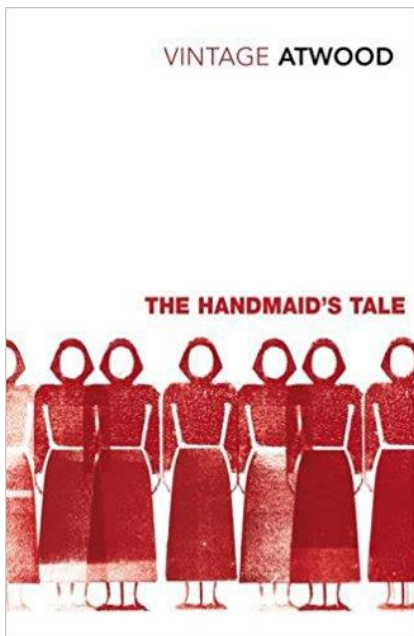


Revisiting the **Scarlet** Dystopia of Gilead : Oh, the Horror in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* *Tale* in Various Multimedia



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Table of Contents

:: Introduction	3
:: CHAPTER 1: <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> (1985): the Novel	6
1.1 <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> : Plot Summary	6
1.2 Main themes.....	9
1.3 Historical Context	20
1.4 Critical Reception	22
:: CHAPTER 2 : <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> (1990): the Film.....	25
2.1 <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> : General Overview of the Film	25
2.2 Critical Analysis: Film versus Novel	30
2.3 Dramatical Clashings: Public Perception	38
:: CHAPTER 3 : <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> (2017): the TV series by <i>Hulu</i>	44
3.1 <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> : General Overview of the TV series.....	44
3.2 The Medium TV : Defining Television	51
3.3 Critical Analysis: TV Series versus Novel	52
3.4 On-screen Violence	57
3.5 Dramatical Clashings : Public Perception	62
:: Conclusion	68
:: Works Cited List.....	71

:: Introduction

When Joseph Conrad's protagonist Kurtz of his famous novel *Heart of Darkness* (1902) cries out the phrase "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 100), he does this because he realises how depraved human nature is. Every human heart contains a shred of darkness in it and the inability to leave this idle is what causes mankind to commit to evil deeds or actions.

In Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) the existence of the human race is in danger due to a declining birth rate which is caused by pollution, chemical poisoning and women's infertility - men are not to blame, under no circumstance. In order to secure the survival of the human race a new republic by the name of Gilead is formed within the borders of the United States of America by a fundamentalist movement that calls itself "Sons of Jacob". They move quickly to restore order and to take away women's rights; women become their man's subordinate and are under no condition allowed to read, write, or think for themselves. A woman's only job is to serve her Commander - whom she is assigned to - and to have intercourse with him, with the only purpose to become pregnant and give birth to a healthy baby. Other than that, she serves no other purpose.

The crimes that are committed towards women in Margaret Atwood's novel from 1985 show the devaluation of human nature and its inability to show empathy in desperate times. Every human heart is capable of committing an evil deed or action when the situation seems to require this. Even though the novel was written in 1985, and it is considered a novel of speculative fiction - a literary fiction genre that speculates about worlds that are unlike the real world in various important ways, involving supernatural, futuristic, or other imagined elements (Oxford Dictionary) - its adaptations for film and TV from 1990 and 2017, respectively, have been met with controversy on different levels.

In this thesis, I want to explore Margaret Atwood's narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* and compare my analysis to both the film adaptation from 1990, directed by Volker Schlöndorff, and

the TV series from 2017, directed by Reed Morano, Mike Barker, Kate Dennis, Floria Sigismondi, and Kari Skogland. My thesis will thus consist of a three-fold analysis. Although there have been several critical analyses on the various social issues hauled by Atwood, none of these look at how the novel, the film, and the TV series relate to each other. Also, not all of the series' or film's viewers are familiar with Atwood's original intentions (or the novel's underlying historical background). And while a film or TV show leaves nothing to the imagination, a book allows the reader to create its own image of the novel's reality, thus creating more space for creative thinking and exploring of the subject. Additionally, TV shows are usually restricted to certain regulations, while a film adaptation offers the viewer the characters without any broadcast restrictions.

In my analysis of the correlation between the novel from 1985, the film adaptation from 1990, and the TV adaptation from 2017, I will look at both the differences and the similarities between the three versions, based on gender classification, women in subjugation, and politics. I will give extra attention to the amount of violence that is used in the different versions. My thesis statement will be that the 1990 film adaptation and the 2017 TV adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* are worthy adaptations of Margaret Atwood's 1985 awarded dystopian novel, although they show increasing amounts of violence and horror, perhaps to shock the viewer, who has become used to seeing more appalling and horrific scenes in different screenplays over the past twenty-seven years.

My first chapter will be an introduction to *The Handmaid's Tale* and the main characters. I will also discuss its main themes: gender classification and women in subjugation, politics and setting (a totalitarian theocracy), as well as its historical context, and the critical reception. My second chapter will look at the film adaptation from 1990, directed by Volker Schlöndorff, and will be analysed with the use of Mieke Bal's *Narratology : Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (2009) and George Bluestone's *Novels into Films* (1966). In addition I will have a look at several critical reviews concerning the film adaptation. The third chapter will analyse the TV series from

2017, directed by several directors, and will make use of Glen Creeber's theory on the art of television shows. Furthermore, I will also analyse several articles discussing the TV adaptation. In this chapter I will also point out the differences in general acceptance according to what can be shown on the big screen appropriately, and how this has affected the different adaptations. I will conclude my thesis with a summary of my findings regarding the adaptations of Atwood's novel. All of the aforementioned will be discussed with a main focus on violence and horror used in all three versions of the story.

:: CHAPTER 1: *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985): the Novel

1.1 *The Handmaid's Tale* : Plot Summary

When Margaret Atwood began writing *The Handmaid's Tale*, a work she calls speculative fiction, in the Spring of 1984, she had no idea the novel would sell millions of copies worldwide, would be awarded several prestigious academic awards, and would not go out of print from the day it was first published in 1985. She also had never anticipated it would cause such an uproar, being banned from high schools and being widely discussed in blogs on the internet (“Haunted by *The Handmaid's Tale*” 1). Moreover, women across the world actively engage in the discussion on the repression of women today, and the costumes worn by the handmaids have been noted to be used in marches and at Halloween for those who want to protest or revel, which are activities Atwood would not ever have thought would happen when she was writing the novel.

The Handmaid's Tale tells the story of Offred, a woman who has been sent to live with the Commander and his wife to serve as their Handmaid in order to reproduce, even though she has a family of her own. The story is set in the Republic of Gilead, a near-future state that has overthrown the United States government. The republic has been established by a totalitarian theocracy and the Commander is one of their high-ranked officials. The republic is suffering from a declining birth rate due to infertility from nuclear waste and sexual transmitted diseases, which only women are blamed for. In an attempt to restore order, women have been deprived of their rights to any form of self-determination, and those who have been proven fertile are slowly taken to serve as handmaids among the highest class. Those who are too old, or have not reproduced or proven to be able so, are sent off to the Republic's Colonies. The lower ranked women are called Econowives and are awarded to soldiers who have shown their worth in battle.

The novel is written in a first-person narrative and is told by Offred - or June as she might possibly be called - who is serving as a Handmaid in the house of the Commander and his wife Serena Joy. She was once married to Luke with whom she has a little girl. Her name now refers to her purpose as the Commander's handmaid, 'Of Fred'. After her rights are slowly taken away from her - she gets fired and her bank account is blocked - Offred and Luke make a run for the Canadian border to escape what is coming. Even though everything is thoroughly planned out they are not able to escape their faith and Offred is taken to the Red Centre where she is trained - or brainwashed - to become a Handmaid. She does not hear from Luke again and only later finds out her little girl is taken in by another family.

At the Red Centre Offred is trained by the Aunts, older women whose only purpose it is to prepare handmaids for the life that is awaiting them; they have to perform a monthly Ceremony with their Commander, with the ultimate goal being reproduction. When they are able to give birth to a healthy baby, they will be granted a life without any further obligations and be able to live peacefully. Their baby will be raised by a high-ranked official and his wife. The Aunts are higher-ranked than Handmaids or Econowives and firmly believe in the new order. They rule the Red Centre with an iron fist and do not tolerate any form of contradiction. Here Offred meets other women who have been taken by the new order, and we hear of Janine and her best friend Moira. Janine later gets pregnant, but unfortunately gives birth to an Unbaby - or Shredder; a term used for babies that are suffering from a birth defect or physical deformation. Moira, who has never believed in the new order, does not meet the Aunts' rules and tries to run off on more than one occasion. When she finally succeeds, Offred does not hear from her until she is taken to a brothel by the Commander on one of their secret meetings.

When Offred is assigned to the Commander she spends her days according to a regular pattern to not exhaust herself; she does her daily shopping, has a bath, and wanders around reminiscing her past. She is not allowed to read or write as it is said by the new order to have caused problems in the past. She explores the room she lives in - although there is not a lot to

explore as it has been completely stripped - and finds the phrase “nolite te bastardes carborundorum”. One night the Commander calls her with him after having spent some time in his house. This is not usual as she is not supposed to have any contact with him except for the monthly Ceremony. On her nights with the Commander they play games of *Scrabble*, she is allowed to read old magazines, and is provided with women’s beauty products. She also learns the meaning of the phrase she found carved in her room: “Do not let the bastards grind you down”.

As Offred’s life continues in this dystopian near-future, she slowly retrieves her energy to fight for her psychological and emotional survival. She now starts to see the signs that have been there from the beginning; Ofglen, with whom she has been doing her shopping trips, opens her eyes by revealing the name of the underground organisation ‘Mayday’, and Nick, who is the Commander’s driver and her lover (Serena Joy initiated their sexual relationship, which they continued without her consent), shows her there are other ways to follow and gives her the strength to keep on fighting. The Commander also takes her out to the brothel Jezebel’s where she sees Moira again, who was given the choice to go to the Colonies or work at Jezebel’s after she ran from the Red Centre and got caught. At Jezebel’s Offred and the Commander have sex in a casual setting and it is after this experience that Offred feels even more uncomfortable undergoing the monthly Ceremony with the Commander. When Serena Joy finds out about her secret outing with the Commander, Offred is sent to her room to await her fate. When she sees a black van approaching, she is sure that she will be sent away, until Nick comes in to tell her they are actually members of Mayday who have come to rescue her. As she gets in the van with them, she does not know if her ending is near - or whether this is a new beginning.

The novel ends with an epilogue in the form of a lecture given by Professor Pieixoto in the year 2195 in which he refers to the story of Offred. It seems her story was recorded on several old tapes which had been found in what was known as the city of Bangor in Gileadean time. It remains unclear if Offred - or June - managed to escape or was recaptured.

Furthermore, professor Pieixoto gives an analytical explanation of the Gileadean regime, clarifying the regime and its formations, yet also suggests to the reader that the Republic of Gilead did not exist for long.

1.2 Main themes

The Handmaid's Tale owes its popularity partly to several taboo-breaking themes that have been widely discussed in a plethora of academic writing. Its main themes will be discussed in this section.

1.2.1 Gender Classification

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood explores the themes of male domination and sexual exploitation. Atwood has not invented these themes - women have always been suffering from them -, but the author has transposed them to a different time and place (Bouson 136). The novel suggests that male domination is part of our cultural beliefs; cultural attitudes are repeatedly reproduced and not much has changed since the writing of the novel until now. Atwood highlights how patriarchal control and masculine values are ubiquitous in women's values of past, present and, possibly even, future generations. The novel even goes so far as to suggest that women themselves are responsible for their own oppression by men (Wilson 178).

Order in Gilead is based on gender inequality to the disadvantage of women. The men hold the power while women have been reduced to "two-legged wombs [...] sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 146), as Offred calls it, and they "are forced to a life of utter passivity and submissiveness" (Bouson 139). Women are not allowed to read or write, or engage in any form of intellectual activity. They are used for breeding purposes only and are "forcibly enlisted in the regime's project of reversing the precipitous decline in the Caucasian birthrate" (Bouson 139). While women were subjects of sexual victimization in the patriarchal

culture of the former United States - as they are told in the Red Centre while watching old pornographic films from earlier times - they are now free, but, according to Aunt Lydia, there is more than one kind of freedom: "Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 34). Women no longer serve as sexualized and dehumanized objects in a sado-masochistic master-slave relationship, in which they are subject to the killing male rage; they are now free from sexual degradation and violence (Bouson 140).

While this may be the case for those who have been assigned to a Commander and spend their days as a Handmaid, not all women suffer the same fate. Women are subdivided into different categories, and it are the Handmaids who suffer the most. First of all, they still belong to someone, as their names reflect ownership. Secondly, not only are they sexual objects for male consumption, they are also shunned and despised by the other women of Gilead (Bouson 140). Handmaids are brutally re-educated by the Aunts in the Red Centre: Hammer describes the Aunts as "sadistic [...] frustrated older women who brutalize their younger, fertile charges out of jealousy and fear" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 40). They teach the handmaids about the atrocities that were committed against women in the old days, and indoctrinate them on how it is better now. They even go so far as to blame victims for their personal misfortune, as is done to Janine who was gang-raped at age fourteen and had an abortion:

But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger. *Her* fault, *her* fault, *her* fault. We chant in unison. *Who* led them on? *She* did. *She* did. *She* did. Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen? Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. (*The Handmaid's Tale* 81-82)

Ironically, the Aunts promote camaraderie among the women of the Red Centre, with the joint shaming of the victim as striking example. The Aunts, who dress in brown, play an active role in the sexual enslavement of the Handmaids by the state by endorsing “the male supremacist power structure of Gilead with its hierarchal arrangement of the sexes” (Bouson 141), simply to restore the traditional values of the male system of domination.

