary was based loosely on a short story by Mary Gaitskill. Only a few scenes are taken directly from the story, however; among them is the aforementioned spanking scene. Debbie Roe, Gaitskill's protagonist, describes the event:

He began spanking me as I said "referring." The funny thing was, I wasn't even surprised. I actually kept reading, although my understanding of it was not very clear. I began crying on it, which blurred the ink. The word "humiliation" came into my mind with such force that it effectively blocked out all other words. Further, I felt that the concept it stood for had actually been a major force in my life for quite a while. (140)

The writing is largely devoid of emotional attachment; scenes are retold in a matter-of-fact voice, without sentimental embellishment. The detachment Gaitskill imbues in Debbie contrasts sharply with the specific focus Shainberg places on Lee's emotion; where Shainberg attempts to dig into this character and explore in depth her every motivation, Gaitskill instead builds a barrier around Debbie. This detached tone underscores thematic elements of escapism apparent in much of Gaitskill's writing, which often uses sexual perversions as a means for her characters to deny their reality.

In "An Affair, Edited," the protagonist, Joel, is haunted by an old girlfriend, Sara. His ruminations on his failed relationship with her, juxtaposed with memories of a fling with coworker Cecilia, reveal the complexities of

human sexual relationships. Sara symbolizes a sort of bruised adolescent sexuality: she worked as a prostitute at sixteen; she tells Joel to beat her during sex; she is described as “[rubbing] her injured-looking vagina” in Joel’s masturbatory fantasies (84). Joel views Sara as “weak” because of her emotional instability (82). On the other hand, Cecilia comes from a wealthy family and is herself very successful; as such, she represents a contrastingly powerful, mature woman.

Similarly, in *Secretary*, Shainberg creates the character Tricia O’Connor (Jessica Tuck) as a foil to Lee. She is introduced as a successful woman in a navy blue suit, and is hinted to be Edward’s ex-wife (she speaks of a “settlement” he needs to sign). When Tricia first appears, Lee is handling a telemarketer with difficulty; her flustered conversation disgusts Tricia, who flat-out calls Lee “submissive.” Lee screams into the phone and slams it down. Tricia looks impressed. Edward is hiding in the closet when Lee looks for him; Tricia stomps on his coat before exiting.

Tricia seems to give Edward a reason to engage in a BDSM relationship with Lee. She threatens to emasculate him. As gender sociologist Christine L. Williams explains, in the typical sadomasochistic relationship, the sadist “hopes to prove his or her superiority and omnipotence” (103). Here the threat is tangible, making Edward’s effort to prove his dominance all the more poignant. Because of the “strict hierarchy” of the office workplace, as well as her own emotional problems, Lee becomes a vulnerable target, especially because she is so willing to participate in such a relationship. As the submissive person in their relationship, Lee serves to reaffirm Edward’s perceived domination. Still, there is something that distinguishes “An Affair, Edited.”

Despite Joel’s contempt for Sara’s supposed weakness, she ultimately holds control over him. She continues to appear in his thoughts, eventually becoming his ultimate sexual fantasy. After he masturbates over her, he desperately pleads to his memory of her, “Come back” (“An Affair” 84).

Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*, first performed in 1964, is highly unconventional. Ono completely surrenders control of the performance, sitting still on a stage while inviting the audience to take a pair of scissors and cut off pieces of her clothing. The performance strongly suggests “the potential for violence,” as Korean art critic Jieun Rhee points out—specifically, the potential for sexual violence (103). Yet what is groundbreaking about Ono’s performance is her subversion of typical performer-audience relationships. Instead of passively watching the artist, the audience members are transformed into performers.

According to film theorist Todd McGowan, the role of the audience is a dominating one: (quoting film critic Christian Metz) “The spectator is absent from the screen *as perceived*, but also (the two things inevitably go together) present there and even ‘all-present’ as *perceiver*” (28). Shainberg also suggests the active participation of the viewer in certain shots of *Secretary*. The kitchenette in Edward’s office becomes a cove of invaded privacy: despite being a separate, enclosed space, the lack of a door and the elaborate metal structure that stands in for one wall allow the viewer to glance in. Lee is featured in two scenes from behind this metal structure; the camera angles strongly indicate the presence of a voyeur, implicating us as viewers into the film itself. Other scenes parallel this sense of voyeurism: although at times Lee appears alone at her desk, she rarely is—a client is almost always seated in the background, heavily out of focus. Yet Lee rarely seems aware of their existence: in one scene, she cuts off a piece of her skirt while a woman appears to watch. In another scene, Lee hides in the bathroom to masturbate. Two quick shots reveal Edward’s paralegal (Lily Knight in one of only a few appearances in the film) in the stall next to Lee, listening in shock to Lee’s moans.

