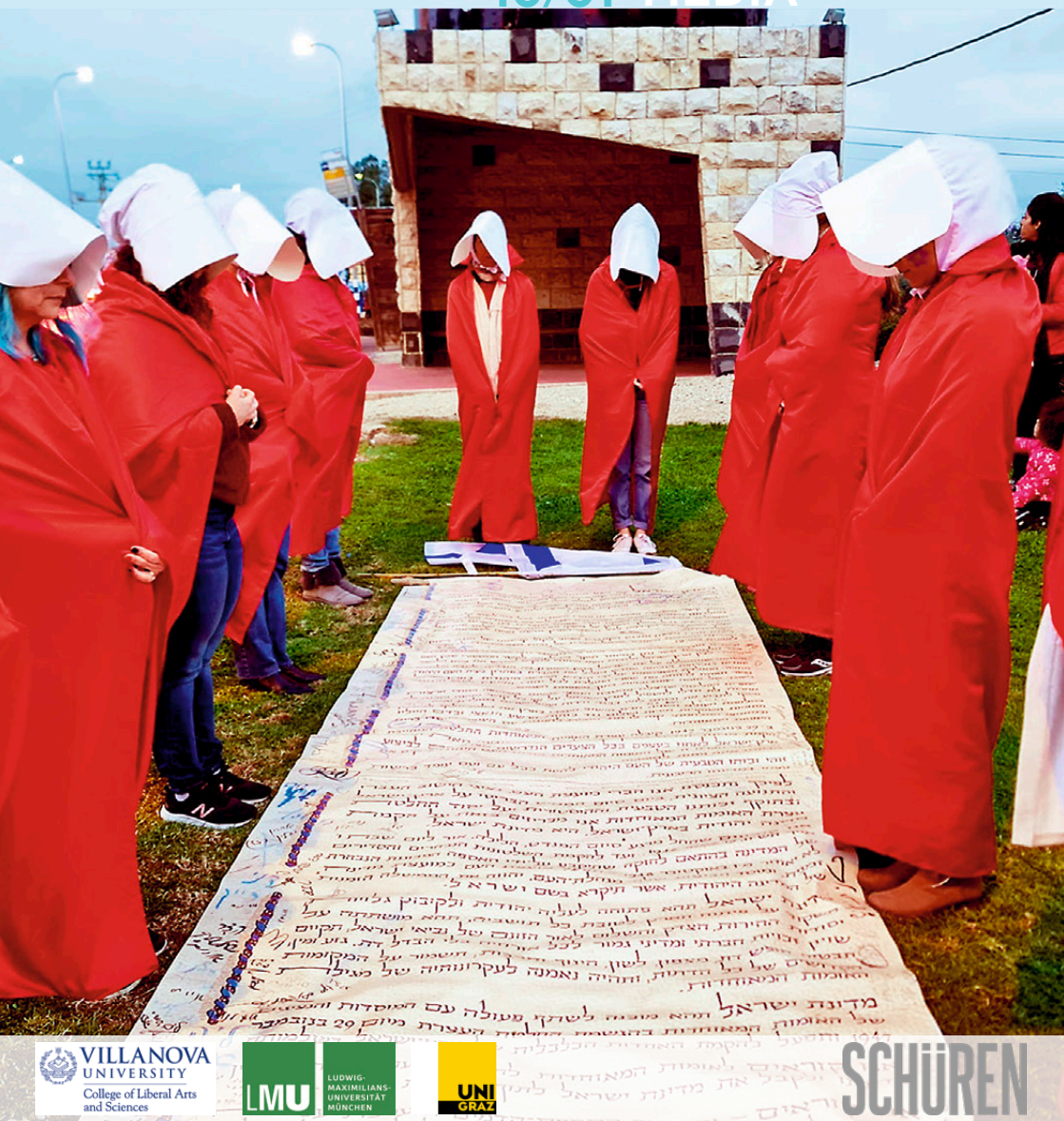
JRFM

JOURNAL RELIGION
2024 FILM
10/01 MEDIA



VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
LMU LUDWIG-MAXIMILIANS-UNIVERSITÄT MÜNCHEN
UNI GRAZ
SCHÜREN

JRFM
JOURNAL FOR RELIGION, FILM AND MEDIA

2024
10/01

Natalie Fritz and Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati (eds.)

Fiction, Religion and Politics in *The Handmaid's Tale*

SCHÜREN

JRFM
JOURNAL FOR RELIGION, FILM AND MEDIA

CONTACT

Institut für Systematische Theologie und Liturgiewissenschaft / JRFM
Heinrichstrasse 78/B/1, A-8010 Graz, Austria
e-mail: jrfm@uni-graz.at • www.jrfm.eu

JRFM
JOURNAL FOR RELIGION, FILM AND MEDIA

JRFM is a peer-reviewed, open-access, online publication. It offers a platform for scholarly research in the broad field of religion and media, with a particular interest in audiovisual and interactive forms of communication. It engages with the challenges arising from the dynamic development of media technologies and their interaction with religion.

JRFM publishes peer-reviewed articles in English that focus on visual and audiovisual media, feature film, documentary, advertising, interactive internet-based media and other forms of communication in their interdependencies with contemporary or historical forms of religion. It critically reflects on theories and methods, studies on intermediality, phenomenological and comparative approaches to media and religion across different cultures and periods. The main focus lies on contemporary phenomena, but diachronic analysis of the interaction between religion, film and media is also promoted as an essential facet of study.

JRFM is edited by a network of international film, media and religion experts from different countries and with professional experience in research, teaching and publishing in an interdisciplinary setting, linking perspectives from the study of religion and theology, film, media, visual and cultural studies, and sociology. It was founded in cooperation between different institutions in Europe, particularly the University of Graz and the University of Zurich, and is published in cooperation with Schüren publishing house, Marburg (Germany). It is an online, open-access publication with print-on-demand as an option. It appears twice a year in May and November and encompasses generally 4–6 articles.

If you are interested in publishing in **JRFM**, please visit our website www.jrfm.eu. You will find detailed information about submission, review process and publication. We encourage papers that deepen the questions addressed by the calls for papers and free contributions within the wider profile of the journal.

JRFM thanks the following institutions for their support:
University of Graz, Austria
University of Munich (LMU), Germany
Villanova University, USA
Das Land Steiermark, Austria
Schüren Verlag, Marburg, Germany

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme

Die deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet unter http://dnb.ddb.de abrufbar.

Cover: Photograph by Yael Nof taken in Kfar Tabor in the north of Israel in April 2023, during the women's protests that took place throughout Israel against the current government's proposed reform of the justice system. The women dressed as Handmaids are gathered around the "Proclamation of Independence" of the State of Israel and demand equal rights, as stated on the scroll. Courtesy of Yael Nof.

JRFM is grateful for being supported by

Das Land Steiermark
Wissenschaft und Forschung

www.jrfm.eu
ISSN 2414-0201
ISBN 978-3-7410-0457-5

Print on demand service:
Schüren Verlag GmbH
Universitätsstr. 55 | D-35037 Marburg
www.schueren-verlag.de

Design: Christian Wessely / Erik Schüßler
Titelgrafik: Wolfgang Diemer
Proofreading: Rona Johnston Gordon

Contents

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati and Natalie Fritz

"Are There Any Questions?"

Fiction, Religion and Politics in *The Handmaid's Tale* Editorial

> And therefore it is by its very nature an act of hope, since writing implies a future in which the freedom to read will exist.
> Margaret Atwood, "Formal Invocation to the Reader"[1]

In the four decades since Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* was published, in 1985, the novel has been adapted to appear in various translations and media. This remarkable work has developed into a global narrative that continues to be (re-)read and adapted. Staging a future dystopian state based on a toxic mix of male-designed religion and authority on the one side and womens' suffering and oppression on the other side, *The Handmaid's Tale* explores mechanisms of power and control that lead to the historically well-documented subjugation of women – the means may have changed but the ends have not.[2]

The novel contains the diary of a woman who is being kept as a reproductive slave in the household of a member of the elite who rule the state of Gilead, a theocracy based on an (allegedly) literal reading of selected parts of the Bible and established largely on the territory that used to compose the United States of America. Although the narrative is fragmented and the description subjective, Gilead is effectively depicted by the protagonist. A dramatic decline in the birth rate as the result of an anthropogenic ecological disaster has jeopardised the survival of the human species and is a key factor behind the creation of the Gilead dictatorship.

Pre-eminent within the dystopian society are the families of the elite, where so-called "handmaids" are on reproductive duty. Believed to be fertile and deprived of all rights, the handmaids are raped by the chief of the

1 Atwood 2022a, 132.

2 See e. g. Bacci 2017.

DOI: 10.25364/05.10:2024.1.1

household in a religious ritual once a month, in hope of a pregnancy. To be able to carry out this duty, the handmaids undergo a gruesome training during which their identity as a "two-legged womb"[3] is moulded. Gilead is an absolutist state that rejects science and technology in favour of a singular idea of the natural order. It dictates a strict division between genders: women care for the house, the garden and, in the few cases, the children; men attend to politics and surveillance. Dress is determined by status, with black, blue, red, brown, or stripped clothing identifying roles, positions and duties in the private and public space.