The third category of women consists of the Commanders' wives; unlike the Handmaids, who are obliged to dress in red to symbolize their imprisonment, the Wives dress in blue to emphasize their position. The colour blue is often associated with Mary, the Madonna, and symbolizes the ultimate goal as a mother - even though they are assumed to be infertile (Unsworth 3). Both Handmaids and Wives are condemned to a role they did not choose. The Wives cannot but accept that they are not allowed intercourse with their husbands, who cheat on them, and that the closest they get to doing the 'deed' is by holding the hand of their handmaid. Serena Joy, the Commander's Wife, is an enraged and bitter woman who resents Offred. Offred, on the other hand, envies Serena Joy for her freedom and her higher ranking in the women's hierarchy, and also for the colour of her dress, which reflects the contrast between red and blue, just like her flowers: “Then we had the irises, rising beautiful and cool on their tall stalks, like blown glass, like pastel water momentarily frozen in a splash, light blue, light mauve” (*The Handmaid's Tale* 161). The colour of the irises - here blue represents coolness and authority - is symbolic for Serena Joy's status and her lack of fertility, while the red tulips are overflowing with seed pods and symbolize warmth, fire and intensity. Even though it is the Handmaids who do all the work, it are the Wives who receive all the credit (Unsworth 3).

For the larger part, women have no say in anything that is decided in Gilead since their main purpose is to reproduce or to contribute to this process. Though men hold the power, women with viable ovaries arguably hold the real power; men are still considered sex machines which is made clear when the Commander takes Offred to the brothel Jezebel to have free sex with her, without any boundaries or restrictions. Women are also the ones who grow and carry a

baby, and are thus responsible for progeny. And while Serena Joy might seem to be a silent bystander, it is she who arranges a sexual encounter between Offred and Nick as she too is tired of waiting for a baby - whereby the suggestion is created that the Commander is the infertile one. Even though women are not authorized to actively participate in any intellectual activities, the Commander provides Offred with magazines and invites her to play *Scrabble*, which makes her reminisce of old times and lets her actively engage in an intellectual activity and show her worth; “words stand with power, that is they serve to create and justify male dominion and female oppression” (Wilson 164), and “When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 320). Women are depicted in a masquerade where they participate in men’s desires and discard their own (Bousoon 141).

1.2.2 Women in Subjugation

The Handmaid’s Tale was written by a woman about a society in which women play the main lead. It functions thus as a ‘female text’, but also as a political statement (Bergmann 853) - an idea which will be discussed in the following paragraph. The novel shows misogyny on a large scale in a fictional near-future setting, that could well be an outline of life today. In the *Historical Notes* (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 311), Professor Pieixoto fails to see these claims as he does not acknowledge Offred’s real name, nor does he recognize the name “June” as Offred’s real name when a list of names is mentioned in the novel by the women in the Red Centre. He also does not care about Offred, “blaming her for not taking a risk he wanted her to take” (Bergmann 853). He wishes she had had “a different turn of mind” and more “the instincts of a reporter”, and that she had printed out several pages of the Commander’s computer (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 322). It seems that Professor Pieixoto has distanced himself from the document and is unable to read the story the way it should be read. He does not give Offred the respect she deserves by not

recognizing her real name, thereby showing his ignorance of the subjugation women were suffering from - which has not changed much since.

The Handmaid's Tale largely reflects on the backlash of anti-feminism in the 1980s and the messages - concerning a woman's place in the household - given to women by the fundamentalist New Right (Bouson 135). This backlash seems to be a recurring trend according to Susan Faludi's analysis of social, economic and political inequities in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991). Faludi shows that women seem to be making progress towards equal rights, but that the media manage to reverse some of these gains by blaming feminism for the problems American women and families suffer from and by highlighting harassment towards women (which makes them look like the underdog again), thus making feminist women a prime enemy for the New Right (Bouson 135). The New Right movement from the 1960s and 1970s was "a combination of Christian religious leaders, conservative business bigwigs who claimed that environmental and labor regulations were undermining the competitiveness of American firms in the global market, and fringe political groups" (ushistory.org), and referred to conservative political activity and mobilization of a society that some considered unorganised. Leaders who supported the New Right Movement were mostly driven by religious motives of different kinds, but they all agreed that America was experiencing a moral decline (ushistory.org) and that a reformation was needed. The Movement managed to grow rapidly with the support of the Catholic Church, and New Right leaders such as Pat Robertson (a media mogul and former Southern Baptist minister) and Jim Bakker (leader of the Praise the Lord Club), but also the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party. These groups felt frustrated with, what seemed, a degradation of moral values, which would include public display of sexuality, rising crime rates, and civil rights unrest (Cunningham 1), problems Atwood's pre-Gilead society seemed to be dealing with as well, and events from the novel can easily be linked to historical events. *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, has dramatized "the sexual oppression of women who, bound in a master-slave relationship, are forced to consent to

femininity” (Bouson 137), which implies that women are robbed of their identities and transformed into replaceable objects in a hierarchal classification of a patriarchal culture, and forced “to a life of utter passivity and submissiveness” (Bouson 139).

Offred remembers a pre-Gilead society in which women were relatively free and able to make their own choices, yet they were suffering from a misogynistic culture in which women were subjected to sexual degradation and violence (Bouson 139). She remembers “[...] stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated, interfered with, as they used to say, but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 66). The Red Centre exposes women to pornographic material of a pre-Gilead society to empower the message that, according to Aunt Lydia, women used to be free, but not protected. When Gilead deprived women of their rights and divided them into five subjugated classes, their intention was a revival of the white elite population. Nevertheless, they are now protected, yet not free to choose danger (Bergmann 848-849). They are prisoners of their own bodies as a woman’s sole purpose is to breed and function as a two-legged womb. Furthermore, “reproductive control always implies control of women” (Bergmann 847), and by also taking away women’s rights to read, write, and engage in other sorts of intellectual activity, the men of Gilead are the ones in power. Offred begins to see herself as a subordinate, a body without a mind, and defines her identity by her purpose to reproduce

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will . . . Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 83-84)

She slowly starts to accustom herself to her new role in society and finds her way through language. She learns to use the new language of her own time so as to seem part of the new order which is reflected by language, “the new patronymic, made up of “of” and a Commander’s name, emphasize ownership” (Bergmann 484) is a striking example of the newly shaped misogynistic culture.

Language is one of the few things that gives Offred hope and faith in a better future, which is exactly the one word she is allowed to read as it is printed on a worn cushion in her room: “I can spend minutes, tens of minutes, running my eyes over the print: FAITH. It’s the only thing they’ve given me to read” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 67). Just like a prisoner, she scours her room to find anything to hold on to - or anything she could commit suicide with, as suicide is her only control, her only way out. She calls it “an escape, quick and narrow” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 220), just like her predecessor chose the easy way out. She does not know who was there before her, but she does realise there was someone before her when she finds a Latin phrase carved in the corner of the closet and asks the Commander its meaning during one of their secret meetings:

Nolite te bastardes carborundorum. Here, in this context, it’s neither prayer nor command, but a sad graffiti, scrawled once, abandoned. [...] The Commander takes the smile-button from me and begins to laugh, and is he blushing? “That’s not real Latin,” he says. That’s just a joke.” [...] “There was another one,” he says. [...] “What happened to her?” I say. He hardly misses a beat. “Did you know her somehow?” “Somehow,” I say. “She hanged herself,” he says; thoughtfully, not sadly (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 196-197).

Suicide would mean a very definite form of closure, and since the novel ends with the *Historical Notes*, mentioning the tapes Offred left behind after she escaped - or was captured - we know that she did not opt suicide. She finds something else that keeps her passion alive, when she

falls in love with Nick, the handyman, after Serena Joy organises a sexual meeting between the two of them, and “thus finds in him someone that can make her feel human and alive, despite her state of subjugation” (Wilson 165). And since love is what the regime tried to destroy, feeling in love and being loved again is what gives her strength and power to organise her escape (Wilson 165). Offred found something that gave her faith for a better future, or at least made her believe there was a way out of the system.

Women are not only suppressed by men, there is also a lot of oppression between women among themselves. Offred lives in the Commander’s house with his wife Serena Joy and the Marthas (women who take care of all sorts of household chores). Serena Joy is also mistreated by the men who dominate society. She is not allowed to take any decisions for herself, nor is she allowed to speak up for herself. Handmaids are infantilized in Gilead (Bouson 138) and treated as such. The Wives are not free either, yet they do get to live their lives - to a certain extent - and are allowed to watch television, or even smoke. But, “when power is scarce, a little of it is tempting” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 320), and Serena Joy thus treats Offred like a child:

As for my husband, she said, he’s just that. My husband. I want that to be perfectly clear. Till death do us part. It’s final. Yes, Ma’am, I said again, forgetting. They used to have dolls, for little girls, that would talk if you pulled a string at the back, I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll. She probably longed to slap my face. (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 26).

Serena Joy’s resentment is displayed specifically during ‘The Ceremony’, which takes place during Offred’s most fertile time in her menstrual period. During ‘The Ceremony’ Offred has sexual intercourse with the Commander in a very impersonal way, while Serena Joy sits behind

her and holds her hands. As a Handmaid she is obliged to undergo 'The Ceremony' every month, since this is what she signed up for, and it is not a pleasurable experience to her:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose (*The Handmaid's Tale* 104).

There is a total lack of mutual consent and pleasure in this scene, and things like sexual arousal and orgasms are no longer thought necessary. Even though Offred mentions that rape would not cover it, since she signed up for it, the eventual execution of the sexual act does make it look a lot like rape and a form of sexual slavery, and thus the worst form of subjugation. Even though Serena Joy treats Offred in a very condescending way during 'The Ceremony', Offred still feels sorry for her when she recognizes her as a former famous lead soprano in a pre-Gilead society: "The woman sitting in front of me was Serena Joy. Or had been, once. So it was worse than I thought" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 26).

Offred is a victim of circumstances. None of the choices that she made were real choices, they were merely situations that she underwent. She realises this as she also remembers a different time, in which doctors were not hung on the wall for everyone to see for abortions performed in a pre-Gilead society, or women who were executed by hanging - termed 'salvaged' - because they went against the system. "Ordinary", the Handmaids are told, "is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will" (Bousoon 138) (*The Handmaid's Tale* 43). Offred's generation is the "transitional generation" (Bousoon 139). In the Red Centre Aunt Lydia tells the handmaids that the transition will be easier for the ones who

come after them, because they have no recollection of previous times: “For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts [...] they will have no memories, of any other way” (The Handmaid's Tale 127), implying that all this will go on ad infinitum.

The Handmaid's Tale offers the reader a critical analysis of North American feminism, starting in the conservative United States of the 1880s, via the Women's Liberation Movement, to the Christian fundamentalism of the 1980s, represented by the Commander and the Aunts. According to Wilson, it could even be seen as a parody for some of these feminist movements' main ideas, such as the anti-rape and anti-porn movements (Wilson 159). Atwood reminds the reader that history is more than a story we tell ourselves, “and it is a mistake to think that we can easily explain away its blood-stained smiles or use fiction to shield ourselves from the oppressive practices perpetuated by patriarchal ideology, with its hierarchal arrangement of the sexes” (Bouson 158). We also need to remember that it is not just the men who can be blamed for this; women are responsible for their own lives, but their indifference and lack of commitment can cause them to become victims of subjugation (Wilson 159).

1.2.3 Politics in Gilead

The United States is a country that practices religious freedom, which means that all religions are treated equally and no religious body has any influence on the government of the United States. The state of Gilead, however, a theocracy established within the United States by New Right fundamentalists, does not practice religious freedom, and shows similarities with the laws from the Old Testament. It seems that Gileadean laws have been derived largely from the Old Testament, as does the class system and hierarchy. Important themes are covenant and redemption, as the “Sons of Jacob” believe they are guiding people to the promised land and give them hope for restoration (Barton and Muddiman 13). Also, the contractual nature of

arrangement is emphasized, since disobedience would imply failure of the newly-founded Republic, and the ultimate goal of Gileadean laws is redemption and creation. Though the intention is to save the world, this is done to the disadvantage of (fertile) women. The novel shows us the inherent misogyny of patriarchal culture (Bouson 137), and, simultaneously, "the debased and constricted language of the distortedly religious regime which has taken over the United States echoes for us with political urgency" (Bergmann 848).

Gilead is an authoritarian, theocratic regime, apparently governed by a far-right religious group that refers to itself as "Sons of Jacob". 'Apparently', because there is no specific mention of the government; we only learn about 'Sons of Jacob' through Offred's notes. In Offred's view the take-over happened quite fast with women having their bank-accounts frozen and being fired from their jobs. This new government is based upon the Biblical idea that women are merely the property and subordinate of their husband (Zarrinjooee and Kalantarian 67). Commanders are the ones in charge, yet it seems there are also some who do not agree with their own rules, since it is the Commander with whom Offred breaks the rules for the first time. He invites her to his room for a casual game of *Scrabble*, and he takes her to a brothel to have intercourse with Offred in an informal setting apart from 'The Ceremony'. Even though the name of the governing authority "Sons of Jacob" seems to have been derived from a biblical passage, Gilead distances itself from any religion, and the people of Gilead are not seen attending any religious institution, or practice any other forms of religion. It is only the laws and restrictions that refer to the Old Testament and its laws.