Edward’s gaze seems particularly weighted. He is indicative of the audience: because we are both watching the same thing (i.e. Lee), his gaze becomes our gaze. Thus we become active participants through him. As Japanese art historian Midori Yoshimoto writes of Ono’s *Cut Piece*, “The invitation triggered the voyeuristic desire among the audience even though most of them felt restrained from participating” (100). Ono undermines the inherent voyeurism of performance by forcing the audience into becoming performers. Shainberg also “triggers [our] voyeuristic desire” by giving us an active role, while at the same time constantly reminding us that we *are* watching. He suggests our domination over Lee: even in the bathroom, she cannot hide from us.

A man cuts both straps of Ono’s bra. Her gaze shifts for a second, but she catches herself and deftly covers her breasts with her arm, denying the audience.

“Although in his essay on the mirror stage [influential French psychoanalyst Jacques] Lacan conceives of the gaze as a mastering gaze, he thought of it in precisely the opposite way later on,” McGowan asserts, “as the point at which mastery fails” (28). According to Lacan, the object of the gaze, particularly in performance, is a mirror: yes, the subject looks at the object, but then the object looks back.

Yoshimoto writes, “Showing no emotion, [Ono] functions as a mirror reflecting the feeling of audience members” (100). She manipulates the audience not by doing nothing, but by being everything: according to Yoshimoto, she allows the audience to enact their own sexual fantasies on her. Similarly, Lee and Edward’s real boss-secretary relationship forms the basis for their BDSM fantasy. Red pens and copyedited letters somehow give way to crawling, arm restraints, and a saddle. A seated woman and a pair of scissors give way to her violent disrobing by complete strangers.

But at one point, Edward realizes that their fantasy is intruding upon their professional relationship. He puts Lee back at the receptionist desk instead of his office. Sexually frustrated by an unsatisfying relationship with dull boyfriend Peter (Jeremy Davies), Lee desperately sends Edward an earthworm wrapped inside a sheet of stationery. The worm seems to represent submission, but Lee uses it as a tool of domination. “Punish me,” she appears to say seductively, provocatively.

It works. In another scene taken from Gaitskill’s short story, Edward calls Lee into his office and masturbates onto her back. In Gaitskill’s story, Debbie Roe quits and refuses to acknowledge the details of her sexual abuse; when a reporter calls to ask for information about the lawyer, she hangs up and hides in her basement, where old Barbie dolls stuffed in plastic cases seem to symbolize her distant childhood, and she feels suddenly disconnected from reality.

Lee, on the other hand, is shocked when Edward fires her. Perhaps because their relationship is so heavily based on reality, Lee has come to believe that it *is* reality; when she returns home, she submerges herself, still fully dressed, in her pool.

And, perhaps because Lee believes in her relationship with Edward so much, we begin to believe in it, too. When Lee accepts Peter’s proposal, we are both confused and a bit disappointed. Peter offers Lee a traditional suburban life—strange, then, that we come to disapprove. Here Shainberg plays with stereotypical audience expectations, and Lee’s unorthodox sex life with Edward becomes our fantasy. As if allowing us this one small concession, Shainberg allows Lee to leave Peter at the altar, running instead to Edward’s office, where he has just fired another secretary. She tells him she loves him, but he is afraid to let their fantasy gain control of their everyday life: “We can’t do this twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.”

“Why not?” Lee counters.

Edward orders her to sit at his desk, palms face down on the table, feet flat on the floor, until he returns. During those three days, media coverage

calls it the “Lee Holloway Hunger Strike,” evoking images of Mahatma Gandhi in protest—in fact, she *is* protesting, attempting to gain control over her own life.

Her subservience proves powerful.

Edward returns, defeated, and whisks her away to his bedroom, where he bathes her and kisses her scarred body. In the background, a woman with an aged, wise voice sings, “What grace have I to fall so in love! What a wonderful dream it seems to be!” Her bath and nudity suggest a spiritual cleansing, reminiscent of baptism: “For the first time in my life, I felt beautiful. Finally part of the earth, I touched the soil, and he loved me back,” Lee croons in voiceover.

In the epilogue, Lee and Edward have married and appear to be an everyday suburban couple. After Edward leaves for work, though, Lee drops a dead insect on the bed. Lee refuses now to be submissive: she is in as much control of their relationship as Edward is—if not more. Even though Yoko Ono allows others to cut away her clothing until she is nude, she maintains control: she covers her breasts, denying the audience the ultimate sexual gratification of their attack, and subverting their domination of her.

In the very last shot of *Secretary*, Lee watches Edward drive away. Suddenly, she turns her eyes directly towards the viewer. Her gaze is at once powerful, confident, confrontational, and unexpected. It becomes clear that she is aware of us, the viewers: “I know you are watching,” her gaze says. And we know it, too; but at this moment, Lee will not let us have the satisfaction of voyeurism, of domination, because she has *let* us watch her.

Cut to black.

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