In describing her novel as speculative fiction, Atwood emphasises that *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a fictional future but on the basis on events that are historically documented.[4] Therefore, the novel plays with a future that has roots in historic experiences and appears a plausible development of our society. Atwood has recorded,

> One of my rules was that I would not put any events into the book that had not already happened in what James Joyce called the "nightmare" of history, nor any technology not already available. No imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities. God is in the details, they say. So is the Devil.[5]

The title of this introductory essay for the *Journal of Religion, Film and Media* quotes the final sentence of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Presented as "Historical Notes", the last chapter of the novel provides a historical framing of the protagonist's fragmentary personal experience in Gilead. At the Twelfth Symposium on Gilead Studies on 25 June 2195, the well-known Cambridge professor, keynote speaker and outstanding expert James Darcy Pieixoto concludes his lecture by asking, "Are there any questions?" The question is addressed not only to the conference audience but also to the readers. And there are indeed many questions to be explored!

In this issue we consider a number of these questions, focusing on the complex interdependence of fiction, religion and politics in the *Handmaid's Tale*, a highly generative narrative received and transformed in so many ways to articulate widespread fears about contemporary society and its

3 All quotations from *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) are from the 1996 edition: here p. 142.

4 Neumann 2006, 172; Winstead 2017, 228; Walsh 2020.

5 Atwood 2017.

possible – dystopian – development. The articles gathered together in this issue approach these topics in light of the novel of 1985 and the Hulu series that began in 2017.

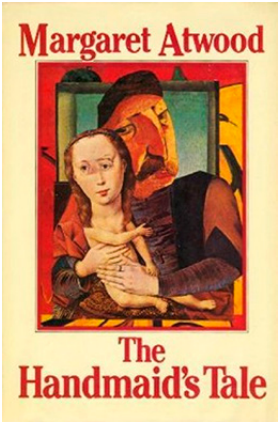
The interdependency between fiction, religion and politics is paramount not only in Atwood's novel of 1985, but also in the multi-layered reception that *The Handmaid's Tale* has stimulated over the years. To deepen this interdependency, in this introductory contribution we proceed here in three steps. First, we focus on the global dissemination of the narrative, second, we explore the political significance of reconstructing history in *The Handmaid's Tale* and third, we turn to the Bible and its striking role in the tension between the fictional narrative and the reader's reality. We conclude with a short overview of the articles related to Atwood's book that are collected in the main section of this issue.

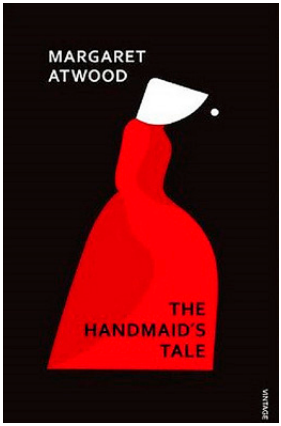
From Tapes to Protesters' Disguises: *The Handmaid's Tale* as a Global Phenomenon

The concluding pages that form the "Historical Notes" encourage the reader to rethink the whole account they have just read, right from the beginning. They provide a framing that projects the handmaid's diary back to around 1955, which is likely surprising to the reader, for the text had not indicated a time period and the nature of the account seemed to suggest a future society. Now, however, the reader learns that the totalitarian state of Gilead was established in the middle of the 20th century and did not last. Furthermore, the "Historical Notes" reveal that what we have just read was in fact a scholarly reconstruction based on transcripts of cassettes made by two men, the professors Wade and Pieixoto, and that the title – *The Handmaid's Tale* – is in fact a sexual joke, a pun on "tale" and "tail":

> […] but those of you who know Professor Wade informally, as I do, will understand when I say that I am sure all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the world *tail*; that being, to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention, in that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats. *(Laughter, applause.)*[6]

6 Atwood 1996, 309.





Figs. 1a–c: Covers of *The Handmaid's Tale* through time: 1a. The cover of the first edition, published in 1985 by McClelland & Stewart in Toronto and designed by Tad Aronowicz. 1b. The cover of the 1986 edition published by Jonathan Cape in London. 1c. The cover of the edition published by Vintage in London from 1996, whose design by Noma Bar has significantly contributed to the iconic representation of the protagonist.

The "Historical Notes" reframe the protagonist's ordeal (she is called "Offred", a patronymic expressing that she is owned by, or *of*, Commander *Fred*) in terms not only of the fiction's chronology but also of the relationship between the dystopian state and the reader's reality. They also unveil fundamental aspects of the entanglement of politics, history and fiction that characterises *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The novel is presented as an accurate reconstruction of recordings of a female voice hidden between songs from the 1950s and scattered across 30 cassettes original to the period. Offred's voice is a testimony across time and media: the diary notes, which correspond to parts I. to XV. of the novel, are stored on magnetic tapes and, after having been found, were transcripted and used as scholarly sources.

The diffusion of the narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* in the reader's reality is the product of broad transmission through various adaptations, with striking interaction between text, image and other means of expression. Even a glance at the cover reveals the complicated intermediality (figs. 1a–c). The first edition of the novel, published in Canada by McClelland & Stewart, was designed by Tad Aronowicz. It shows on the cover a small, childlike naked woman, who is held tightly by a huge man in dark clothes.[7] The cover image borrows from

7 http://tinyurl.com/57zmuhpu [accessed 26 January 2024].

Fig. 2: The Handmaid's Tale (Volker Schlöndorff, US 1990), screen shot, 00:24:14.

futurism and surrealism, which in light of the content seems very fitting, for it makes tangible both the subjectivity of the experience and the dystopian vision. The cover of the 1986 edition published by Jonathan Cape, London, shows the red robes and white bonnets, the dress code of the handmaids that thanks to the Hulu series has become instantly recognisable. The cover of the 1996 edition published by Vintage, London, was designed by Noma Bar and also contributed to that iconic representation of the protagonist.[8]

Alongside translations of the novel into many languages, performative and audiovisual media have also influenced the reception of the work worldwide. In 1990 the film The Handmaid's Tale by the German director Volker Schlöndorff was released (fig. 2). A ballet choreographed by Lila York and with music by James MacMillan, Arvo Pärt, Alfred Schnittke and others was premièred in Winnipeg by Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet in autumn 2013 (fig. 3).[9] On 6 March 2000, an opera with the same title written by the composer Poul Ruders was presented in Copenhagen (fig. 4);[10] also in 2000 John Dryden and Nick Russell-Pavier produced a radio drama for BBC Radio 4.[11]

8 https://www.dutchuncle.co.uk/noma-bar [accessed 26 January 2024].
9 http://tinyurl.com/3rt38dt9 [accessed 26 January 2024].
10 http://tinyurl.com/3wy23htw [accessed 26 January 2024].
11 http://tinyurl.com/44uwmyen [accessed 26 January 2024].

Fig. 3: Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Trailer of *The Handmaid's Tale*, 12–16 October 2022, screen shot, 00:01:00, http://tinyurl.com/3rt38dt9 [accessed 26 January 2024].

Fig. 4: English National Opera, Trailer of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 2023/24, screen shot, 00:01:00, https://tinyurl.com/k2kma936 [accessed 26 January 2024].

In April 2011 the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company staged the world première of the theatre adaptation by Joe Stollenwerk (fig. 5).[12] Since 2017, Hulu has released five seasons of a very successful series – with 76 Emmys nominations and 15 awards[13] – with the sixth and final season expected to be available in 2025 (figs. 6a–c). This series, which adapts and develops the narrative, has

12 https://www.drjoesto.com [accessed 26 January 2024].

13 https://www.emmys.com/shows/handmaids-tale [accessed 26 January 2024].

Fig. 5: Theatre adaptation by Joe Stollenwerk, scene photograph, https://www.drjoesto.com [accessed 26 January 2024].

Figs. 6a–c: The Handmaid's Tale (Bruce Miller, US 2017–present). 6a. "Offred", Season 1, 2017, 00:46:07; 6b. "Mayday", Season 3, 2019, 01:01:10; 6c. "Safe", Season 5, 2022, 00:46:36. The three images have been selected to highlight the transformation of Offred, from a scared prisoner to "June", a freedom fighter.

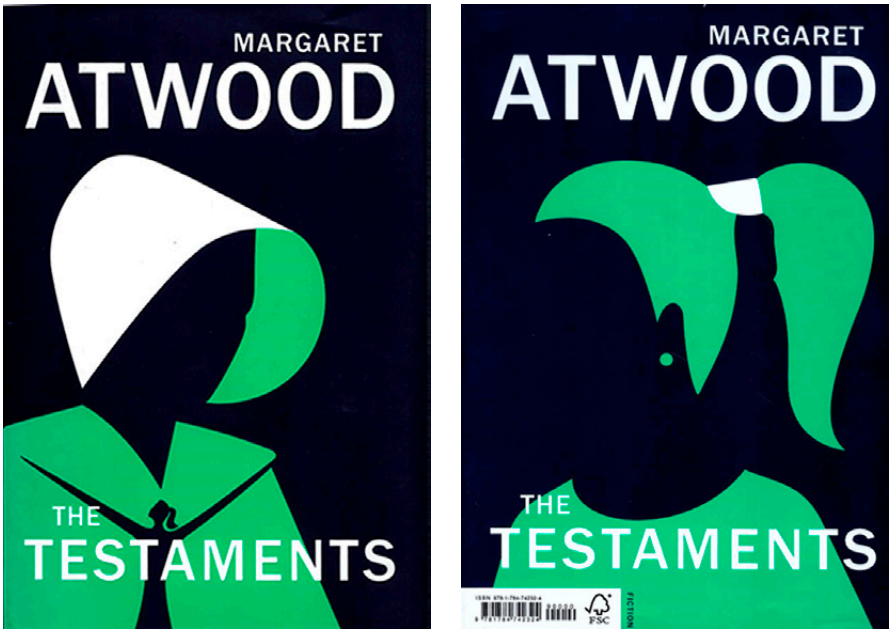
Figs. 7a and b: "Historical Notes", in: Margaret Atwood, 2019, *The Handmaid's Tale, The Graphic Novel*, adapted by Renée Nault and Margaret Atwood, art by Renée Nault, New York: O. W. Toad.

greatly heightened awareness and the popularity of the narrative.[14] In 2019 an adaptation into a graphic novel by Atwood and Renée Nault appeared (figs. 7a and b), and in September that year Atwood published a sequel, *The Testaments*. The cover of the later work, designed by Noma Bar, quotes the iconic figure he developed for the 1996 Vintage edition of *The Handmaid's Tale*. For the sequel, the depictions of the protagonists, one on the front cover and one on the back, mirror each other, alike but not identical (figs. 8a and b).[15] The various adaptations of the narrative in different media have brought a range of versions, specific readings and new interpretations of Atwood's novel.