Thus, women are now protected - as it is called - in order to have them carry out the task to which they have been assigned, according to their function. "The masculine code is carried out to its absolute extreme" (Bouson 137), and women are consigned to forget about the life they were used to. The men believe that what they are doing is necessary to restore order, and to ensure healthy posterity, yet the only thing they are advocating is male use and control of female sexuality (Bouson 146), which the Commander conceals by explaining the pre-Gilead

years as “just an anomaly, historically speaking [...] All we’ve done is return things to Nature’s norm” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 232). This statement, strengthened by the control of female sexuality, elucidates the position women are in, and the way subjugation works; inequality in a society is exposed when sex is considered something men do to women, without mutual consent (Bouson 146).

Women are not only physically abused, they have also been robbed of their literary rights to silence their voices, for “Blessed are the silent” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 100), according to the revised Gileadean Bible. Men have a say about anything and everything, yet women are left without a voice, which implies male power. Offred recognizes the connection between language and male power and consciously refuses to obey these rules that have been imposed, and emphasize political suppression. She has her evenings with the Commander, when she is allowed to read, and her love affair with Nick is also a form of female opposition to the state.

The *Historical Notes* at the end of the novel suggest that the Republic did not last for long. There are several references to a modern society in which Gileadean ideas are no longer valid. The chair of the Twelfth Symposium of Gileadean is named Professor Maryann Crescent Moon, and the name of the lecturer from the Department of Military History is Professor Sieglinda Van Buren (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 311-312). Since two important speakers of the symposium are female, it should be clear that women are no longer suppressed and they are allowed to occupy high positions.

1.3 Historical Context

When Atwood first published *The Handmaid’s Tale* in 1985, it was met with different responses. While some critics were unable to hide their enthusiasm about the speculative novel that was “greeted as the long-awaited feminist dystopia” (Fallon 4), others were less positive and called some of the details from the novel “repellent” (Fallon 3). Even though some of the events

depicted in the novel seem rather extreme, Atwood merely based her scenes on historical events of which she changed the setting (“Haunted by *The Handmaid's Tale*”). Every political act that was depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* has, at some point, occurred in history; “The novel, the questions it poses, and its responses are thus political in the most thorough sense - they affect ideology, they effect change” (Bergmann 848). It is thus important to read the novel in the correct way, and keep the historical events - which will be discussed in this paragraph - Atwood is referring to in mind.

Atwood had the idea of writing *The Handmaid's Tale* several years before she actually began writing it, and she describes it as “a study of power” and a “logical extension from where we are now” (Cathy Davidson, “Feminist 1984” 24, qtd. In Bouson 136). Critics have noted it is not nearly as futuristic as we would wish it to be: “in a very real sense, the future presaged by ‘The Handmaid's Tale’ is already *our* history...,” (Arnold Davidson, “Future Tense” 116, qtd. in Bouson 136). History has been proven to repeat itself. Atwood reflects on the anti-feminist messages given to women by the fundamentalist New Right Movement in the 1980s, and lays out the possible consequences of things to the reader, such as the virtual enslavement of women, the reduction of women's functions, the silencing of women, and the depiction of women as replaceable objects (Bouson 135).

A political movement that lures its followers with a better future - and those that do not follow the party suffer oppression - might possibly be a phenomenon that is most associated with historical events. Hitler's promises to his followers in the 1930s to restore family values can be considered an example of this. Those who did not share Hitler's ideas would suffer oppression, and restoring family values was only for those of the pure Aryan race, removing those who did not ‘fit’. Also, the so-called “Lebensborn” movement was an ideology that would forcibly take the children from unmarried mothers and mediate adoption of these children by racially pure and healthy parents - loyal SS members and their families - which reminds the reader of Offred's lost daughter (Albanese 37). This historical fact inspired Atwood to write

about what she terms Unbabies, that is those babies who did not meet any health standards and looked deformed: “with a pinhead or a snout like a dog’s, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 122). Another thing Hitler instigated was the burning of books he did not approve of, thus censoring information. Finally, Atwood was also inspired by a movement within the whole of Islamic religion which imposes its view on segregation of men and women, and women’s clothing, being fully covered by a head-to-toe veil or burqa.

By telling the tale of Offred, Atwood looks back at past generations, while creating a legitimate plausible future. She does not leave the reader with just a dystopian future, she also includes an epilogue that is set in the distant future of the tale and lets the reader find some closure there. The *Historical Notes* show that, even though an attempt was made to create a controlled new order, no irreversible changes are made to society as we know it, and it is still defined by the same omnipresent sexism. Society finally goes back to patriarchal control, yet without the strict laws that were imposed on women (Wilson 175). Nevertheless, “Atwood implicitly suggests that we are in some way ignoring the continuing problem of the subordination and denigration of women” (Wilson 175), and “past and present are not separable discourses” (Wilson 177).

1.4 Critical Reception

Even though *The Handmaid’s Tale* was published over 30 years ago, it is still a very popular novel amongst a widespread audience. The novel’s narrative strategy is to call for attention “to the acts of reading and interpretation” (Bouson 136) and leaves room for the reader to speculate about the protagonist’s participation and fate. The reader is asked to collaborate in the process of putting all pieces of the puzzle together and forced to recognize the artistic complexities (Bouson 136).

Some critics were very enthusiastic about Atwood's form of speculative narrative and found themselves consumed by the story. Fallon collected several critical reviews in her article "What Critics Said About 'The Handmaid's Tale' Back In The 1980s" (2017) and found almost as many opinions as there are critics. Atwood certainly managed to hold the reader's attention by creating a fascinating, yet strange, world in the future, where social statuses have a new meaning and social conventions are designed accordingly, with the use of special costumes and colours (Wilson 181). However, the novel is based on the position of women in general and looks at white women's oppression in the future. It fails to consider the position of women of different colour in the 1980s, or even today, and can thus be considered rather conservative (Berlatsky 2). It was also considered too dramatized and paranoid when it was first published. The story shows various deeply rooted sexual and racial bases, but cannot be read without any dissection or judgement (Bouson 157).

The *Historical Notes* speculate about what happens to Offred and leave the reader in a state of suspense about a possible rescue. The tapes are the only thing that offer some reason for speculation, yet the protagonist's fate remains unknown (Bouson 154). Some critics argue that she managed to escape with the help of Nick, while others argue that her fate simply remains a mystery and that it is possible she has found freedom, but she could also have been recaptured and killed and it were only the tapes that survived (Bouson 155).

The tapes are about survival and reflect on the society of Gilead. The only thing they prove is that the state did exist and that Offred was able to reflect on it. The novel teaches us that history should not be denied, which is a message that is hidden in the name of the university where the lecture on to the tapes is held. The name of the university is "the University of Denay, Nunavit" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 311), which, if spoken out loud, can be heard as "deny, none of it". The novel also teaches us that history does not change and that we did not learn much about the imposed patriarchal culture of Gilead, since it is Professor Pieixoto who jokingly comments that "all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic

vulgar signification of the word *tail*; that being, to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention, in that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 313). While all the academicians laugh about his comment, he also belittles Offred’s intelligence by suggesting she is an educated woman “insofar as a graduate of any North American college of the time may be said to have been educated” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 318). The misogynistic patriarchal professor outrages the reader by being obsessed with the facts, yet fails to acknowledge Offred’s feelings and notions. He appropriates and objectifies the female voice and exposes ideological biases from the past, present, and future on the act of interpretation (Bouson 156). The *Historical Notes*, and the novel in general, suggest that “cultural attitudes are reproduced and that little real change can be identified in the condition of women over generations - even centuries - because male control is so much a part of our cultural beliefs” (Wilson 178). “While change takes place on one level; on another level time is indivisible within a male-dominated culture that reaches back into the past” (Wilson 178).

:: CHAPTER 2 : *The Handmaid's Tale* (1990): the Film

2.1 *The Handmaid's Tale* : General Overview of the Film

In 1990, the German film director Volker Schlöndorff, known for *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* and the Oscar-winning film *Die Blechtrommel*, was responsible for the film adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. He worked together with famous British screenwriter Harold Pinter, who died of liver cancer in 2008, and actress Natasha Richardson, who took care of the lead role of Offred/ Kate and died of a tragic skiing accident in 2009. Other lead roles were covered by Faye Dunaway (in the role of Serena Joy), Robert Duvall (as the Commander), and Aidan Quinn (who plays Nick).

The film opens in a rather significant setting which shows an unsettling amount of violence right from the start. Within the first three minutes the events as shown in the film adaptation are already different from how they have been described in the book, and expose the viewer to more excessive violence. The opening scene of the film shows the viewer an overview of a mountain landscape with a text in the middle of the screen: "Once upon a time in the recent future a country went wrong. The country was called The Republic of Gilead" (Schlöndorff 0:00:43). Following this text we see Kate, who will later be known as Offred, her husband Luke, and their little girl trying to escape the Gileadean regime. The short scene that follows is rather dramatic with Luke trying to distract the soldiers of the Eyes of God, but instead he is brutally murdered, Kate is captured violently for trying "to cross the border" (0:07:32), while her daughter runs off into the woods. Kate is then loaded off a truck, together with other women, and they are herded into another building. Here people are organised by race, gender, and fertility. Kate's attitude quickly changes from fierce to fearful when she sees how a woman who protests, is treated by the regime. Those who have been found infertile are sent off in a truck labelled "livestock", which is a term that refers back to World War II. During that period the Nazis made

use of livestock trucks to transport people. In the film the term has been crossed out, yet is still clearly visible, and the link to World War II is easily made. The book does not explicitly mention the reason as to why Kate, or June as she is called in the novel, is captured. Luke's fate is not mentioned either and thus remains unclear, possibly to protect the reader from too much violence. Also, her little girl is mentioned occasionally in the book, while the film shows her wandering and lost in the snow several times - possibly to create more empathy with the viewer?

Women who have been tested fertile are taken to the Red Centre, where the Aunts will 're-educate' them, to become Handmaids. On the way there, Kate is confronted with the new state and the fate of women. Although the windows of the bus have been painted over, Kate sees women wearing face masks, shovelling on the side of the road, possibly the contaminated parts that are mentioned. In the Red Centre one woman goes against the Aunts and is forcibly taken away. Another woman is also removed from the group and does not reappear until the next morning at breakfast, with severely beaten feet. The novel explains that hands and feet are not required to be a useful Handmaid, and thus the body parts that are used for punishments. It is implied that the woman masturbated since Aunt Lydia says: "I hate to punish her, but she abused her body [...] Men can't help it, but we are different. We have self-control" (0:12:05 - 0:12:51). In the Red Centre the women are forced to watch old videos of women marching - the novel suggests they were forced to watch pornographic material - for the Aunts to reinforce their message. Janine, a character that remains rather superficial, yet plays an important role in both the novel and the film, is forced to confess the sin of aborting her unborn child in earlier days, after she became the victim of rape. She is scolded at by the Aunts and the other Handmaids for aborting her child, as her pregnancy was intended to "teach her a lesson" (0:17:24), after she led the boys on. The new regime accuses her of provocative behaviour and she should keep herself responsible for getting raped. This act of humiliation takes place during the so-called "Testifying" meeting - a term from the book used for these kinds of meetings - that seems more

imposed on rather than a voluntary act. During this scene the other Handmaids do not come across as very intelligent, and are portrayed as if they have no sense of self. The white clothing and the women's behaviour could lure a viewer into thinking they are watching a group of women in an asylum, rather than a group of well-educated women who were taken against their will, and are now being forced into a new life as handmaids. The only ones who seem to not acquiesce in their new fate are Kate and her new friend Moira, who was captured for gender treachery (0:07:37).

While in the book Kate and Moira have been friends since before Gilead, the film shows that they become friends in the Red Centre, thereby changing a long and intense friendship between two women. This is one of the many information gaps in the superficial adaptation of the novel. As a consequence, the close relationship between Moira and Kate, and their collaboration in both the Red Centre and, later, Jezebel's does not make much sense. It also fails to mention the moment that women's rights are taken away - the mass lay-offs, malfunctioning debit cards, and loss of the right to read and write - which creates a blur in the continuity of the story for those who are not acquainted with the original story line. Another example of such a gap is the ban on women's right to intellectual activity, which only becomes clear from the use of tokens when Offred and Ofglen are sent to the store to buy groceries. In the novel Offred spends several years as a handmaid - presumably three years - and her posting with the Commander and Serena Joy is her last chance before being sent off to the Colonies if she does not manage to conceive, while in the film this is her first posting and her time as a Handmaid is assumed to be no more than four months. While the book makes use of flashbacks, the film is shown in a chronological order. Pinter and Schlöndorff had to come up with a way to incorporate such flashbacks in the film, and so Kate has to return to the Red Centre when the Commander is absent - during which time Moira escapes with the help of Kate.