The mediatisation process of *The Handmaid's Tale* is complicated. The core narrative has been widened in different ways in the various adaptations. Margaret Atwood herself not only initiated this process, but also interacts with it with cooperation or criticism, and in 2019 she gave a new impulse by publishing the sequel.

14 See Somacarrera-Íñigo 2019.

15 https://www.dutchuncle.co.uk/noma-bar [accessed 26 January 2024].



Figs. 8a and b: Noma Bar's cover design for the first edition of *The Testaments*, published by Chatto & Windus in London in 2019.

The merging of fiction and social criticism inherent in the original narrative can be deployed in very different social contexts worldwide, particularly when it comes to the unequal treatment or oppression of specific people or groups – especially women. In recent years, women worldwide have assumed the distinctive traits of the Gileadean handmaids in protests related to women's rights and, consequently, human rights: in Buenos Aires, Washington DC, Dublin, London, Tel Aviv and elsewhere, protesters have dressed in the handmaid's distinctive red robe and white bonnet (fig. 9).[16] In doing so, they link political agendas with the narrative, now an iconic depiction of a male-designed totalitarianism rooted in (sexual) violence against women. Their garb speaks of, on one hand, subjugation to a regime and, on the other hand, women's agency as freedom fighters.[17] The motif of *The Handmaid's*

16 In a series of newspaper articles and magazine essays, Margaret Atwood has expressed her support for those demonstrating for women's rights and human rights. See e. g. Allardice 2019; Atwood 2022b; 2022c.

17 Beaumont/Holpuch 2018; Fritz 2023.

Fig. 9: Demonstration in Haifa on 11 March 2023. Women dressed as handmaids protest against planned judicial reforms in Israel. © Hanay, CC BY-SA 3.0 Deed, Wikimedia Commons.

Tale recurs as protestors demand women's self-determination and condemn the state's intention to regulate women's bodies. The brand awareness created by the handmaids' clothing is enormous, with its message conveyed visually and instantly, even before a viewer asks a fellow onlooker, reads a caption or clicks though on social media.

The Hulu series, in which Elisabeth Moss plays Offred/June, has reinforced these movements. The development of characters on the screen does not align with their development in the novel. In particular, the Hulu series stages the protagonist in a very clear, almost-bold role, transforming the elusive Offred of the novel into the fighter June, who confronts the regime with relentless determination and irreducible will and endures all kinds of torture and suffering to find and free her daughter (figs. 6a–c).

References to the handmaids, and to Offred/June in particular, expect the audience to actively engage in reconstructing fragments, relationships and perspectives. The iconic figure is an invitation to merge fiction with the politics of the lived reality of the receivers. In the novel, power over women is

politically legitimised and enforced with reference to a divine order. Today, knowledge of the fictional story of Gilead serves as a matrix for demonstrators who take to the streets worldwide. Their clothing as handmaids materialises the reference to contemporary reactionary positions and serves as a visual warning to prevent a similar social order.

From the Great Darkness of History to the Horrors of Historical Synthesis

The "Historical Notes" transform the story the reader had derived from the novel's main plot so far, using a striking hermeneutical device based on self-reflexive elements in the narration. Accordingly, the concluding notes can be understood as a *mise en abyme*.[18] The fragmentary nature of the protagonist's reports is mirrored in the fragmentary nature of the reconstruction by the professors, which in turn mirrors the fragmentary nature of the reconstruction of history in general, and finally, the fragmentary process of its interpretation. Professor Pieixoto summarises this thought: "As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes."[19]

One fundamental aspect of the hermeneutical reflection at work in *The Handmaid's Tale* concerns this awareness of historical – in this case, fictional historical – reconstruction as a never-ending task that involves putting together pieces while knowing the image can never be complete. Each attempt to represent history is linked to a specific vision of society, of interpersonal relationships and of the individual and each is differently legitimised.[20]

The novel also emphasises a second hermeneutical aspect integral to the reconstruction of history. That reconstruction requires fragments to be gathered into a whole, but in the process the gaps between the pieces are neglected. The complete and harmonic overview that is crafted neglects inconsistencies. In the totalitarian ideology of Gilead, the stratifications and contradictions are silenced: the destructive power is presented as a new and

18 Dällenbach1977; Fevry 2000.

19 Atwood 1996, 320.

20 The name Pieixoto can be read as a pun on the name Pope Pius IX, the pope who on 8 December 1854 established the immaculate conception of Mary as Roman Catholic dogma (http://tinyurl.com/2feav49b, accessed 6 February 2024). In the "Historical Notes" Pieixoto is the leading expert on the "correct" interpretation, although he seeks to appear modest. Overall, the novel emphasises – with irony – that it is always men who know best.

coherent vision of history. Professor Pieixoto explains to his academic audience this fundamental trait of Gilead's theocracy:

> As we know from the study of history, no new system can impose itself upon a previous one without incorporating many of the elements to be found in the latter, as witness the pagan elements to be found in Medieval Christianity and the evolution of the Russian "K.G.B." from the Czarist secret services that preceded it; and Gilead was no exception to this rule. Its racist policies, for instance, were firmly rooted in the pre-Gilead period, and racist fears provided some of the emotional fuel that allowed the Gilead takeover to succeed as well as it did.[21]

And, later, he concludes, "As I have said elsewhere, there was little that was truly original or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis."[22] Pieixoto thus describes history as a process of stratification, characterised by re-readings and adaptations. The totalitarian ideology of Gilead enforces this process by extracting all kinds of gruesome practices from the multi-layered darkness of history and presenting them as a coherent ideological system. As we will see shortly, the Gilead regime tries to use religious, particularly biblical, echoes as the glue that holds all the different pieces together.

At the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies in 2195, historians in the future perform as did the Gilead regime and the author of *The Handmaid's Tale* (and of *The Testaments*): they revisit history, speculating on which fragments might fit together to tell a convincing story.[23] Those re-readings of history are distinguished, however, by their purpose. The Gilead regime re-reads (religious) history in order to legitimise a totalitarian system based on oppression and violence, particularly of and against women but also of and against people defined as inferior. Professor Pieixoto and his colleagues seek to provide a historical reconstruction of the failed despotic regime by transcribing and ordering Offred's recordings. Their power may be different, but they are still deciding how (his)story is to be read.

Atwood has re-read history to help her readers imagine a dystopia that could happen anytime and everywhere.[24] Directors, choreographers, graph-

21 Atwood 1996, 313.

22 Atwood 1996, 315.

23 On the implicit political agenda in "making history" in the novel, see Davidson 1988.

24 Winstead 2017, 231 sums up the reinterpretation inherent in Atwood's speculative fiction: "However, what is unique about Atwood's understanding of how speculative fiction

ic designers and protesters on the streets re-read history through *The Handmaid's Tale* in order to denounce dystopian traits of contemporary policies within democracies. *The Handmaid's Tale* is thus far more than a patchwork of the horrors of history. It stages the agency of a novel as a device that stimulates interpretation.

When the reader reconstructs the timeline of the novel, it is evident that "future" refers only to the scholarly conference, for Offred's diary depicts a society of 30 years before the first edition of *The Handmaid's Tale*.[25] Gilead belongs to the past in many senses, but what of 2195's society? We learn little at all, but for the academics it seems to be business as usual: male professors are experts giving keynote presentations, their female colleagues introduce them humbly to the audience.

The Bible as an "Incendiary Device"[26]

Religion plays a crucial role in *The Handmaid's Tale*.[27] A cross-reading of Atwood's novels finds the Bible as a leitmotif, both directly, with reference to the presence of the Old and New Testaments within Christian practices and traditions, and more broadly, in association with writing, reading and interpreting as cultural achievements. Ideologies and practices drawn from a particular reading of the Bible are highlighted in *The Handmaid's Tale* and its sequel, *The Testaments* (2019), with many explicit references to biblical and Christian traditions.[28] The "Historical Notes" contain, however, a subtle (or ironic?) reference to the possibility of interpreting Gilead in light of

might do political work is that she does not cite, as the aforementioned critics do, the political potential of imagining and exploring new worlds, or the ways speculative fiction can be particularly rhetorically persuasive. Instead, Atwood looks to speculative fiction's autonomous agency as a technological object in order to imagine how her fiction might change readers politically, reimagining the reading process as material interaction between novel and brain." For the role of dystopia in Atwood's œuvre, see e. g. Howells 2021.

25 See Neumann 2006.

26 Atwood 1996, 94.

27 A number of authors have addressed the role of religion in *The Handmaid's Tale* and in Atwood's works as a whole: see e. g. Filipczak 1993; Tennant 2019; Graybill/Sabo 2020a; Pezzoli-Olgiati 2021; Burnette-Bletsch 2023; Naglieri 2023.

28 For an overview of the complexity of biblical references in the novel (and the Hulu series), see Tennant 2019. Naglieri 2023 traces biblical references in *The Handmaid's Tale* through selected examples in the visual reception history.

other religious traditions: Professor Gopal Chatterjee of the Department of Western Philosophy of the University of Baroda is to give a lecture entitled "Krishna and Kali Elements in the State Religion of the Early Gilead Period".[29]

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Bible is applied to legitimise Gilead's oppressive totalitarian regime and unrestrained use of physical and psychological violence. Only men are allowed to read the Bible, restricting access to knowledge and undermining the power of writing, reading and interpreting. At the same time, however, the Bible is an existential resource for the protagonist as she resists and challenges the regime. Religious belief and practice thus assume ambivalent significance. On one hand, state religion is the most powerful instrument for justifying the dictatorship of a few male commanders, their gruesome practices of oppression, the ideology behind the enslavement of women thought fertile, their training and forced surrogacy. Religion is used to justify the arbitrary "justice" at the core of Gilead and the exclusion of people from other religions, races and origins.

On the other hand, religious practices and memories and even memorised Bible texts from her previous life allow Offred to develop an intimate inner space that nurtures her resilience and subversion within her hostile environment. By addressing God in desperate prayers, she keeps alive the conviction that she is not Offred and strengthens the link to her previous identity as an independent woman, partner and mother in pre-Gilead society.[30]

These contrasting aspects are well-rooted in the history of religion, which largely informs the novel and, consequently, its deployment in the decades following the novel's publication. In the *Handmaid's Tale*, as more generally in Atwood's fiction, the Bible is not simply a material object – a volume that exists in many translations, forms, sizes and media – or a collection of specific books. The Bible exists in memorised fragments, in hymns, in broad imaginings from its complex reception. And it serves as an ethical and moral guide, although interpreted differently by individuals and institutions in Atwood's universe, which reflects its use as an instrument of power.

The Handmaid's Tale also understands the Bible in terms of its relationship with those who grasp it in a sophisticated process of writing, receiving and interpreting.[31] It assumes a symbolic role as the book par excellence. The

29 Atwood 1996, 308.

30 Filipczak 1993; Graybill/Sabo 2020b.

31 Pezzoli-Olgiati 2021.

"readings" of the Bible in *The Handmaid's Tale* are always fragmentary. The political system justifies itself by selecting and bending Biblical quotations, which Offred compares to the (correct) citations she remembers. The fragmentary character of Offred's account and the scholarly efforts to bring all the pieces together seem to allude to the fragmentary nature of the sacred book and the exegetical efforts of Biblical Studies. In both instances, learned men seek to fill gaps in a text that has reached them from the darkness of the past.

In Offred's time, the Bible is kept away from women's hands and minds. In the households of the elite, the book is kept in a locked box and only a Commander has the right to read it:

> The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it. It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hand at it? We can be read from it, by him, but we cannot read. Our heads turn toward him, we are expectant, here come our bedtime story.[32]

The reading of the Bible launches the "Ceremony", a ritual in which a handmaid is raped once a month in the Commander's marital bed – "bedtime story" in the passage quoted above has a caustic undertone. What happens when women take the Bible into their own hands is explored in *The Testaments*. Indeed, in Atwood's sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, a few selected women in Gilead are allowed to learn to read and write in order to be able to interpret the Bible themselves. This is the turning point that destroys the theocratic state from within.

At the core of the entanglement of fiction, religion and politics in *The Handmaid's Tale*, both in the original novel and in its subsequent forms, is the Bible. For the thematic section of this issue, we therefore selected three contributions that address the presence of the sacred book. Friedhelm Hartenstein offers a close reading from the perspective of a scholar of the Old Testament and with a particular focus on moments in which the Bible is quoted in the novel. Ann Jeffers, a scholar of the Ancient Near East and Second Temple Judaism who draws from Gender Studies, unravels biblical allusions in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Bina Nir, a scholar in Cultural Studies who is living in Israel in this challenging and precarious time, addresses a similar

32 Atwood 1996, 94.

topic, for her reading of biblical narratives in Atwood's book highlights the link between patriarchy and the Bible, not only in the work itself but also in contemporary political attempts to (re)instaurate that authority. Finally, Simon Spiegel, a Film Studies scholar, looks beyond the novel to the TV series. Focusing on the development of the main character, June/Offred, he explores the transformation of a dystopian work into a still-not complete serial drama, and the paradoxical challenges of that series' success.

"Are there any questions?" Yes, there are so many. The articles presented in this issue of the *Journal of Religion, Film and Media* cannot provide all the answers for the global phenomenon that is *The Handmaid's Tale*. Even as they focus on the presence of the Bible, however, they do explore from a range of perspectives how a fictional narrative can shape contemporary culture through a variety of media and by addressing diverse audiences. The story within *The Handmaid's Tale* shows how important critical questions are and also how important it is to be permitted to ask them at all. That fundamental democratic right is not safe beyond the novel either. Why over the four decades since it was written, we might ask, has Atwood's story been received by multiple audiences, in multiple languages and through multiple media as a vehicle for critical public engagement with social and political processes? The answer lies surely in its relevance.

Quoted Media

Dance

The Handmaid's Tale, Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Choreography: Lila York, Music: James McMillan, Arvo Pärt and others, 2013–present.

Film and Series

The Handmaid's Tale (Volker Schlöndorff, US/DE 1990).

The Handmaid's Tale (Created by: Bruce Miller, Hulu, US 2017–present).

Graphic Novel

Atwood, Margaret, 2019, *The Handmaid's Tale, The Graphic Novel*, adapted by Renée Nault and Margaret Atwood, art by Renée Nault, New York: O.W. Toad.

Novels

Atwood, Margaret, 1996 [1985], *The Handmaid's Tale*, London: Vintage.

Atwood, Margaret, 2019, *The Testaments*, London: Chatto & Windus.

Opera

Poul Ruders, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 2000, Libretto: Paul Bentley.

Drama

The Handmaid's Tale, adapted from Margareth Atwood's novel, produced at the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company 2011, http://tinyurl.com/359c2xaa [accessed 26 January 2024].

Bibliography

Allardice, Lisa, 2019, "For a Long Time We Were Moving Away From Gilead. Then We Started Going Back Towards It", Interview with Margaret Atwood, *The Guardian*, 20 September 2019, http://tinyurl.com/4uvmmrcz [accessed 26 January 2024].

Atwood, Margaret, 2017, Margaret Atwood on What *The Handmaid's Tale* Means in the Age of Trump, *New York Times*, 10 March 2017, http://tinyurl.com/4mfw2umd [accessed 26 January 2024].

Atwood, Margaret, 2022a, "The Writer as Political Agent? Really?", in: Atwood, Margaret, *Burning Questions. Essays and Occasional Pieces, 2004 to 2021*, New York: Doubleday.

Atwood, Margaret, 2022b, "Enforced Childbirth Is Slavery". Margaret Atwood on the Right to Abortion, *The Guardian*, 7 May 2022, http://tinyurl.com/mstbfbe4 [accessed 26 January 2024].

Atwood, Margaret, 2022c, I Invented Gilead. The Supreme Court Is Making It Real. I thought I was Writing Fiction in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Atlantic*, 13 May 2022, http://tinyurl.com/yc564m3p [accessed 26 January 2024].

Bacci, Francesco, 2017, The Originality of *The Handmaid's Tale* & *The Children of Men*. Religion, Justice, and Feminism in Dystopian Fiction, *Metacritic. Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 3, 2, 154–172, https://doi.org/10.24193/mjcst.2017.4.08.

Beaumont, Peter / Holpuch, Amanda, 2018, How the Handmaid's Tale Dressed Protests across the World, *The Guardian*, 3 August 2018, http://tinyurl.com/ds5b6vd9 [accessed 27 January 2024].

Burnette-Bletsch, Rhonda, 2023, The Handmaid, in: Tilford, Nicole L. / Murphy, Kelly J. (eds.), *Biblical Themes in Science Fiction*, Atlanta: SBL Press, 85–101.

Dällenbach, Lucien, 1977, *Le récit speculaire. Essai sur la mise en abyme*, Paris: Seuil.

Davidson, Arnold E., 1988, Future Tense. Making History in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in: VanSpanckeren, Kathryn / Castro, Jan Garden (eds.), *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Form, with an Autobiographical Foreword by Margaret Atwood*, Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 113–121.

Fevry, Sébastien, 2000, *La mise en abyme filmique. Essai de typologie*, Paris: Édition du Céfal.

Filipczak, Dorota, 1993, Is There No Balm in Gilead? Biblical Intertext in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Literature and Theology* 7, 2, 171–185.

Fritz, Natalie, 2023, Wir sind keine Mägde! Frauen demonstrieren weltweit in rotweiss, *kath.ch*, 10 June 2023, http://tinyurl.com/bddmsn4a [accessed 2 February 2024].