Another strong female role is the one of Serena Joy, the Commander's wife, played by Faye Dunaway. She is the only woman who is seen mourning her former professional life as a

singer, when she is seen watching videos of herself performing “Amazing Grace”. She is not pushed into a submissive role like the handmaids, but is the cold, dominant woman behind the Commander, and the one who really decides on what happens next in her household. She suspects the Commander of sterility - which could officially not be possible - and arranges a sexual encounter between Kate and Nick, the Commander’s chauffeur, a crime for which Kate could be punished severely. Although Serena Joy is the kind of woman who does not pretend to be the lovely housewife, she does get very upset with Kate when she finds out about her secret rendez-vous with the Commander, since she had made it very clear upon Kate’s arrival that “as for the Commander; he is my husband. Fred is my husband, till death do us part” (0:25:08). Not only has Kate taken her place in the marital duties, she now also takes her place in social interactions, which is considered a step too far by Serena Joy, and Kate realises she could have her sent off to the Colonies. However, the film makes it clear that it was not Serena Joy who called for Offred to be escorted out the house by, what seems, the soldiers of the Eyes of Gilead; the book leaves it in the open whether Serena Joy could have been capable of sending Offred away. The only time she shows emotional weakness is during the Ceremony, when the Commander attempts to touch Offred, and Serena Joy quickly grabs his hand to avoid him from touching Offred in a sexual manner, after which she is shown alone and defeated by both Offred and the Commander.

The role of Commander Fred is played by Robert Duvall and is shown as an older, friendly-looking gentleman, yet also partly responsible for the ongoing war against the rebels in the mountains. Furthermore, he has no trouble performing the Ceremony, which is an obvious act of rape as shown in the film. Besides the fact that he comments on it being “impersonal” (0:53:46) when Offred tells him off about him touching her during the Ceremony, he shows no other emotions. While the book gives the impression they interact with each other on a friendly, yet distanced, basis, the film shows the Commander and Offred communicating with one another as if she were his mistress and not a submissive. Offred even goes as far as asking the

Commander for his help when Serena Joy finds out about their visit to Jezebel's. However, when she visits him in his study, Offred finds the Commander sitting with a gun in his hand, possibly to kill himself, calling the situation "unfortunate" (1:38:00), and telling her he cannot do anything for her. He thanks Offred for her presence and lets her know she was the one who kept him going, after which he forcibly kisses her on the mouth. Offred then slits his throat in a horrific way and runs off, leaving him to die. As a consequence she is escorted outside by, what seems, the soldiers of the Eyes of Gilead. However, it turns out Nick called for the soldiers, since he is a member of the resistance group called "Mayday". The book leaves the reader guessing whether Offred was taken by the soldiers of the Eyes or by the Mayday resistance. It also does not mention what happens to the Commander; Offred killing the Commander is a completely different ending from anything suggested in the novel.

Nick, the Commander's driver, is the one who ultimately saves Kate. He shows her how to feel alive again and saves her from the Commander's house by having her picked up by the resistance. Initially, Serena Joy arranges a sexual encounter between Nick and Kate, since she is desperate for a baby in the house, yet they start seeing each other more often in a less constrained setting. Since Luke is no longer alive in the film, Kate can completely fall for Nick, in contrast to the book where it is not clear whether Luke is still alive or not, and she is constantly doubting her feelings for Nick. The film shows a blooming relationship between the two lovers, and Nick quickly starts acting the jealous lover, showing his discontent of Kate's duties with the Commander. When Kate is escorted out the house, she first suspects Nick of setting her up to killing the Commander - there was a note in her room that said "tomorrow 10 pm" and a knife - and calling the soldiers on her, but she quickly understands it is the resistance who have come to pick her up. In the van Nick helps her to get rid of her clothing and then leaves her with the words "I'll find you" (1:42:40). The resistance helps Kate hide in the mountains. Ultimately, the film ends showing a heavily pregnant Kate in the mountains, waiting for Nick to find her.

Even though the story is supposed to be set in a near-future, the images do not clearly show such a setting. There are no clear references that the state is not set in a present-day society. In fact, it more often refers to the present than to the future, leaving out anything that could refer to a future society. This does give the film a very plausible character, leaving out futuristic technological gadgets. And while the film's story line mostly sticks to the original plot, there are also quite a few differences from the original book and events that are told in a different setting or in a different moment. The film leaves out several narrative plotlines, which makes it unclear for a viewer who has not read the book to understand the complete story and how it came about. The film ends with Kate, wandering in the mountains, and wondering what will happen next:

I don't know if this is the end for me or a new beginning, but I'm safe here in the mountains, held by the rebels. [...] I wait for my baby to be born in a different world. I still dream about Jill, but I'm telling her that I don't exist, or that I never existed, but I know we're going to find her. She will remember me (1:44:50)

2.2 Critical Analysis: Film versus Novel

Watching the film adaptation after having read the novel may produce surprising insights. As Mieke Bal puts it in her introduction to the theory of narrative texts in *Narratology* (2009):

How is it that a narrative text comes across to the reader in a certain manner? Why do we find the same fabula beautiful when presented by one writer and trite when presented by another? Why is it so difficult [...] to preserve the effect of the original? (75)

One of the differences derives from the working of a text itself, which changes with any alterations the author makes in his language. However, changes are inevitable when one leaves behind the written text and exchanges it for a visual narrative. A successful translation of a novel into film requires a narratological analysis, as well as an engagement with film as the visual medium; a translation is not “a one-to-one transposition of story elements into images, but a visual working-through of the novel’s most important aspects and their meanings” (Bal 167). Of course, comparing novel and film is not simply done to assess whether the director remained faithful to the original story, but rather to determine the message he is trying to express to his audience (Bal 170).

George Bluestone discusses the relationship between novel and film in his book *Novels into Film* (1957) and claims that it is one that is “overtly compatible, secretly hostile” (2). “Film is a visual, verbal, and aural medium [...] that relies heavily on movement and music, [...] it usually presents a narrative depicting characters in a series of conflicts” (Bluestone VII). The novel is a complex medium due to its history, and it confronts the reader with “the fluidity of its boundaries” and “its particular relationship to life” (Bluestone 7). It is considered versatile because it can assimilate different types of narrative such as essays, letters, and memoirs, while film is considered versatile due to its assimilations of images, music, and dialogue (Bluestone 7).

In writing, it is expected that the novelist will use a language and create a setting which is comprehensible to his reader, and does not go beyond the reader’s imagination. Therefore, the novelist constantly has to extend the boundaries between social expectation and imagination, only to satisfy the audience at all times in all places with a given set of myths, symbols, and conventions. The filmmaker also has to meet his audience’s demands, and while “differences in the raw materials of novel and film cannot fully explain differences in content” (Bluestone 31), both novel and film press their audience in an active role in the aesthetic response. The audience demands that their needs be satisfied, which has led to a well-defined series of conventions. Much of the demands are imposed by state and industry, and film is often

shaped by both the businessman and the audience, while moral control has continually altered the context of films.

Even though the subject, or story, of both novel and film is identical, their content is still different, and it is the content that makes for the differences in perception in the adapted film version of the novel (Bluestone 62). A film adapter has to make some alterations to a given set of conventions “which have historically distinguished literature from the cinema and made of each a separate institution” (Bluestone 45). When anything peculiarly filmic or peculiarly novelistic is transformed, it cannot be done without destroying essential parts of the content. In addition, our seeing remains primary as “in the film the spoken word is attached to its spatial image”, while “in the novel the line of the dialogue stands naked and alone” (Bluestone 58). Thus, a film adaptation of a successful novel will always be different from the original novel it is based on: the art of film depends on the moving image, mass audience and the industrial production, while the art of narrative depends on language, a limited audience and individual creation.

2.2.1 Aspects of Time and Space

Although both novel and film are arts of time, film focuses more on the arrangements of space and takes time for granted; it displays time by going from one point to another. The film adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* ignores the fact that the original story is presented partly through flashbacks or time jumps and proceeds in a chronological fashion, focusing on only the events that happen in the present. By doing so Schlöndorff leaves out crucial information and creates information gaps. An example of this can be found in the fact that he does not give a reason for the downgrading of women “to second-class citizens with the punch of a button” (Zutter 5); women as second-class citizens is a given fact in the film, yet without any additional information as to why this is the case. Whereas the novel has three tenses, the film only has

one, and Schlöndorff does not seem to be interested in consciously separating time and space. Even though the film tells Offred's story in a chronological order, at the same time it seems she has been in the position of handmaid for several years - at Jezebel's she mentions she has not had an alcoholic drink in years. It is also unclear how long Offred spent at the Red Centre, or at the Commander's, since she has barely processed what has happened to her when she is rescued. Schlöndorff's implied artistic reality leaves out references to time and space, which, however, are necessary to understand the setting of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Whenever films and novels are compared, signs of both language and photographed images are always considered, as they form the audience's impression of the narrative. However, it is hard to represent mental states such as memories, dreams, or imagination in film, as well as the presentation of streams of consciousness; conceptual imaging has no existence in space as the state of mind is absent in the visible world (Bluestone 47). Since dreams and memories only exist in the individual consciousness, they cannot be represented as such in spatial terms, which makes it difficult to transmit them in film. In the novel Offred spends a great deal of her time alone in her room, thinking about her life pre-Gilead, yet in the film she is hardly seen in her room. Her internal thoughts and struggles are not shared, and as film cannot render thought for it "is not thought; it is perceived" (Bluestone 48), the audience is thus left with a more one-dimensional protagonist in the film, compared to the Offred the reader comes to know in the novel.

When it comes to the logic of sequential ordering of events in time, the reader assumes that the tenses in the novel indicate the order of events. However, the sequence of events in film is different; the sequential ordering becomes clear while watching the film and there is no doubt about the order. Besides, a reconstruction of the chronological sequence is not always possible or relevant (Bal 79), and certain scenes might be left out for reasons of decency or because they are too horrific. It can also occur that there is a gap in the chronological succession and the information given is not complete, which means that if the contents of an

internal retroversion (an event presented in the past) overlap that of the primary fabula, then the retroversion usually serves as compensation for a gap in the story. The novel is mostly based on such retroversion, which clarifies certain events (Bal 90). The film, on the other hand, completely leaves out retroversion and is thus confusing at times. Janine is first seen being victimized and held accountable for being raped at the age of fourteen, but later she is shown pregnant and educating the other girls about the horrible things men did to women in previous time (soon after she gives birth to a baby, but we never see what happens to that baby). Right after this scene Kate helps Moira escape, but the reason as to why Kate does this is not made clear: the film does not give a reason for their close bond, while in the novel it is clear they were close friends in pre-Gilead time. Retroversions are used to provide indications about the antecedents and concern the past of the actors, which can be relevant for the interpretation of events (Bal 89); such narratological aspects should be treated with great importance and cannot be presented as direct discourse to avoid problems in the chronological sequence (Bal 84).

A novel, then, has more possibilities to make use of anachronic interventions (flashbacks or flashforwards) and fragments do not have to be organized in a linear order, whereas a film depends on what the viewer sees happening on the big screen. It leaves less space for interpretation of time and space.

2.2.2 Focalization and Characters

Focalization looks at “the relations between the elements presented and the vision through which they are presented” (Bal 145). This relationship is “a component of the narrative text” and belongs in the story and the order of events (Bal 149). Focalization is a central concept when it comes to discussing narrative, especially when it comes to manipulation. Atwood has presented her audience with a certain combination of events that may be already familiar from history. Since she has presented the historical events through a novel instead of a historical document,

the events are now seen in a different light, but still remain shocking. The film presents several scenes that leave little room for imagination, and they can easily be connected to stories from World War II - women shovelling on the side of the road, or blacks being taken away in a truck.

With regard to the difference between novels and films, it has to be noted that novelists deal with the problem of verbal limitations and the inability of being able to display nonverbal experiences (Bluestone 46). A visual image always provides different information from the written narrative: "what a figure does is as important as what he or she thinks, feels, remembers, or looks like" (Bal 115). Where the novel needs a thorough description of a character's thoughts and feelings, the film needs to depend on the actor's skills, and the power of the human face to suggest thoughts and feelings and to convey emotions should not be underestimated. The novel depends on discourse, while the film depends on picture. However, this detail seems to have been overlooked in the film adaptation as Offred does not show much emotion. Her acts reveal her emotions, yet her facial expressions are bland. The novel seems to show Offred as a feisty type, which however is not the impression the film gives the viewer. Offred's emotions are only perceived through language, which is not enough to create a profound impression of the protagonist and satisfy the viewer. When transposing a literary character from novel to screen, language alone is not enough to create a character according to the novelist's ideas.

Although the film has a strong cast, it is not enough to make it a successful adaptation of the highly successful original novel. A reason for this may be the fact that several details were left out, or that incidents and characters as described in the novel do not have the same impact when they are adapted to fit the screen.

2.2.3 Visual Effects in the Narrative

In narrative discourse, the novelist is bound to a certain set of conventions, which must be translated into images, feelings and concepts to fit the film adaptation. Film, on the other hand, is free to work with endless variations of the physical reality (Bluestone 20). The moving picture is experienced through each viewer's own perception, which can influence a viewer's opinion. The filmmaker can choose to only focus on one storyline and leave out other events, which could either complete the story, or expand on the plot. Schlöndorff focused on the main story line, yet he also left out many significant details that gave the story more depth and that clarified certain events; he left it to the spectator to fill in the missing passages.

Lights and colours are important conventions in a film as they can be applied to evoke a desired mood. Colours are very explicitly present in the film adaptation, especially through clothing. The film makes great use of colours in clothing to enhance the women's positions and to stress the contrast in their positions; Wives are dressed in blue, Handmaids in red, Marthas in green, and Aunts in brown. Especially the Wives' blue and the Handmaids' red form a big contrast, as they also represent the colours of the American flag and the patriotic character of Gilead.

The film is full of visual effects and symbolic images, which represent references that are less outspoken. An example of this can be found in the way that women who have been labelled 'infertile', are moved from one place to another. They are put in trucks that used to read 'livestock', a word that has been crossed out in such a way that the reference is still clear, and the viewer easily makes the connection to World War II (Atwood has always claimed that nothing she wrote in the novel was made up and that everything had happened somewhere in history before; a given Schlöndorff has used in his film adaptation). Another visual effect that amplifies the film's impact is the horrific portraying of the Ceremony, which is in fact nothing more than a violent rape scene. Offred is pictured holding Serena Joy's hands, wearing a bright

red dress, while Serena Joy is dressed in contrasting royal blue. It looks as if Offred's veil is choking her, symbolising the nature of the act and her position. However, the film seems to leave less of an impression than the novel, in which Offred specifically declares that the Ceremony is not rape: "Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose (*The Handmaid's Tale* 104)."

2.2.4 Aspects of Sound

The final aspect that deserves mentioning is the function of sound in editing. Sound does not play a role in the novel, but any film relies heavily on the use of sound; it can add extra effects to the visual narrative and prepare the viewer for upcoming scenes. Sound is considered a logical extension of the technique of editing. A more exciting scene, such as Moira's escape, uses uplifting music with heavy drums to create tension for the viewer. A more emotional scene, such as Moira's and Kate's farewell, makes use of violins, which initiates a more emotional atmosphere and provides the possibility of empathy for the viewer. Another example is the use of the gloomy music and heavy sirens in the opening scene, the cries of the child for her mother, and the ominous percussion at the beginning of the film during the roundup of the blacks. Further, music can be functional when used for a significant scene; when the new baby girl is presented to the Wives, the music of *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World* from the Rodgers and Hart musical *Jumbo* (1935) is heard in the background. Another example is the use of the church choir singing during the reading of the Bible, right before the Ceremony is about to start. However, no music is played in the background during this scene. The only sounds that are heard are those of a moaning Offred to indicate the painful event. "Sound is used to reinforce, comment on, anticipate the film's visual images" (Bluestone 30), but the absence of it can create an equally powerful message.

2.3 Dramatical Clashings: Public Perception

2.3.1 Schlöndorff's Intentions

When Margaret Atwood sold the rights to her novel to producer Daniel Wilson in 1986, it was because he would be working with writer Harold Pinter and director Karel Reisz. Unfortunately, despite the collaboration of two talented filmmakers, no studio was interested in adapting Atwood's novel and it took almost three years before film studio Cinecom showed interest. Although Reisz was no longer available, Volker Schlöndorff expressed interest in directing the film, which would star Sigourney Weaver as Offred. Ironically enough Weaver became pregnant during the time of the filming and had to drop out, after which British actress Natasha Richardson was found to play the main role. By that time Schlöndorff had approached almost every American actress, but they all declined. Richardson was also wary about taking the role, since Schlöndorff interpreted *The Handmaid's Tale* as a sexually charged thriller. The film was finally released in March 1990, five years after the novel's first publication.

The Handmaid's Tale is Schlöndorff's "first feature-length contribution to the science-fiction genre" (247), according to Hans-Bernhard Moeller and George Lellis, who examined Schlöndorff's work in *Volker Schlöndorff's Cinema : Adaptation, Politics, and the 'Movie-Appropriate'* (2002). Science-fiction can be considered a genre used for both entertainment and commentary on present-day societies, while *The Handmaid's Tale* also looks at a possible horrific future for mankind. However, the genre was not entirely new to Schlöndorff as he was able to add several of his ideas and ideological concerns, and rework them in this dystopian genre to leave his mark. Moeller and Lellis argue that "*The Handmaid's Tale* represents a return to the Schlöndorff of the 1970s in its focus on a woman's right to personal and sexual fulfilment" (247) and that the film "confronts issues of fascism, patriarchy, conformity, individualism, and rebellion" (248), themes Schlöndorff had worked with before. He was eager to make his move into Hollywood, as a pioneer of the New German Cinema movement. His intention was to show

his part of his struggle to come to terms with the political past of Germany, and, since he also wanted to display the potential neo-fascist societal evolution in America, he was thus particularly interested in directing this movie (Moeller and Lellis 249).

Though Schlöndorff had experience with the theme of neo-fascism, he made the mistake of interpreting the film as “a sexually charged and vivid drama without the nuance or emotional depth of the source material” (Zutter 2). Because of this approach, he did not give Offred’s interior monologues the attention they deserved, and he thus turned Offred, or Kate, into an oddly blank character without much enigma. She barely had more lines than any of the other characters (Gilbert 3), which, according to Richardson, had to do with Pinter’s aversion against voiceovers in film - comparable to the omniscient narrator in the novel - and Schlöndorff commented that he did not want to create a too sympathetic Kate: “If you were to identify more with the main figure of Kate...that would in my view become unbearable for the audience and border on kitsch” (Schlöndorff, qtd. in Moeller and Lellis 253). Rather, he showed too much nudity and eroticized a violent rape (Zutter 4).

The film looks at Offred as the female victim who is passively involved in an oppressive situation (Moeller and Lellis 251-252), and presents her from a far more detached perspective (Moeller and Lellis 252). Since Pinter stripped away the many layers, relationships and secondary plots of the original story - and the linear fashion in which it proceeds - Kate is perceived as a “weak, non-thinking protagonist who is preoccupied with sexual happiness” (Barnett, qtd. in Moeller and Lellis 252). The novel, on the other hand, shows Offred as “an astonishing character with a rich interior monologue incorporating fierce intelligence, compassion, and violent fantasies of revenge against her oppressors” (Gilbert 3). However, Moeller and Lellis ask themselves whether the differences in Offred’s character are really of great importance to the audience, and they argue that Pinter and Schlöndorff respect their audience’s intelligence by assuming they are capable of filling in gaps and understanding implied connections (Moeller and Lellis 254).

Moeller and Lellis conclude their discussion of the film adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* by stating that the screenplay falls short in providing a satisfying context and backstory for the action, and hence lacks a dynamic protagonist. However, they do find the result “interesting and often compelling” due to its discussion of social issues, such as environment, and visual aspects linked to “a discourse about power, gender, family structures, and sexual freedom” (Moeller and Lellis 260). They advise critics who fail to look beyond the original storyline, to look at the larger cultural contexts Schlöndorff and Pinter address. Moeller and Lellis consider the film is best appreciated when the film’s attack on neo- fascism and its references to Nazi actions against women are not overlooked. Despite Moeller’s and Lellis’ conclusion that both the novel and the film adaptation are best appreciated as reflections on feminism, the film grossed less than \$5 million against a \$13 million budget, which was an undeniable financial failure that could neither please fans of Atwood’s work, nor moviegoers (Gilbert 7).

2.3.2 What the Media Had to Say

In spite of Moeller’s and Lellis’ conclusion and plea to regard the film adaptation as a reflection on feminism, the media panned the film. The article “*The Forgotten Handmaid’s Tale*” (Gilbert 2015) for the magazine *The Atlantic* quotes several critical opinions. According to Roger Ebert, “The movie seems equally angry that women have to have children at all, and that it is hard for them to have children now that men have mucked up the planet with their greedy schemes,” while *Entertainment Weekly’s* Owen Gleiberman calls it “so poisonous and mechanical that you have to wonder: Is this really what our society is threatening to turn into, or is Atwood just exorcising her own fear and loathing?”.

The Handmaid’s Tale speaks about the circumstances of the 1980s and 1990s, when young women were taking their lifestyles and the victories of the women in previous generations for granted. The novel was written by a woman from a post-feminist point of view, while the film

adaptation was written and directed by two men. Offred's story then came to be perceived through the eyes of two men, and the film alternates between violence and erotic sex. *The Washington Post's* Rita Kempley acknowledges that "Schlöndorff seems as uncomfortable in this feminist nightmare as a man in a lingerie department.", yet she also praises the story of "surrogate motherhood run amok in a society dominated by iron-fisted pulpit thumpers turned fascist militarists," *The New York Times'* Janet Maslin said: "As visions of a hellish, dehumanizing future go, this one could never be mistaken for a man's," and "With its devilish attention to polite little touches, its abundant bitchiness ... *The Handmaid's Tale* is a shrewd if preposterous cautionary tale that strikes a wide range of resonant chords", indicating exactly the flaws in the film adaptation compared to the novel.

Even though Gilbert quotes some rather negative comments, she also states that "the film isn't all that bad" (4). She considers the script typically minimalistic, in line with Pinter's work, yet language is not everything. The film is filled with symbolism and visual effects, rather than lengthy monologues. Nevertheless, the catastrophic status seems to prevent "other producers from tackling new film or TV adaptations, even while the book continues to endure both as a model of speculative fiction and across a variety of artistic mediums" (Gilbert 7). Gilbert concludes that neither audience, nor film industry would be interested in adapting a more faithful version of Atwood's novel, since it is questionable what kinds of new insights could be gained. However, two years after the publishing of this article, a television series of *The Handmaid's Tale* was created.

2.3.3 From a Spectator's Point of View

In Hollywood, it is the audience who ultimately makes or breaks a film. Since the film came \$7 million short to break even, it is not considered a success. Critical articles on the film adaptation do not give it much credit and the Internet's movie database *IMDb.com*, where viewers can

leave a critical review, also displays a lot of opinions; although some people are very enthusiastic about the film, the majority seems rather negative about it. The film gets rated a 6.0/10.0 and those who comment the most are highly prolific commentators. Top comments on the film's plot contain statements such as "With its obvious restraints, the movie needs a less expensive and more intense final conflict. [...] It's not a terribly liberated ending (SnoopyStyle, qtd. in IMDb.com); "Wow, this story dates badly, [...]" (Robert J. Maxwell, qtd. In IMDb.com); and "a high-minded but posed, uncomfortable human drama" (MoonSpinner55, qtd. in IMDb.com). Others have seen the director's cut and conclude that this did not live up to the expectations:

I just don't know, but for the moment it seems that this is a bad film merely because it was poorly written and directed, and that's all. Notably bad is the art direction. [...] Other missed opportunities: the book conflated the episodes of secret games, the ritual of surrogate sex and the larger moves within the warring factions. How could Pinter have not exploited this? (tedg, qtd. in IMDb.com).

People agreed most with the comment that "This is basically an unknown movie and it's easy to see why--it's far too dark and disturbing for a general audience" (preppy-3, qtd. in IMDb.com), and "The final result is nowhere near a successful movie, but never less than a fascinating failure" (Michael Neumann, qtd. in IMDb.com).

Some viewers were not familiar with the original story and were thus focused on the storyline. They did not see the director's artistic intentions. Their opinions were based on just the movie and its impact:

I haven't read the novel, although I have skimmed through it. While the film may not be wholly faithful to the novel, it does capture the spirit and themes of the book. [...] When I looked through the book, I discovered the concept of the handmaid's names. In the film,

hearing Kate being called "Offred" didn't register in my brain as "Of Fred", meaning she was his property. It sounded like a weird name in a strange society, not unlike the names slaves were given in the South, or one that would be given to a pet. (grendlekhan, qtd. in IMDb.com)

However, the movie receives a better rating from those who have not read the novel, than from those who have, and one could conclude that the movie is not as bad as critics make it to be. Even though the plot is interesting and compelling, it is the linear fashion which the adaptation has adopted that is disturbing to Atwood's fans.

Nevertheless, the film seems to have been entirely forgotten and it is said that copies are so rare that they sell up to \$100 on Amazon.com (Gilbert). Gilbert suggest that it might be due to its status of cinematic failure that no other producers have ever felt the need to capture Atwood's model of speculative fiction as a model for a new film or TV adaptation, and speculates (in her 2015 article) that neither audiences nor the film industry are ready yet.

:: CHAPTER 3 : *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017): the TV series by *Hulu*

3.1 *The Handmaid's Tale* : General Overview of the TV series

On April 27, 2017, subscription service *Hulu* aired its first three (of the in total ten weekly) episodes of the brand-new TV series *The Handmaid's Tale*, created by Bruce Miller, known for the successful American post-apocalyptic science fiction TV series *The 100* (2014-). Bruce Miller is also one of the executive producers, together with Warren Littlefield, Reed Morano, Daniel Wilson, Fran Sears and Ilene Chaiken. Noteworthy is that four of the five directors of all ten episodes are women, except for Mike Barker, who directed episodes four and five. Margaret Atwood herself was one of the producers of the show, as was Elisabeth Moss, who portrays the role of main character Offred. Other lead roles were covered by Yvonne Strahovski as Serena Joy (known for the role of Hannah McKay in *Dexter* (2012-2013)), Joseph Fiennes as Commander Fred, and Samira Wiley as Moira (known for her role of inmate Poussey Washington in *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2017)).

The first episode gives the viewer a detailed explanation of the show's settings, and the main characters are carefully introduced. As the series evolves, each character has their own story explained more profoundly. Interestingly enough, the TV series provides the viewer with more additional background information about the characters than the novel does. Although the original novel dates from 1985 and had the story set in a near-future setting that could well be the year 2017, the TV series has been adjusted to fit present-day television. The series mentions the use of *Uber* - a car transportation and food delivery app founded in 2009 - and makes use of Apple's *iPhone*, which was first released in 2007, in the flashbacks of pre-Gilead. These flashbacks expand on the situation before Gilead, for instance when June reveals to

Moira that she is pregnant and shares her concerns about everything that can go wrong during a pregnancy or the delivery of a baby. While these are normal concerns, June's are abnormal. Also, when she has just given birth to her daughter Hannah and she is still in hospital, the newborn is stolen by a delusional woman - who probably just lost a baby of her own. In comparison, the film adaptation never mentioned any sort of relationship between June and Moira, yet this turned into one of the TV series' main focuses.