Graybill, Rhiannon / Sabo, Peter J. (eds.), 2020a, *"Who Knows What We'd Make of It, If We Ever Got Our Hands on It?" The Bible and Margaret Atwood*, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press.

Graybill, Rhiannon / Sabo, Peter J. (eds.), 2020b, Introduction. Getting Our Hands On It, in: Graybill, Rhiannon / Sabo, Peter J. (eds.), *"Who Knows What We'd Make of It,*

If We Ever Got Our Hands on It?" The Bible and Margaret Atwood, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 1–23.
Howells, Coral Ann, 2021, Margaret Atwood's Recent Dystopias, in: Howells, Coral Ann (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 171–188, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108626651.013.
Naglieri, Lucrezia, 2023, La religione e il potere in *The Handmaid's Tale* di Margaret Atwood, Note iconografiche al simbolismo di Gilead, in: Baglioni, Igor / Biano, Ilaria / Crosignani, Chiara (eds.), *Religioni fantastiche e dove trovarle. Divinità, miti e riti nella fanstascienza e nel fantasy*, vol. 2, Rome: Edizioni Quasar, 7–24.
Neumann, Shirley, 2006, "Just a Backlash": Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 75, 3, 857–868.
Pezzoli-Olgiati, Daria, 2021, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Religion und Gender künstlerisch verdichtet, in: Höpflinger, Anna-Katharina / Jeffers, Ann / Pezzoli-Olgiati, Daria (eds.), *Handbuch Gender und Religion*, 2nd ed., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 533–561.
Somacarrera-Íñigo, Pilar, 2019, "Thank You for Creating This World for All Of Us". Globality and the Reception of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* after Its Television Adaptation, *Revista canaria de estudios ingleses* 78, 83–95, https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2019.78.06.
Tennant, Colette, 2019, *Religion in The Handmaid's Tale. A Brief Guide*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Walsh, Richard, 2020, Margaret Atwood's Speculative Bibles. "First the Bad Things, Then the Story", in: Graybill, Rhiannon / Sabo, Peter J. (eds.), *"Who Knows What We'd Make of It, If We Ever Got Our Hands on It?" The Bible and Margaret Atwood*, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 111–133.
Winstead, Ashley, 2017, Beyond Persuasion. Margaret Atwood's Speculative Politics, *Studies in the Novel* 49, 2, 228–249.

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati has co-written this article in preparation for a research project at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies within the research group "Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formations", which is funded by the DFG (FOR 2779).

Friedhelm Hartenstein

The Bible, Religion, and Power in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

A Close Reading from the Perspective of Biblical Scholarship

Abstract

This article offers a close reading of Atwood's famous novel from the perspective of biblical scholarship. Anyone who reads *The Handmaid's Tale* will readily notice how strongly *biblical texts* inform the narrative and the fictional world of Gilead. This relationship begins with Genesis 30:1–3, which appears as an epigraph. Religion in *all its complexity* is a cornerstone of the novel. The article looks at its threefold use of religion: as a *biblically based foundation of the ideology and power structures* of Gilead, as an *anthropological foil for the leitmotif of seeing and being seen* in Offred's story, and as a *point of departure and reference for the main character's personal reflections*. The article limits itself to observations based on the novel as first published in 1985.

Keywords

The Handmaid's Tale, Religion, Margaret Atwood, Bible, Old Testament, Power and Reproduction

Biography

Friedhelm Hartenstein was Professor of Old Testament at the University of Hamburg from 2002 to 2010 and has been Professor of Old Testament at the LMU Munich since 2010. His research encompasses prophecy and Psalms, the history of religion in Ancient Israel (with a focus on iconography), the theology of the Old Testament / Hebrew Bible, and hermeneutics.

Margaret Atwood's global hit *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1985. In her introduction from 2017, Attwood describes reading much science-fiction literature, including dystopias, in her high-school days during the 1950s.[1] One thinks immediately of George Orwell's classic *1984*, first published in

1 Atwood 2017, xiii.

DOI: 10.25364/05.10:2024.1.2

1949, with which *The Handmaid's Tale* has much in common, not least important elements of the plot but also, and especially, the mood. No one who has entered Winston Smith's London will forget the opening sequence: the run-down entrance of an apartment block where the stale smell of rotten cabbage covers everything while from a poster on the wall the oversized face of "Big Brother" watches. Offred's world in *The Handmaid's Tale* opens in a similarly immersive way – in a former gymnasium where the reader is immediately drawn in by the density of described details. The reader sees and feels texture, such as the wooden floor with its painted lines and circles. Sour sweat and the fading scent of bubble gum and perfume reverberate from the girls who once watched basketball here. The sports facility, which has been turned into a dormitory, testifies through its very materiality to the overthrow and transformation of a culture. It highlights the new order to which the residents of the Rachel and Leah Center (known as the Red Center) must conform. In that space, in which memories and expectations erase each other, only the *now* matters. With this opening – on a par with that of *1984* – Atwood has fulfilled Philip K. Dick's instructions for "How to build a universe that doesn't fall apart two days later".[2] Atwood herself acknowledged, "If I was to create an imaginary garden, I wanted the toads in it to be real."[3]

Unlike Orwell, Atwood chose a subjective narrative perspective: the book offers only the view of the main character, Offred. It meanders between episodes from the present and the associations, memories, and reflections that arise from them. Thus, the structure of *The Handmaid's Tale* does not follow a rigorous narrative form, which is explained on two levels. Offred often reflects on her narration and herself within it. At one point, for example, she wishes her story had "more shape" and apologizes to imagined readers for the report being so fragmentary and unfinished.[4] But additionally, Atwood included "Historical Notes", supposedly written about 200 years after the events of the book.[5] The statement is by a historian from the future who, together with a colleague, has edited Offred's report. These scholars came across a metal box that had belonged to the former U. S. army and contained tape cassettes from the last third of the 20th century, which with the help of

2 Dick 1995.
3 Atwood 2017, xiv.
4 Atwood 1998, 267–268.
5 Atwood 1998, 299–311.

technology could still be played.[6] Since the recordings were not numbered, the editors had to put them in a plausible order themselves. Atwood's novel thus suggests that its division into 15 parts (and 46 chapters) may well differ from the original sequence.

Offred's tale is a message in a bottle from a hermetic totalitarian state on the soil of the former United States. Unlike Orwell's British vision of INGSOC, a Stalinist-informed secular dictatorship, Gilead features a Christian fundamentalist society based on U.S. cultural elements (biblicism, Puritanism, Mormonism, militarism, and others). The dystopian idea of a misogynist oppressive state that demonizes all liberalism has an eerie topicality nearly 40 years after the novel's first publication.

When I was asked to write a contribution for this issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*, I hesitated. I had not yet read the novel and was only peripherally aware of its adaptations into the genres of feature film and television series. I was approached specifically, however, as a professor of Old Testament, and anyone who reads *The Handmaid's Tale* will quickly notice how strongly biblical texts inform the narrative and the world of Gilead. This relationship begins with the epigraph, Genesis 30:1–3. Religion in all its complexity is a cornerstone of the novel.[7]

In the following, I present my observations from a close reading of *The Handmaid's Tale*,[8] which focus on the often subtle, implicit, and ambiguous references to religion in the narrative. This method requires that I make use of more direct quotations from the novel than readers might expect. Atwood's text is multi-layered and literarily complex, and – informed by the exegetical approach of my profession – I am convinced that its strength comes mainly from being closely heard. Therefore, I am somewhat reserved in my commentary and interpretation (for a summarizing interpretive evaluation see the final section of the article). I emphasize the threefold use of religion in the novel: as a biblically based foundation of the ideology and power structures of Gilead, as an anthropological foil for the leitmotif of seeing and being seen in Offred's story, and as a point of departure and reference for the main character's personal reflections.

6 Atwood 1998, 301.

7 See Atwood 2017, xvii, for the statement that the novel is not simply "anti-religion"; see also Pezzoli-Olgiati 2021, for "religion and gender" in the narrative.

8 The novel was first published in 1985; for this article I cite a reprint from 1998. I have excluded from my deliberations the follow-up volume Atwood 2019 and the feature film and TV series based on the novel.

Power and Reproduction

When we first meet Offred, she is in her room in the Commander's house. Slowly and thoroughly, the reader is shown how, in this room and in the house in which it is located, she is subjected to restrictions and rules that affect her entire way of life. She is completely reduced to herself – individual freedom is extremely limited. Her sole purpose is her function as a tool of biopolitics,[9] as a vessel of reproduction.

In the course of the narrative, the framework for that role becomes increasingly clear, albeit only through titbits of information that readers must piece together. At some point, a long-planned coup d'état has taken place, wiping out the president of the United States and the entire Congress. A new and militarized elite has taken power. A massive collapse in male and female fertility resulted from man-made environmental problems, which included nuclear radiation and subsequent pathological mutations. From the point of view of the new rulers, however, the liberal and permissive society since the 1960s, in which women had self-determination over their sexuality and their bodies, contributed to the reduction in fertility. "The main problem was with the men", the Commander explains to Offred, "There was nothing for them anymore."[10] The revolution of Gilead thus joins other dictatorships, such as the ayatollahs in Iran and the Taliban in Afghanistan, in which women's rights, including educational opportunities, are restricted and, in the end, eliminated. Gilead is thus by no means a particular phenomenon, but rather an anti-modern project that recurs on a global scale in various forms.

For its justification, Gilead invokes – in accordance with the roots of the United States – the Christian scripture of the Old and New Testaments. It does so in line with fundamentalist interpretation,[11] as practiced, for example, by specific Mormon communities and by various groups of Evangelicals in the 20th century. Media control and media power play a role in Gilead too,

9 See Foucault 2006.

10 Atwood 1998, 210.

11 Note the definition in Oeming, 1998, 150–151: "If one does not dismiss the necessary differentiations, it is possible to identify fundamentalism within the context of biblical hermeneutics as a mindset which takes the Bible as word-by-word inspiration of God that reports only reliable facts and whose doctrines have eternal validity. Doubt or open negation of the biblical truth must be fought (in extreme cases even with violence)." (transl. by the author).

as in any dictatorship. Hints in the report and in the "Historical Notes" suggest that the high-ranking Commander in whose house Offred has to serve is a certain Frederick R. Waterford (the name *Of-Fred* is derived from the assignment to him, as also in *Ofglen*, *Ofwarren*, for example). Looking back, the historians identify Waterford as a strategic planner of the Gilead regime who applied his professional knowledge from market research to this end.[12] The perfidious regime experienced by the Handmaids may owe its origins to him. Among other things, he is said to have designed the new dress code:[13] the Handmaids wear distinctive red dresses that completely cover their bodies and white hoods reminiscent of the Pilgrim Fathers. Wide wings to the right and left of the face make direct eye contact with other people virtually impossible. Also, all mirrors in the spaces in which the Handmaids live (in the Red Center as well as in the households) have been disabled or removed. Their self-image is thus physically as well as psychologically reduced to their biopolitically prescribed functionality.

Biblical Statements as the Law

In Gilead, selected biblical statements are regarded as immutable law.[14] They are taken literally, without any discussion of deviating interpretations. They are detached from the historical references (in terms of both origin and reception) that since the Enlightenment, Bible criticism has employed to relativize the text. Named as God's eternal will, the passages from Scripture are identified with "the reason of state". Biblicist practices that previously shaped only parts of lived religion in the United States are consistently used as a superstructure for totalitarian rule: "The regime uses Biblical symbols, as any authoritarian regime taking over America doubtless would: they wouldn't be Communists or Muslims."[15] In the drills performed in the Red Center under the command of the Aunts, the law of Gilead is violently inculcated: corporal punishment is allowed by "Scriptural precedent", such as slave-related legislation.[16] As in the Bible, men are never officially sterile,

12 See also Atwood 1998, 185 (in Offred's report).

13 Atwood 1998, 306.

14 I have identified the biblical references discussed in the following paragraphs myself, as Atwood's novel does usually not mention them explicitly. Some allusions are indirect and vague and are given here without full certainty.

15 Atwood 2017, xvii.

16 Atwood 1998, 16.

only women.[17] Statements to the contrary are strictly punished. Offenses such as adultery are punishable by death (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22).[18] At least two eyewitnesses are required for a conviction (Deut. 17:6; 19:15; John 8:17 and more). This "two-witness rule" had long been in place, for example among Jehovah's Witnesses and is a literal performance of biblical legal rules.[19] The subordination of women in assemblies, already practiced previously in conservative Christianity, is justified with reference to the apostle Paul. Thus, women's hair must be demurely covered (1 Cor. 11:6).[20] In particular, the infamous (Deutero-Pauline) passage 1 Timothy 2:9–15 is read out, 'liturgically', by a male leader at an assembly specifically designed for the indoctrination of women.

> The Commander continues with the service: […] "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety."[21]

Here the biblical text is quoted verbatim and is a key passage for Gilead's ideology. In many other instances, however, the Commanders, as heads of their households, do not recite the biblical text unaltered. They manipulate its communication – which is always only oral – for instance by omissions or by paraphrasing rather freely, which Offred frequently registers and corrects in her mind. This form of communicating 'biblical truths' – one-sided and selective and twisting the text – is a means of oppression and a demonstration of the political and social domination of men over women in the totalitarian system.[22] This reality is especially evident when the Bible is ceremonially read aloud in the domestic setting.

17 Atwood 1998, 61.
18 Atwood 1998, 61.
19 Atwood 1998, 61.
20 Atwood 1998, 62.
21 Atwood 1998, 221. The passage cited by the Commander is 1 Tim. 2:12–15.
22 See, for example, Atwood 1998, 45; 64; 90; 92; 117.

The Ceremony of Bible Reading: "Power of the Word" and "Knowledge of All the Rules"

At fixed intervals, the members of a household come together for a Bible reading, another exercise that echoes Evangelical practice. The household includes – as in the Bible – not only the family in the narrower sense but also the servants: the green-clad household helpers (called "Marthas", see Luke 10:38–42; John 11:1–12:8), the red-clad Handmaid, and the male chauffeur. The hierarchical order of the household is staged as a "tableau",[23] an ancient form of amateur theatre that was also used in Passion plays. First, all female members of the household group around the "leather chair", the empty throne of the head of the household.[24] The Commander knocks before entering the living room, the refuge of his wife, who is dressed in blue. He is always the last to arrive: "He looks us over as if taking inventory. One kneeling woman in red, one seated woman in blue, two in green, standing, a solitary man, thin-faced, in the background."[25] The master of the house then takes a black Bible from a casket next to his armchair, to which he alone has the key.

All servants, but especially the Handmaids, are forbidden to read. Books and magazines are destroyed or systematically withdrawn. Offred is, however, a transitional figure, living in the early period of Gilead, when the women who serve as Handmaids had a different life before the dictatorship. In this respect, she – and others like her – still have memories of the time before the upheaval, memories that include religion. She can therefore compare the new conditions with those that had existed previously, although the lack of access to media prevents her from doing so systematically. Even within these limits, she retains a critical consciousness:

> The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it. It's an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it? We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read. Our heads turn towards him, we are expectant, here comes our bedtime story.[26]

23 Atwood 1998, 87.
24 Atwood 1998, 87.
25 Atwood 1998, 86–87.
26 Atwood 1998, 87.

The Commander in his black habit reminiscent of SS uniforms and official gowns performs his 'liturgical' duty with subtle signals of absolute power: "he has the word"[27] and "knows all the rules".[28] The description of the ceremony and the metaphors used for it, found in chapter 15, are among the most striking passages of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Here I am concerned with the use of power that is evident in the staging of the Bible reading:

> We lean towards him a little, iron filings to his magnet. He has something we don't have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once. The Commander, as if reluctantly, begins to read. He isn't very good at it. Maybe he's merely bored. It's the usual story, the usual stories: God to Adam, God to Noah. *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth*. Then comes the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the center. *Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.* And so on and so forth. We have it read to us every breakfast.[29]

The fundamentalist use of the Bible demonstrated here is aimed at the irrevocable subordination of women to men. To that end, the blessing to go forth and multiply from primeval history (Gen. 1:28) is linked to the story of Jacob's two wives, Rachel and Leah, and their handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah (Gen. 30). From this specific combination Gilead's rulers have derived the regime of power and reproduction that uses the Handmaids.

Surrogate Motherhood – A Biblical Model for the System of Handmaids

The motif of childlessness is central to the stories about the patriarchs and their wives found in the Book of Genesis.[30] In the large narrative arc of Genesis 12–36, together with the motif of forced flight from the land, it serves to demonstrate to ancient readers how the divine promises with which God

27 Atwood 1998, 88.

28 Atwood 1998, 154.

29 Atwood 1998, 88.

30 For these narratives see, for example, the monographs van Seters 1975; Fischer 1994; Köckert 2017, and the commentaries Seebass 1997, 1999; Willi-Plein 2011.

called Abraham out of his homeland (Gen. 12:1–3) became deeply disquieting. They challenge trust and patience.

Childlessness takes centre stage for the first time in Genesis 16,[31] a text that Atwood seems likely to have used, while Genesis 30 serves as a backdrop for the system of Handmaids in Gilead, although this is evident only in allusions (see below). In Genesis 16, Sarai, Abraham's wife, attributes her barrenness to God. To remedy the situation, she asks Abraham to father a son with her personal maid, the Egyptian Hagar, "perhaps to be built up by her"[32] (the same turn of phrase is used of and by Rachel in reference to her maid Bilhah in Gen. 30:3). In Genesis 16:4 Abraham wordlessly follows his wife's suggestion. From the sanctioned union with the maid, a pregnancy indeed follows. But Hagar rebels: she knows that as the future mother of a child of the patriarch, she has enhanced status, and she lets her mistress feel it. Sarai finds the situation unbearable and asks Abraham to intervene. He explicitly allows her to do with her maidservant as she pleases (Gen. 16:6). The very harsh treatment by Sarai that follows leads to the maid's escaping with the child in her womb.

In the second half of the story (Gen. 16:7–13), Hagar continues to show her agency. She flees to a spring of water in the desert, where she is addressed by a messenger of God. He perceives the maid as a person in her own right, not just as a cog in the plans of others. She is addressed by him first with her proper name and then in terms of her status, "Hagar, maidservant of Sarai", and she is asked where she has come from and where she is going. The messenger tells her to return to her old position under Sarai but at the same time informs her of a promise for her future son, to whom *she*[33] – not Abraham or Sarai – is to give the name *Ishmael*, meaning "God hears", and who will become a forefather of the Arabs. Hagar recognizes that she has been noticed and appreciated and responds to God, "You are the God who sees me" (Gen. 16:13).