June and Moira are two best friends who met in college and went through several stages of life together. Moira is the one who introduced June to Luke, her husband, using the dating app *Tinder* (2012). Even though Luke is in a relationship when they first meet, they nevertheless decide to meet in private, without Moira or Luke's wife being aware. Moira herself shows no interest in Luke since she is more interested in women. Soon after their first meeting Luke decides to leave his wife and he and June get married. When the Gileadean regime starts to take form, they try to leave the U.S. and move to Canada. However, they do not succeed in their plans as the man who was supposed to help them dies, and they are left on their own. In their effort to cross the border, Luke is shot and June is captured and taken to the Red Centre. At the Red Centre she is introduced to her new life and the restrictions this involves. She is also reunited with Moira, and introduced to the other women who have fallen victim to the new system. The most important, and recurring, characters are Janine, later Ofwarren, Ofglen, or Emily, and Alma. Not everyone is as compliant, and when Janine - the only one to become pregnant and give birth to a healthy baby in the series - shows her discomfort, she is disciplined with a cattle prod (which is normally used on livestock) by Aunt Lydia and forcibly taken away. When she later returns in the dormitory, it is not just her feet that have been mutilated, her eye has also been removed since, according to the series, one can also serve as a Handmaid with only one eye. And, as Moira states: "If my right eye offends thee, pluck it out." - a reference to Matthew 5:29 in the New Testament.

In the first episode the viewer is confronted with some striking factual differences from the original storyline. The most striking one may be that Offred's best friend, Moira, is portrayed by Samira Wiley, a black woman. Offred's husband Luke is of Nigerian descent, and their child is of mixed race. The original novel does not mention any important characters of colour. People of colour had been classified "Children of Ham" and were forcibly resettled in the upper Midwest. Also, the TV series confirms Offred's pre-Gilead name to be June, while her daughter is named Hannah. When Luke, Hannah, and June try to reach the Canadian border, their car crashes and they are forcibly captured by Gileadean soldiers. Luke then tries to divert the soldiers in order for June and Hannah to escape, but when June then hears gunshots, she assumes Luke has been shot. In the novel, however, Luke's fate remains unknown. Later Offred is seen - or rather her silhouette - sitting in her new room, in her new uniform, describing her new situation. She speaks to the viewer through a voice over - something that was despised by the filmscript writer Harold Pinter. Furthermore, Serena Joy and the Commander are much younger in this version. Finally, the series shows an emotional connection between the Commander Fred and his wife Serena Joy, different from how they are portrayed in both the novel and the film adaptation.

Besides June and Moira, another strong female character in the novel, the film, and the TV series is Serena Joy. The series has deepened her character even more by revealing she was one of the founders of the new regime, or at least part responsible for writing the new laws. She acts friendly yet distant to Offred, less harsh than the Faye Dunaway character, and even shows compassion at times. Even though she co-wrote the Gileadean law, she is also oppressed by the system. Her husband repeatedly rejects her, which is shown when she makes advances at him and he refuses her, as he turns down any sort of emotional affection from her. Flashbacks show Serena Joy and Fred's life before and during the beginnings of Gilead, and it reveals Serena Joy as having been passionate about restoring old values. She even wrote a book on how life should be (which was titled *A Woman's Place* and is seen as thrown out in the

trash since women are no longer allowed to read) and held speeches to promote it. It was also Serena Joy who came up with the famous quote “do not mistake a woman’s meekness for weakness”. The viewer can easily draw the conclusion that this is not what she had in mind when she came up with the idea of a new state without any worldly temptations. It is not until after the takeover that she is completely shut out of the new government planning and that she has to accept her new role as an obedient wife.

While the novel’s Serena Joy is presumed to be middle-aged or older, with grey hair and arthritis, TV series’ Serena Joy is much younger. The actresses playing Offred and Serena Joy are only one year apart in real life, and a wife and handmaid who are almost the same age results in a more dynamic relationship, especially when you come to the realisation that they could even be friends in real life, Miller said in an interview for *Business Insider* (Renfro 3). Also, Strahovski is much taller than Moss, and the fact that she wore heels added to the effect of Serena Joy imposing on Offred in all sorts of ways (Renfro 3). When Serena Joy learns that Offred is not pregnant, while Serena Joy thought she was, her fury is thereby even more intimidating, in particular when she hits Offred and angrily kneels down on the ground next to her. It is obvious she is a woman who has been waiting for a baby for a long time, while restraining her anger all this time. When she takes Offred to the house where her daughter Hannah lives, it is clear that Serena Joy is not the kind and charming lady she seems to be, but rather a strong and independent woman who is not afraid to go to the utmost when times ask for it.

Where Offred does not manage to fulfil her duty in the novel, in the TV series she does get pregnant (the result remains unknown). The only other Handmaid to get pregnant is Janine (played by Madeline Brewer), who is the most important supporting character. Janine is a seemingly fragile young girl with a troubled psyche who needs help from the other girls to grow accustomed to her new role as a handmaid. She is placed with Commander Warren and his wife, who loathes her. Janine is “kind of batshit crazy” (Bradley 2) and takes comfort in

deliberately misleading other people. At the Salvaging she tells Offred that Moira was sent off to the Colonies and is now probably dead, causing Offred to strike the first of many hard blows on the head of a man accused of raping a Handmaid. Janine herself does not have to take part in the Salvaging as she is highly pregnant, which she enjoys showing off. After she has given birth to a healthy baby, named Angela, she is seen nursing the baby and telling her about her brother Caleb. She tells the girl how they will run off with Commander Warren, and how they will form a family. It turns out, however, that Warren misled Janine, who slowly breaks down after finding out. Finally, she is found standing on the edge of a bridge with little Angela in her arms. Offred is the one who manages to get through to Janine and have her give up the baby, after which she still jumps into the river beneath. However, she survives, and when in the final episode the handmaids are called out for the stoning of someone who endangered a child, it turns out to be Janine. It is then that the handmaids do not follow Aunt Lydia's instructions and refuse to carry out the stoning. They are sent home with a warning that consequences will follow. The image of the handmaids walking home, in their red uniforms, is heard in a powerful voice-over: "They should have never given us uniforms, if they did not want us to be an army".

Ofglen, played by Alexis Bledel, is Offred's shopping partner and, just like the other characters in the series, she plays a more important role compared to the one in the novel. Offred thinks of her as pious, but changes her opinion after they manage to share some personal information during one of their walks along the river. Ofglen reveals she has a wife with a Canadian passport, who managed to get away, together with their child. Ofglen, however, was caught at the border for gender treachery, and forced to live as a Handmaid since she still has viable ovaries. She also reveals that she is a member of the Resistance organisation Mayday and warns her about an Eye in her house, but without making clear who that would be. The next day Offred is awaited by a new Ofglen. Her initial shopping partner, whose real name is Emily, has been caught and is sentenced for gender treachery. It turns out she was involved with a Martha, who is hanged as Ofglen watches. Ofglen receives a lesser sentence since she can still

bear children, but she undergoes female genital mutilation. According to Aunt Lydia, “things will be so much easier for [her] now” and “[she] won’t want what [she] cannot have” (episode 3). Later Emily returns as Ofstevens, and Offred runs into her at the market and attempts to ask her about Mayday, but Ofstevens remains quiet. When she steals a guard’s car and kills him by running him over, she is taken into a van and is not seen or heard of again. In the *Facebook* group on the TV series fans of the show are asking for her return, though, since she was one of their favourite characters.

The Eye Ofglen warns Offred about his Nick, the Commander’s driver (a role by Max Minghella). In pre-Gilead, he used to be a drifter, not being able to hold on to a job for a decent amount of time, and flashbacks show how he got involved in the Gileadean regime. His counsellor, later Commander Pryce, from the career counselling agency tells him about a new “group that wants to set things right [...] they are called Sons of Jacob” (episode 8), and invites him to a meeting. Presumably, he is not a passionate advocate of the new regime, but he needed a job and this is the one that came on his path. When Serena Joy wants him to have intercourse with Offred, because it seems the Commander is sterile, he agrees and Offred and Nick perform their duty under the supervision of Serena Joy. Even though Nick is an Eye, he and Offred start seeing each other in secret and he develops feelings for her. However, after he has driven Offred and the Commander to Jezebel’s, he ends his relationship with her on the way back, because he cannot cope with all the stress it brings. After Offred’s refusal to follow Aunt Lydia’s instructions at the stoning of Janine, she is taken by a van the following day. As she is dragged out Nick ensures her that it is safe to go with them and that she needs to trust them.

Joseph Fiennes portrays the role of Commander Fred Waterford, a high-ranked government official of Gilead and one of the founders, and Serena Joy’s husband. In the series his name is clearly confirmed as Commander Fred Waterford, a name which was only suggested in the novel. Both the novel and the film portray Waterford as an older man, and in

both versions he dies at the end; the novel only makes a very implicit suggestion that he was executed in a political purge, while in the film he gets killed by Offred. In the TV series, however, it is not clear what becomes of him. While he seems to be a rather gentle man, who cares for his wife and the other members of his household, it is important to consider he is one of the founding men of the Republic and even tries to interest other nations into adopting the model of handmaids and wives. When a Mexican delegation comes to visit, he and his wife put together a banquet - which is more like a little show - and demand Offred to speak highly of the system, so that they will be able to trade between the two states. Even though he is a government official, he also violates rules he has drawn up by taking Offred to a place called Jezebel's, where she sees Moira again and realises she is not dead. Later, Offred even talks the Commander into returning to Jezebel's since there is an important Mayday package there that must be picked up. Unfortunately the Commander has organised a meeting between Moira and June in his room, taking away Offred's chance of picking up the package behind the bar. The Commander is a man who always wants to be in control, and he likes to create the illusion that he has an actual relationship with Offred. He enjoys showing her off to others. Nevertheless, that does not make him a fertile man and when Offred turns out to be pregnant, Serena Joy is all too willing to tell him the child is not his. He does not seem impressed, as he is more concerned with issues concerning the preservation of Gilead.

The last male character worth mentioning is that of Luke, June's husband. As June and Luke are running from the soldiers of Gilead, he gets shot. The film cuts his story short right there, confirming his death, and in the novel he is not mentioned again. In the TV series, however, he is shot, and a few episodes later the viewer finds out he is still alive. A representative of the Mexican government, who has spoken to him, tells June he is still alive and gives her the opportunity to leave him a note. It turns out the gunshot did not kill him, and an ambulance was going to take him to a hospital. However, the ambulance got into an accident and he managed to escape, after which he was picked up by a group of people on their way to

Canada. He finds refuge there and in the last episode he is seen hugging Moira, who also found her way to Canada. He had been informed of her arrival, since she was on his “next-of-kin list”.

The TV series receives an average rating of 8.7 in the *International Movie Database* - rated by nearly 25,000 visitors. It has already been mentioned as Best TV show of 2017 by several websites, and shortly after its final episode was aired it was announced that there will be a season two, expected to be released in 2018.

3.2 The Medium TV : Defining Television

Soon after its introduction, television became a medium that was taken for granted, with the power to construct and determine our view of the world. It showed the viewer a natural and transparent window of the world, a fact that should not be underestimated. Glen Creeber discusses the medium television in his book *Tele-Visions : An Introduction to Studying Television* (2006) and argues that due to its habitual nature television was not taken seriously for a long time (Creeber 1). However, much has changed since then and television has turned into a medium which generates commentary and challenges the viewer’s attitude towards the world.

Television is no longer an everyday medium which is solely used for pleasure in an intimate, domestic setting. In recent years, its function has changed from a background noise to a diverse medium. TV is now more diverse in use and potential, due to the use of bigger screens and the choice of over 500 digital channels and several subscription channels such as *HBO*, *Netflix* and *Hulu*. The advanced quality of the digital image now allows TV to approach cinema - or even transcend - in its use of the visual image (Creeber 75).

TV now makes a distinctive contribution to the narrative form through the ongoing serial narrative as used in soap operas (Ellis, qtd. in Creeber 82), of which *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017) can serve as an example. The entire series tells the story of Offred and how she became

a handmaid in Gilead, while each episode focuses on one character and tells their specific story. Another development in television is the transnational distribution and the Anglophone dominance of material made in the U.S., which “makes it economically viable to make television [movies] with budgets approaching those of theatre movies and transmit them around the world dubbed into a range of languages” (Creeber 75). Add high-quality soundtracks of the music used in the TV drama to this and broadcast television becomes an experience that can be relived multiple times. The narrative does not rely on just the present moment, but its intimacy proceeds beyond the domestic environment (Creeber 19, 75).

The quality in today’s television has increased significantly, but TV drama has also come to allow more pervasive sexual and violent scenes, since it is not concerned with a “9 o’clock watershed mark” (Creeber 74) anymore. Subscription services have not only created more diversity and more creativity, but the visual style of their TV series includes an increase of more explicit images of violence and sex, something also reflected in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

3.3 Critical Analysis: TV Series versus Novel

3.3.1 Aspects of Time and Space

Time is an important aspect in an adaptation, since television and film do not work with the same amount of time. While the film missed the point of retrovision and only showed a linear storyline, the TV series does a much better job at grasping the effect of the flashbacks of the novel. By incorporating the flashbacks into the linear storyline, the series offers the opportunity to learn about the background of current events. The series is set in two different times: it tells the story in a near-future present, with the use of regular time-jumps and flashbacks to the past to clarify the current situation. These time-jumps are made clear through the use of light: flashbacks are shot in a clearer light with warmer, saturated colours, compared to the present time, which is shot in mostly Vermeer-esque shades of green and blue. The show also relies on

the difference between psychological time and chronological time: June's perception of time changes with her new role as a handmaid and her days are long and uninteresting with an occasional 'Salvaging' as a highlight. Furthermore, the flashbacks mention the use of *Uber*, a service which is popular in present-day society, and thus manage to draw the viewer into the current events, making the series much more plausible to its modern audience.