I have noted additional biblical material, particularly from Genesis, that is relevant to surrogacy in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Genesis 16 (and the later parallel narrative Gen. 21:8–21, which deliberately weakens Hagar's inde-

31 For Gen. 16 see especially the interpretation by Willi-Plein 2011, 66–72.

32 Translations of biblical passages are mine throughout the article.

33 For the custom of name-giving by the mothers in Ancient Israel, see Kessler 2009; Bridge 2014. Interestingly, a later redactor (the Priestly Writer, cf. Seebass 1997, 91) altered the promised name-giving by Hagar in Gen. 16 to that by the patriarch Abraham (Gen. 16:15–16).

pendence[34]) and also Genesis 30, describe a social institution, attested also for the Ancient Near East,[35] that enables slaves to serve as surrogates for infertile wives.[36] It is not very likely that the authors of the relevant biblical stories were still familiar with the custom of surrogate motherhood from their own experience. Additionally, surrogacy is neither legally required nor recommended as worthy of imitation anywhere in the Bible. The legal texts of the Torah do not even mention it. And where it is included in narratives, especially Genesis 16 and Genesis 30, the human conflicts that can arise are emphasized. Indeed, the obvious sympathy that Genesis 16 shows for the figure of the maidservant is a specific feature of the biblical tradition. Ancient Near Eastern evidence (e.g. from the Codex Hammurapi, § 146, from an Egyptian text on inheritance regulation from the 12th century BC, and from an Assyrian marriage contract of the 7th century BC) is, by contrast, primarily interested in the associated legal issues.[37]

Similarly at variance from practice in the Ancient Near East is the biblical response to the escape of a slave.[38] According to Deuteronomy 23:16, a runaway slave is not to be returned to the master. Ancient Near Eastern laws envisaged the death penalty for slaves in this situation, while in Israel, according to Deuteronomy 23:17, the slave should be accepted into one's own community and not oppressed. In Gilead, however, the escape of a Handmaid is an offense punishable by severe corporal punishment (such as the beating given to Moira following her first escape) and even death.[39]

Finally, in Genesis 30 children born of a slave woman are recognised by the main wife and can be incorporated into the family: "no conflicts"[40] arise. By contrast, in the case of Sarai, Abraham, and Hagar in Genesis 16 a status conflict arises and is indeed central to the narrative plot. Atwood's inclusion of both Genesis 30 and Genesis 16 in her novel can be seen in the subtle way she describes the change in Offred's feelings towards the Commander and his wife. With that shift comes a sense of power. To explore this point, I now look more closely at the system of surrogate motherhood in Gilead.

34 For the parallel story Gen. 21:8–21 as a revision of Gen. 16, see, for example, Fischer 1994, 299–333; Heinsohn, 2010.

35 See the Ancient Near Eastern documents discussed in van Seters 1968.

36 See the overview in Fischer 1994, 97–101.

37 See, in addition to van Seters 1968, van Seters 1975, 68–71.

38 See Fischer 1994, 102–103.

39 Atwood 1998, 275–276.

40 Fischer 1994, 100.

Genesis 16 and the Relationship of Wife and Handmaid

Offred's voice, which in *The Handmaid's Tale* is lively and multi-layered, changes in the course of the narrative: the Handmaid becomes more sensitive over time to the situation of Serena Joy, the Commander's wife. At first Offred primarily perceives Serena Joy – perhaps with reference to Genesis 18:12 ("now that I am old, shall I still experience pleasure?") – in terms of age and infertility: "Even at her age, she still feels the urge to wreathe herself in flowers. No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving, you can't use them any more, you're withered."[41] This response is consistent with Offred's initial impression of the Commander: "Now the Commander is coming out. […] His hair is grey."[42] This too might be an echo of Genesis 18:12 ("and my lord is old").

After the Commander invites her into his study against all the rules, resulting in the secret arrangement of further meetings,[43] Offred feels increasingly more for both the Commander and Serena Joy. This is evident, for example, in the description of the Handmaid's mating, which is also ritually organized. The delicate act, which in Gilead takes place fully clothed, is staged as neutrally as possible. The man is in uniform, the wife sits directly behind the Handmaid and grasps her hands so that the conception is considered the wife's own – the maid is supposed to appear as "one flesh"[44] with her (a reference to Gen. 2:23): "Kissing is forbidden between us. This makes it bearable. One detaches oneself. One describes. […] Which of us is it worse for, her [Serena Joy] or me?" [45] The process changes its emotional signature over time. The distance falls after Offred has become the Commander's forbidden "outside woman":[46]

> I felt I was an intruder, in a territory that ought to have been hers. Now that I was seeing the Commander on the sly […], our functions [the wife's and hers] were no longer as separate as they should have been in theory. I was taking something away from her, although she didn't know it. […] Why should I care, I told myself. She's nothing to me, she dislikes me, she'd

41 Atwood 1998, 80–81.
42 Atwood 1998, 57.
43 Atwood 1998, 154.
44 Atwood 1998, 94.
45 Atwood 1998, 95.
46 Atwood 1998, 163.

> have me out of the house in a minute […]. She was a malicious and vengeful woman, I knew that. Nevertheless I couldn't shake it, that small compunction towards her. Also: I now had power over her, of a kind, although she didn't know it. And I enjoyed that. Why pretend? I enjoyed it a lot.[47]

In Gilead the assignment of the Handmaid to her mistress, presupposed biblically above all in Genesis 16,[48] is strongly emphasized, and the mistress of the house even has sole power to sanction all female personnel.[49] But Serena Joy makes a clandestine arrangement with Offred to remedy the Commander's suspected sterility by having the Handmaid have intercourse with the chauffeur, Nick. The relationship between Handmaid and mistress has shifted – they are two women sharing a destiny in Gilead's system: "I think: she's biting her lip, she's suffering. She wants it all right, that baby. I see the two of us, a blue shape, a red shape, in the brief glass eye of the mirror as we descend. Myself, my obverse."[50]

Perhaps the remark "Myself, my obverse", somewhat similar to the expression "one flesh" we saw used for the wife and her Handmaid, is a further allusion to the paradise narrative, where Adam greets his wife, brought to him by God, who made her "as his [Adam's] counterpart" (Gen. 2:18), as "flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23).[51] Creative biblical allusions such as these shape *The Handmaid's Tale* in many places. Genesis 2–3 also offers itself as a fruitful comparative text for an important leitmotif of the novel: the deliberate mentions of seeing and being seen.

The Regime of Seeing

The rulers of Gilead seek a panoptic system, enabling total surveillance.[52] It is based on the internalization of the possibility of comprehensive monitoring. No one is to be trusted, each and every one watches the other. This aim is

47 Atwood 1998, 161–162.

48 Gen. 16 uses the Hebrew terms *šipḥā*, "personal maid" (?), and *gᵉbīrā*, "mistress"; for the exegetical discussion whether these are technical terms see, positively, Willi-Plein 2011, 68–69, and, relativizing, Fischer 1994, 91–97.

49 Atwood 1998, 162.

50 Atwood 1998, 259.

51 For the equal status of the first couple in these verses, see Kessler 2006.

52 See the classic study Foucault 2008.

realized – unlike in Orwell's *1984* – almost without technical means. In Gilead the recurring official symbol for this monitoring is the ever-watchful winged eye – obviously taken from the Trinitarian symbol of the triangle with rays and the eye of God, which has been common since the 17th century.[53] The customary farewell formula between the Handmaids, who are only allowed to shop in pairs, is "Under His Eye".[54] *Whose* eye this is remains deliberately indeterminate. It is a male gaze (of the state/God) from which nothing is to escape. To this end, social life is visually defined in detail, by the dress code, for example, and by rituals. In the Red Center, the Handmaids, fertile and therefore potentially dangerous women, are inculcated with invisibility: "Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen – to be *seen* – is to be – her voice trembled – penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable."[55] Another mention of invisibility relates to the lower ranks of the society. About Nick, the chauffeur, Offred remarks, "both of us are supposed to be invisible, both of us are functionaries."[56] With the rules of seeing located beyond speech, *The Handmaid's Tale* emphasizes an anthropological fact: societies organize themselves fundamentally through a regime of gazes. People are permeated by the knowledge of their being seen by others, which determines their self-perception. This way of being is also about the dialectic of veiling and nakedness. It is about bodies as socially determined and thus about the cultural organization of gender and sexuality.

One of the most influential texts in world literature in this respect is the biblical Paradise narrative, Genesis 2:4b–3:24. Traditionally, in the wake of Paul and Augustine, it has been interpreted as the narrative of "the fall of man". Thus, it is imprinted on the Western Christian consciousness as a linkage of seduction, (female) transgression, sin, shame, and death. However, current exegetical research on Genesis 2–3 – notwithstanding the burden of reception history – has established another probable reading of the text.

The narrative of the creation of the human couple in the Garden of Eden, of the attainment of their 'autonomy' by eating the fruit, and of their expulsion from communion with God is not a tale of guilt and punishment (a word for sin does not even appear in it).[57] And the gender relationship is described not

53 For this iconography see Kaute 1968, 224.

54 Atwood 1998, 45.

55 Atwood 1998, 28.

56 Atwood 1998, 232. For social invisibility see Honneth 2003.

57 See, for example, the comprehensive interpretation of Gertz 2018, 80–149.

simply as naturally given, but as a (reversible?) consequence of the drama of becoming human. The curses in Genesis 3:14–19 therefore have an after-the-fact character with regard to the realization of nakedness in Genesis 3:7 and its consequences. The immediate making of preliminary clothes by the pair and the protective clothing given to them later by God for the world beyond Eden suggest the foundations of culture.[58] All people now know of the gaze of others (and of God) directed at them individually, and they act accordingly.