The TV series consists of ten different episodes of approximately 60 minutes each, which allows the show more time to adapt to the events as described in the novel more truthfully. The first episode shows Offred alone in her room, thinking about her life before the creation of Gilead, and she explains the viewer what has happened to her and what her new tasks involve. It gives the viewer more information on what is going on in the series and Offred's mind. The scenes in which Offred is seen alone in her room do the novel far more justice than the film ever did. They represent her solitude and despair, and her thoughts, dreams, and memories are shared out loud through narrative, with most lines being literally from the novel. This causes Offred to become more than the one-dimensional character from the film, which is why it should come as no surprise that the actress Elisabeth Moss has won an *Emmy Award* for "Outstanding Lead Actress".

The TV series consists of a logical sequential ordering of events, as in the novel, with the addition of flashbacks to the past. The chronological sequence as used in the novel is reconstructed in the serial and nothing has been left out. The first episode already reveals a lot and explains the bigger picture of the basic storyline, and all episodes together form a linear storyline. Due to its frequent use of flashbacks, and the presentation of one character per episode, the viewer is not left with any information gaps and is even provided with extra information concerning the different characters. An example of this can be found in the presentation of Ofglen, Offred's shopping partner, of whom we do not learn much about in the novel. The series provides the viewer with more information and tells us that Ofglen is a lesbian and a college professor of cellular biology. When Offred asks her why she was not sent to the

Colonies, she replies that having two viable ovaries is what saved her. The series also shows her being found guilty of gender treachery, because of her sexual relationship with a Martha - the Martha is hanged and Offred herself becomes a victim of female genital mutilation. The series, then, benefits from the number of episodes, which allow for more profound characters and more background information.

3.3.2 Focalization and Characters

Focalization refers to the perspective through which a narrative is presented. Initially, *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017) is presented through the eyes of Offred, although the series does not specify this. However, while in the first episode the viewer gets a clear look into Offred's mind and hears her voice as the voice-over, Offred is not the omniscient narrator since each episode looks into a different character, which gives the viewer additional information that Offred has no knowledge of. For example, Offred has no idea of Luke's whereabouts or his fate, yet the viewer knows everything about Luke's character. Only the camera can be considered omniscient in the series.

In writing, characters are described to a large extent, but on screen the acting, and the power of the human face and its different expressions become paramount. Since the handmaids are not allowed to talk, the power to act through facial expressions becomes more important, as Elisabeth Moss explains in an interview for *The Hollywood Reporter*. To exemplify this, she describes the scene in which the Ceremony is performed - a rape scene - and explains her thoughts behind her acting. She goes into detail on how she imagined the rape as something you would not consciously want to experience. She decided to act as if she was not present in the moment, which explains her facial expression. Also, in an interview with Seth Meyers, Alexis Bledel explained the importance of face-acting, especially when she was forced to wear a face-mask after she was found guilty of gender treachery; her eyes were the only things she could

use to portray her feelings. Where the film overlooked the importance of facial expressions and the dimension it creates for a character, the TV series appreciates the importance of face-acting. It creates the possibility to identify with a character and it can leave an enormous impact on the viewer.

3.3.3 Visual Effects in the Narrative

While the novelist has to deal with verbal limitations, a writer and director can excel in both the use of language and image. The film left out scenes that seemed meaningless, which, however, clarified many of the events in the plot, while the length of the series has given it the opportunity to go into every detail and does not have to leave anything unexplained. The only narrative element that is left out is June's mother, yet everything else that is mentioned in the novel is explained in the series.

The Handmaid's Tale (2017) takes advantage of the visual potential and presents the viewer some mind-blowing audio-visuals, combined with a great script. In the first episode, Offred recalls a visit to the aquarium's underwater tunnel with Luke and Hannah, and the bright and vivid colours show a great contrast to her present life. Another example is the use of colours; flashbacks are shot in shades of red and yellow, while the present is shot in shades of grey, green, and blue. Also, the camera effectively uses shallow focus (close-ups) to show the oppression and totalitarian regime the handmaids are dealing with. The use of shallow focus emphasizes the limited knowledge handmaids have of the Gileadean regime and how it came to this (Renée). It also makes a connection between the age of Gilead and the time before its existence. The shallow focus also shows how the handmaids' bonnets almost seem to light up when they are outside, giving them the image of angel-like figures. Altogether, it is the camera and the combination of colours that sets the mood for a great deal for the series.

The visuals and symbolic images leave their mark on the series' image and show that there is far more to it than is actually said explicitly. Again, the scene in which the Ceremony is shown is a great example of this; it is what is not said that makes the scene all the more effective and impressive. And even though a moving picture can in no way be compared to a piece of writing, the television adaptation seems to be a very successful narrative, using some of the novel's exact lines that quite possibly contribute to its success.

3.3.4 Aspects of Sound

Whereas the film mostly uses instrumental background music, the series adapts popular well-known songs, mostly from the 1980s. The songs emphasize the characters' feelings and emotions, and express what they are not able to say (Cosores 1). A complete playlist of all songs used in the series can be found on the digital music service *Spotify*.

Music adds depth to the experience of watching a series and in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale* the lyrics of the songs help explain what the characters can't. The first episode ends with *You Don't Own Me* (1963) by the late Lesley Gore, and represents Offred's and the other handmaids' feelings on being a walking womb. Near the end of the second episode we hear *Don't You Forget About Me* (1985) by the Simple Minds, which ends abruptly at the sight of a new Ofglen, indicating that the old Ofglen may be forgotten that quickly. Another song that is played is one with the controversial title *Fuck the Pain Away* (2009) by Peaches, and is heard when Moira and June are running outside and glanced at in a condescending manner by those they pass on their way. They are completely unaware of the fact that the new regime has already frozen their bank accounts, and new laws are being put into force. The lyrics of *Waiting for Something* (2006) by Jay Reatard are heard when Ofglen finds out about her operation, and it can be considered a presage of what happens in a later episode (when Ofglen has become Ofsteven and steals the car of an Eye). It also shows her feisty nature and her internal rebellion:

It's not complete
I must compete
Stand on my feet
Live with these creeps
I'm sitting
And waiting for something to happen
Oh no no no!
They won't get me

Music can be considered a way to invigorate moods and emotions in the narrative. It also functions as a mark between transitions and creates a bridge between the viewer and the series.

3.4 On-screen Violence

3.4.1 Broadcast Restrictions

In comparing the violence displayed in the TV series and the film version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is important to realise that, even though both versions deal with the same subject, they cannot be compared to each other without taking the differences in media into consideration.

When television had just been invented, it was considered 'new media' and quite different from how television is perceived nowadays. Today, we no longer focus on the superficial differences in the imagined, or fantasised, specificities of the medium, but rather look at 'the moving image' altogether (Carroll 2003, qtd. in Creeber 114). Also, not everyone perceives violence in the same way. Much of the research that has been performed on TV violence leaves out the fact that people "vary widely in terms of social background and

personality” (Gunter and Furnham 315), and the heterogeneity of the audience is not taken into account. The audience's perception of violence depends on how the violence is portrayed: violence may be shown in close-up, or from a distance; there could be a difference in scripting of the actors committing the violence; reasons for the violent acts contribute to perception; variations in the portrayal of the result play a role, including the pain and suffering of victims; and the outcome for the perpetrator is of importance (Hamilton 13). Studies on individual viewers and their responses to TV violence have been extremely limited, since researchers were not interested in the differences in viewers. They preferred to create a broad, theoretical framework, which incorporated “standardized, tried, and tested measures of personality [and they thus needed a] systematic and comprehensive examination of the impact of TV violence” (Gunter and Furnham 316). In Hamilton’s collection of essays *Television Violence and Public Policy*, Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli mention: “Although a viewer's gender, or age, or class makes a difference in perspective, television viewing can make a similar and interacting difference. The interaction is a continuous process (as is cultivation) beginning with infancy and going on from cradle to grave” (Hamilton 25), and these differences can thus be left out. The following examination of violence in *The Handmaid’s Tale* ignores any differences in social background and personality, and discusses ratings and comments found through websites such as *Facebook* and *IMDb.com*.

3.4.2 Violence in the Moving Image

Many people consider television their main source of information on worldly issues. Learning about violence in the news and fictional programming may cause their critical view on social environments to shift, and they will start to think that the world is turning into a place of perdition (Hamilton 24). This is often caused by the manner in which violence is presented (Hamilton 60), on which the viewer’s response depends. Factors that play a role are the graphic image,

intensity, duration, and attractiveness of the violence. However, research has not been able to pinpoint whether it is the violence by itself that is problematic for people, or the degree of it (Gunter et al. 44).

Something is considered violence, or an act of violence, when it involves “an interaction between a perpetrator, an act, and a target” (Hamilton 62). Hamilton’s essays refer to violence as:

Any overt depiction of a credible threat of physical force or the actual use of such force intended to physically harm an animate being or group of beings. Violence also includes certain depictions of physically harmful consequences against an animate being or group that occurs as a result of unseen violent means (Hamilton 6)

Also, we can consider four types of aggressive behaviour: verbal aggression, threat of physical aggression, unarmed physical aggression, and armed physical aggression. Verbal aggression is expressed through “noxious symbolic messages containing criticism, insults, cursing, or a negative affective reaction” (Gunter et al. 21). Threats of physical aggression can be found in “overt verbal and nonverbal warnings of intentions to cause physical harm to a person” (Gunter et al. 21). It is considered unarmed physical aggression when one person attacks another and this involves contact with any body part, without the use of weapons or other objects; when weapons or other objects are used, it is considered armed physical aggression (Gunter et al. 21).

The violence by itself is not necessarily the problem. Much of the violence that can be seen on screen is left unpunished, and portrayed as justified (Hamilton 6). The victim might be suffering, but does not show any signs of pain or harm. According to Hamilton, this development is responsible for something that has been defined as ‘desensitization’. Desensitization looks at the effect violence has on mass media, and how it undermines feelings of concern, empathy, or

sympathy viewers might have towards victims of violence in real-life situations. “Studies indicated that heavy viewers of media violence showed less psychological reactivity to violent film clips compared to light viewers; that general psychological arousal decreases as viewers watched more violent media” (Hamilton 22). Viewers become increasingly comfortable watching violence on TV (Hamilton 23), which could easily explain the increase of on-screen violence. Hamilton argues that once viewers are emotionally comfortable with the violent content, ongoing exposure to violent material that was considered offensive or degrading at first, may become more acceptable (Hamilton 23).

3.4.3 Graphic Content in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

When discussing the use of violence in the on-screen adaptations of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it is important to realise that the novel was banned in many classrooms in the United States when it first came out: it referred to violent pornographic images, too much government control, and an overly misogynistic dystopian culture. The novel’s topics seemed inappropriate for classroom discussions, and an adaption of the novel could create a new discussion. Whether or not the media should allow the use of graphic violent images has long been at the heart of a wider debate of censorship and regulation (Gunter et al 2). Nevertheless, the use of violence on screen has increased significantly over the years and “routine exposure to such content may cause viewers to become used to witnessing violence and to adopt a less caring attitude about victims of violence [on screen]” (Gunter et al 2).

As expected, there is much to be found on the internet on *Hulu’s* adaptation of the 1985 novel, and many people are highly enthusiastic about it. However, the cinematic version does not receive a lot of support, and a search on the web will yield less results. Articles on the film version do mention its overt use of violence, and especially the rape scenes and the ending of the film receive a lot of criticism when it comes to acts of violence and offense. Even though

offense is often considered a matter of personal taste, the notion of harm, however, is not. Audience could well enjoy some forms of violence, but it could still be considered distasteful (Gunter et al 1), and regular viewing of violence on television could make viewers immune to seeing violence in everyday society.

On *IMDb* the TV series is rated 12 years and older for France; Russia has its parental advice set on 18 years and older; while the U.S rates it as MA: “this program is specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17. This program may contain one or more of the following: crude indecent language (L), explicit sexual activity (S), or graphic violence (V)” (“Understanding the TV ratings”). Nevertheless, *The Handmaid’s Tale* can be watched through a subscription channel, which creates a flexibility in guidelines, and it is expected that parents take notice of what their children are exposed to. Hence, a channel such as *Hulu* might show more graphic material than a regular TV channel, and an increased number of violent acts is not surprising (Gunter et al 45).

While the novel already contained horrific content, and the film showed some rather horrific graphic images, it is far less than what the TV adaptation shows. American lifestyle website *Popsugar* even devoted an article to “9 Things You Need to Know Before Your Teen Watches *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (Schweitzer) in which it discusses the graphic material. It not only mentions the explicit use of violence and suicide, it also refers to complicated rape scenes, female genital mutilation, and the use of strong language.

Taking the four different types of violence into consideration - verbal aggression, threat of physical aggression, unarmed physical aggression, and armed physical aggression - the TV series shows a huge number of scenes that contain violent acts. The first thirty minutes of the TV series’ first episode contain several scenes with high amounts of verbal aggression and strong language, which are mostly the scenes in which Aunt Lydia is lecturing the new Handmaids in the Red Centre. And although Serena Joy speaks to Offred very calmly, a strong threat of physical aggression can be heard in her voice. The show even opens with armed and

unarmed physical aggression. Even though June and her daughter Hannah manage to flee from the soldiers at first, they are found and captured violently, and June even gets knocked down by a weapon. Aunt Lydia is also guilty of using a type of weaponry to invigorate her message; she uses a cattle prod on Janine while using strong language. Also, the graphic scene of people hanging on the wall is not suitable for younger viewers, and neither are the scenes that show any form of physical abuse. TV critic Abigail Chandler even calls the show “horror in its purest sense” (Chandler), and claims that the viewer enjoys being scared; the viewer is not an impartial observer, but rather looks into June’s head, making it all the more real. And while her thoughts might not be of a violent nature, they are indeed horrifying.

Clearly, the 2017 TV series outweighs the 1990 cinematic version when it comes to graphic content. Viewers are specifically warned about the violent content shown in the series, and many critics refer to it as something to take into consideration before watching the show.

3.5 Dramatical Clashings : Public Perception

3.5.1 What the Media Had to Say

The first three episodes of *Hulu’s* TV adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, an *MGM* project, were directed by Reed Morano, a female director, who had never directed such a big project before. However, Bruce Miller, the show’s creator, and Steve Stark, *MGM’s* president of television productions, felt that Offred’s story needed to be told from a woman’s point of view and Morano showed them to have the right vision (Littleton 3). The choice for Morano was a gamble, but considering the numerous nominations, it is not a choice they regretted.

The Handmaid’s Tale has often been called a “feminist dystopia” (“Haunted by *The Handmaid’s Tale*”), and Miller thus found it important to have women’s input on the series, resulting in all but two episodes to be directed by females. Also, most characters are women, as in the novel, and they have been extraordinarily rewarded for their performances. *Chicago*

Tribune's film critic Michael Philips regards Elisabeth Moss “an actress ready, willing and subtly eager for this dystopian nightmare set in a brutally nostalgic near future” in his review with the expressive title “‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ review: Elisabeth Moss captivates in dystopian nightmare”. Philips also compliments Morano on her experimental use of the camera as the story’s narrator. He specifically mentions the third episode, which is full of flashbacks, and regards its “shot length, tonal change-ups and the like” as the reason as to why Morano’s version is a superior and “solidly effective adaptation” (Philips 2). According to Philips, *The Handmaid’s Tale’s* TV adaptation is “the sternest sort of speculative fiction, shot through with gallows humor. [...] The world of “The Handmaid’s Tale,” in Atwood’s description, is the result of a populace refusing to “wake up,” even as women lose their money, their property, their identity” (Philips 2).

Philips, like other TV critics and reviews, also refers to the era in which the adaptation of the 1985 novel is broadcast. Atwood presented the reader with historical concepts, but the series leaves out any references to historical events. In fact, there is much discussion on the internet as to why the series was released now, in the age of Trump as a president, with gender classification, women in subjugation, and politics being such sensitive topics. For example, it was suggested that the march in episode three was a response to the Women’s March held against Trump concerning women’s rights in January 2017. However, those scenes had already been shot before the march and are nothing more than a coincidence.

Hulu’s adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* has been nominated for thirteen *Emmy Awards*, with individual nominations for Moss, Wiley, and Bledel, nominations for directors Morano and Dennis (episode 9), and a few technical nominations including cinematography (Miller 3), and has won the award in eight categories. It has been discussed in a plethora of articles on numerous news websites, which should give critics an idea on the success of the TV series. Additionally, it is not just the TV series by itself that has been received with such positive reviews, people are also very enthusiastic about the TV series as an adaptation and how it has

remained truthful to the original novel. TV critic Sam Wollaston describes the series as “a brilliant adaptation – some changes, but loyal in what it says and what it asks” (“The Handmaid’s Tale review – the best thing you’ll watch all year”) in *The Guardian*; Pulitzer prize winning TV critic Emily Nussbaum of *The New Yorker* wrote an exuberant piece on it with the promising title “A Cunning Adaptation of ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’” (Nussbaum 1), in which she goes into detail on both the novel and the adaptation; and Melbourne based TV critic Melinda Houston describes the adaptation as “fabulous” in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and refers to the series as having “magic in the detail” (Houston 3). About the characters she writes: “Not many folk here are likeable, but all are thoroughly human and three-dimensional, and some of the most moving moments come from the most unexpected quarters” (Houston 3). Bruce Miller is excited to see the series getting the recognition it deserves and finds it rewarding “to be part of what he anticipates being a wave of more shows that represent female voices from all walks of life” (Gonzalez 1).

The Emmy Awards were held on 17 September 2017 in Los Angeles, California. Ann Dowd won an award for “Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Drama Series” for her role as Aunt Lydia, and Alexis Bledel won an award for “Outstanding Guest Actress in a Drama Series” for her role as Ofglen. Elisabeth Moss was awarded for her role as Offred with an Emmy for “Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series”. Not only the actors were awarded, there were also awards for the series, specifically the pilot episode “Offred”. This episode won in the categories “Outstanding Writing for a Drama Series”, “Outstanding Cinematography for a Single-Camera Series”, and “Outstanding Production Design for a Narrative Contemporary or Fantasy Program (One Hour or More)”. Reed Morano won an Emmy award in the category “Outstanding Directing for a Drama Series” for directing the first episode. The complete series was awarded with an award for “Outstanding Drama Series”.

The Handmaid’s Tale was also nominated in four different categories at the *TCA Awards* (Television Critics Association), and these awards were held at 5 August 2017 in Los Angeles. It

was announced that *The Handmaid's Tale* won an award in both "Outstanding Achievement in Drama" and "Program of the Year" (Turchiano 1).

3.5.2 From a Spectator's Point of View

Nowadays, social media websites such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* play an important role when it comes to trying to fathom the viewer's opinions on a TV series. Viewers like to share their thoughts on several social networks, where they discuss the series with peers. News sites often base their articles on reviews posted on such websites and use quotes from users, creating content for their medium, since these are their most valuable and directly available sources. In comparing the TV series and the film version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and discussing the viewer's opinion on both versions, it is important to realise that they cannot be compared to each other without taking the differences in media into consideration. Even though both versions deal with the same subject, the viewer can perceive the adaptations in a different way, especially when the focus is on the violence portrayed in both versions.

The official *Facebook* group on the *Hulu* TV series offers extra background information, and regularly posts news articles on the series for fans to comment on. The majority of the comments are laudatory; people call the series "brilliant", "terrific", and "better than the book". Some suggest what they would like to see addressed in the following season 2, since it has been announced *Hulu* will start filming for a next season. This will probably launch in 2018, possibly as early as April.

On *IMDb*, the series has been rated an 8.7/10.0 average and has received over 130 reviews, with some of the best commentators receiving almost an equal amount of likes on their review. Commentators consider the series a fantastic adaptation of a classic in the genre of speculative fiction and suitable for both men and women, and it is advised to watch it as it is considered a "MUST WATCH" (MoreWalkLessTalk). The series conveys a powerful message

and is credited for its amazing acting. The message might even be too powerful and can come across as emotionally overwhelming and draining, which is regarded as the characteristic feature that has awarded the series with its superb rating. Some critical viewers have concentrated on the numerous quiet moments in the series and even consider these moments the most powerful scenes of the series. Feelings and emotions do not always have to be expressed explicitly as silence has also been proven to be a powerful tool in building suspense and conveying a powerful message.

However, not everyone is as enthusiastic about the series and there are several negative reviews as well, and some commentators even go so far as mentioning that it is a very slow watch and that it is not worthy of the viewer's time. It is called boring and unoriginal "beyond human comprehension" (Iarosat-32821). However, these negative comments are a minority of all comments, and those who comment positively even add that the negative comments should be ignored as "they scream of ignorance" (MoreWalkLessTalk). Positive comments state: "Strong is the word for this series, and little, weak people detest strong so be prepared for the fake reviews and thumbs down across the actual reviews for it" (MajorMAlice), which tells the reader to not turn away from it.

The TV series has definitely struck a chord with many viewers; people feel like they can easily relate to the events described in the series, and the actors have been able to portray the characters in a great way. When Atwood wrote the novel in 1985 she was inspired by several historical events, yet the story also relates to the present with many of the events showing similarities with recent events. Comparisons to the Women's March are easily made, even though that has turned out to be a coincidence. Other comparisons refer to Trump's presidency and his determination to build a wall to keep refugees and fortune seekers out, and the possibility of criminalisation of abortion (Oppenheim). The ongoing refugee crisis in Europe is also a topic of discussion, since Luke and Moira are generously welcomed in Canada when they flee from the dictatorial regime of Gilead, and they are immediately helped with a starting a new

life in a foreign country. Recent news articles referring to the halving of the concentration of sperm in western men in the past 40 years (Davis) are another reason people discuss the events from the TV series. Also, the discrimination of women in the series has renewed the discussion of the fact that there is still a gender gap and women are not valued equally to men in many positions (“The Handmaid’s Tale review – no television event has hit such a nerve”).

Since *Hulu* has announced there will be a season 2, the pessimists are probably outnumbered, and it has been confirmed that most main characters will return for season 2: Moss, Wiley, and Brewer will return as Handmaids, and also Bledel has been confirmed to return in the next season. Hannah, June’s daughter, and Aunt Lydia will also make their appearance in the following season.

:: Conclusion

In analysing Margaret Atwood's narrative *The Handmaid's Tale* and its adaptations, and discussing the political situation of the novel, the position of women, and the classification of gender - the most controversial themes - I argue that there is an increased use of violence in both adaptations of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Atwood's story is largely based on historical events, and gender inequality, male domination and subjugation of women are ubiquitous in her narrative, as they are in history. Atwood uses *The Handmaid's Tale* to reflect on the backlash of anti-feminism of the 1980s, which determined that a woman's place was in the household. According to conservationist groups, moral values declined during the 1960s and 1970s and Atwood responded to the reformation of moral standards as advocated by the New Right Movement. She addressed women's oppression and subjugation, which is reflected in both the physical and the intellectual abuse of the handmaids in her text. The novel suggests that women used to be victims of sexual victimization, but that they now are free. However, they still are not allowed to take their own decisions, and their only purpose is reproduction in a society in which men's ability to reproduce is not doubted.

The novel does not just address male control, it also looks at Gilead as a theocracy with a government that has based its laws and restrictions on the Old Testament. Since birth rates are declining due to women's infertility and there is a need for hope, "Sons of Jacob" claim to guide people to the promised land and create a new order. However, one cannot blame disorder on just one gender or race; everyone is responsible for what happens in the world. Men are responsible for their own behaviour, and women can be held responsible due to their indifference and lack of commitment. If we would like to ban the omnipresent sexism, we need to stop ignoring subordination and denigration of women, and end gender inequality. Again,

Atwood was inspired by historical events and shows the reader that history is more than just a story we tell ourselves.

The cinematic version shows us that an adaptation is not just a one-to-one transposition of narrative story elements into images on the big screen. While the novel was written by a woman, the film was created by two men, Schlöndorff and Pinter, which made all the difference. Their idea was to create an erotic thriller and vivid drama, causing them to focus too much on nudity and to eroticize a violent rape. Even though the stories are identical, and much of the most important aspects of the original storyline found their way into the movie, the makers also left out quite a few important aspects. Schlöndorff and Pinter ignored the novel's flashbacks, leaving out crucial information to the viewer. They also did not look at Offred as a rounded character, but rather left her to be a one-dimensional protagonist without any profound thoughts of her own. By stripping away the many layers, intense relationships, and secondary plots, the plot becomes a weak adaptation of the original narrative. While a film depends on image, a narrative depends on discourse. Since the filmmakers left it too much to the viewer to fill in the information gaps, the viewer was unsatisfied with the final result. However, those who were not familiar with the novel were not that disappointed and were able to enjoy the film without much background information, which could leave one to conclude that the film by itself was not all that bad. As an adaptation, however, it left the viewer unsatisfied.

The TV series benefits from time, in contrast to the film. While the film left out much of what seemed meaningless, starting with the numerous flashbacks, the flashbacks are exactly what the story needs. They clarify the plot and give the viewer the additional information he needs to fully understand and experience Offred's story. While the film was directed by men, the series has mainly been created by women, something which greatly benefits the outcome. Since the series can use time to its advantage, it has the opportunity to expand on the novel's characters and grasp their background. This causes for more rounded characters, in contrast to the film's one-dimensional protagonist. The film was shot in 1990 and technology has advanced

since then, which is reflected in the series' appearance; its use of camera techniques, combined with mind-blowing visuals, and the use of different colours cause the advanced technological features to be a major contribution to the series.

When Margaret Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985, she could not have anticipated that it would still - or again - be a topic of discussion thirty-two years later, for several reasons. Critics, both professionals and hobbyists, have shared their opinions on the adaptations, and not everyone is an enthusiast. Some critics consider the film an unworthy adaptation, while those who do not know the novel have enjoyed the movie to some extent. But while the film has been met with controversy, the TV series has been received with enthusiasm by both those who have read the novel and those who have not. The series has been awarded with *Emmy Awards* and *TCA Awards* and has been confirmed to return with a season two in 2018. The new season will "bridge the gap between the original novel's ending (Offred's kidnapping) and its epilogue" (Smith). Although both the film and the series contain some rather violent scenes, there has not been much ado about this. However, the audience does receive a warning from Moss, stating that "things are going to get even worse" and that "season two is going to be bad too, really dark" (Smith). Her warning seems to come from the realisation that people are not insensitive to the increased on-screen violence, yet they are looking for an increased shock-effect to extend the thrill.

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