The permanent awareness of visibility is rightly recognized by Hans Blumenberg as the heart of the myth of Genesis 2–3.[59] The paradise narrative conveys an etiology of humanity based on awareness of mutual seeing and the resultant adaptation of bodies through veiling (or unveiling). At the beginning of cultural practice was dress. Offred's narrative exhibits a strong awareness of the anthropological significance of seeing and being seen, both as a form of the exercise of power and as genuine mutual recognition and thus subversion of suppression. We might say that in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the unobstructed gaze and its reciprocation is both a fact and a desire. It is more fundamental than the gender-related gaze, from which, naturally, it cannot be separated.

Nudity, Clothing, and Power

The internalization of male control over women's bodies, as willed by the rulers of Gilead, is articulated by Offred when she undresses for a bath without being able to see herself: "My nakedness is strange to me already. […] I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely."[60] The domestic ceremony of reading the Bible is described particularly vividly in terms of visual control and its reversal, between the Commander and the women grouped around him. While he seems to constantly change his "disguises" and thus proves himself to be a kind of everyman, the women's gazes fix on him: "Is there no end to his disguises, of benevolence? We watch him: every inch, every flicker. To be a man, watched by women. It must be entirely strange."[61] In what follows,

58 See Hartenstein 2019.
59 Blumenberg 2006, 777–783.
60 Atwood 1998, 63.
61 Atwood 1998, 87.

this image is continued as a mutual trying on of roles, a donning of each other's status. The Commander remains superior to the women in power, but he lacks any empathy. He is blind to them. They, however, see and observe him closely in his sensory darkness. He – in Offred's interpretation – feels his way "into them" (also sexual metaphor) on

> this journey into a darkness that is composed of women, a woman, who can see in darkness while he himself strains blindly forward. She watches him from within. We're all watching him. It's the one thing we can really do, and it's not for nothing.[62]

The Commander finally appears in the realistically sad and intimate scene with Offred in the hotel room. He is completely stripped of any claim to power and revealed in all his paucity. The inner mendacity of the Gilead system culminates in the club for the amusement of the officers:

> Will this be worse, to have him denuded, of all his cloth power? He's down to the shirt; then, under it, sadly, a little belly. Wisps of hair. […] "Maybe I should turn the lights out," says the Commander […]. I see him for a moment before he does this. Without his uniform he looks smaller, older, like something being dried.[63]

Really Being Seen

The change in Offred's relationships with all persons with whom she comes in closer contact is evident at key points in the narrative in terms of the reversal or subversion of the regime of gazes prevailing in Gilead:

The Commander again: after the secret agreement, he looks at Offred during the ceremonial mating, which makes her uncomfortable because what "should have been no more to me than a bee is to a flower" now seems unseemly.[64] At the same time, his looking gives her awareness of a power of an "equivocal kind" that she has achieved over him: "Once in a while I think I can see myself, though blurrily, as he may see me."[65]

62 Atwood 1998, 88.
63 Atwood 1998, 254–255.
64 Atwood 1998, 161.
65 Atwood 1998, 210.

Serena Joy: a similar change takes place in Offred's relationship with the wife, who also makes a forbidden arrangement, in this instance to get a child. During their negotiations, which as such already undermine the regime of Gilead, mistress and maid look at each other: "I look up at her. She looks down. It's the first time we have looked into each other's eyes in a long time. Since we met. The moment stretches out between us, bleak and level. She's trying to see whether or not I'm up to reality."[66]

Ofglen: of central importance is the moment of truth between Offred and her shopping partner, Ofglen. The relationship between the two Handmaids has been subject to the regime of mutual control for a long time. Neither knew whether she could trust the other. But then, in the reflection in the store window of the Soul Scrolls factory, they exchange glances that reveal themselves to each other:

> Now I shift my gaze. What I see is not the machines, but Ofglen, reflected in the glass of the window. She's looking straight at me. We can see into each other's eyes. This is the first time I've ever seen Ofglen's eyes, directly, steadily, not aslant. Her face is oval, pink, plump but not fat, her eyes roundish. She holds my stare in the glass, level, unwavering. Now it's hard to look away. There's a shock in this seeing; it's like seeing somebody naked, for the first time.[67]

It takes the additional confirmation, in words, that they think alike about the empty lie of the mechanized prayer printers to transform their relationship: suspicion becomes trust. They are no longer alone.

Nick: Offred projects much of her pre-Gilead love for Luke onto the chauffeur, with whom she ends up having a relationship she wants. Her desire to see him undisguised is real and a utopian wish for humanity.[68]

Offred herself: when in the hotel of the forbidden club to which the Commander has taken her, where mirrors are allowed, Offred looks at herself for the only time recorded in the whole report. Her self-image is sober and clear: "Now, in this ample mirror under the white light, I take a look at myself. It's a good look, slow and level. I'm a wreck."[69] The tension between

66 Atwood 1998, 204–205.
67 Atwood 1998, 167.
68 Atwood 1998, 269.
69 Atwood 1998, 253.

ubiquitous surveillance and the genuine seeing and knowing between people that blossoms in the cracks of Gilead's walls finally leads us to Offred's personal religion, which seems significant not only individually but also collectively.

Reflection on Writing and Faith

Offred's tale contains reflective passages that consider the peculiarity of a story that cannot be written down, since there is nothing to write with, but must be told. That the Handmaid wants to contextualize her experiences is first and foremost an act of self-care: it helps her survive. "What I need is perspective", she says, because only through the "illusion of depth, created by a frame" can one gain orientation. Otherwise, one stands before a two-dimensional wall, and everything is only "a huge foreground".[70]

Storytelling, Believing, and Truth

Offred is aware that the drive to tell her tale can be deceptive. Reality, especially that which is only remembered, is fleeting. And it is at the same time so complex[71] that all attempts to put it into words subsequently are "reconstruction": "When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove."[72] Offred, intriguingly, says comparable things about her faith, most noticeably when she plays through different versions of what might have happened to Luke, the father of her daughter, after their joint attempt to escape in the early days of Gilead: "The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything."[73] It is precisely this fragile way of dealing with uncertainty "In Hope"[74] that characterizes her religious faith.

70 Atwood 1998, 143.
71 Atwood 1998, 134.
72 Atwood 1998, 134.
73 Atwood 1998, 106.
74 Atwood 1998, 106; 195.

It is fed by elements from before Gilead (with a reference, for example, to "presbyterian"[75]). Occasionally, we learn of mystical immersion or a romantic devotion to nature.[76] Despite critical distance to and partly ironic remarks about the ideological use of Christian symbols, especially in the Red Center, Offred holds onto a faith whose truth is as uncertain and open as the promise of truth in retelling events. One of the material mediums she uses is the little cushion on the window seat, on which is embroidered in uppercase letters the word FAITH: "It's the only thing they've given me to read."[77]

Necessary Imaginations

"Tonight I will say my prayers." These words begin a haunting section of *The Handmaid's Tale* devoted primarily to processing Luke's memory:[78] "I pray where I am, sitting by the window, looking out through the curtain at the empty garden. I don't even close my eyes. Out there or inside my head, it's an equal darkness. Or light."[79] Offred's prayer is loosely based on the structure of the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4), adapting its content to her concerns and commenting on the traditional formulations, sometimes ironically, sometimes despairingly. The act of addressing "God" seems to her to be as necessary as it is questionable: "I feel very unreal, talking to You like this. I feel as if I'm talking to a wall. I wish You'd answer. I feel so alone. […] Oh God. It's no joke. Oh God oh God. How can I keep on living?"[80] Analogously, she addresses an imagined "you" in her storytelling as an act of necessary imagination: "A story is like a letter. Dear *You*, I'll say. Just *you*, without a name."[81] Address is part of a concrete practice of praying and testifies to a history, both of which are means of survival, without requiring metaphysical or realist assumptions about the existence of the addressee. Simply the spoken double address of a "you" (God and listeners/readers) makes the *you* in each instance possibly real: "By telling you [the reader] anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because

75 Atwood 1998, 54.
76 Atwood 1998, 97; 110–111; 153–154.
77 Atwood 1998, 57.
78 Atwood 1998, 194–195.
79 Atwood 1998, 194.
80 Atwood 1998, 195.
81 Atwood 1998, 40.

I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are."[82] In this respect, her real name plays a special role for Offred, and is also decisive for her personal religion.

The Real Name

Offred refers to her former name several times. In a way, it is her most precious memory, the unmistakable proof of her former identity:

> My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure that I'll come back to dig up, one day.[83]

The name "has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past."[84] In this it resembles the name of God in Hebrew mysticism, with similar connotations of presence and withdrawal:[85] "I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark."[86] To not forget this name is therefore imperative, even if Offred once considers forgetting it as a way out of her despair ("I must forget about my secret name and all ways back. My name is Offred now, and here is where I live."[87]). The only person in Gilead to whom she entrusts her real name is Nick; she tells him because of her desire to belong to him completely.[88] The analogy with the Hebrew name for God in the Bible, the tetragrammaton YHWH, which in Jewish tradition is subject to pronunciation taboos and held highly sacred, is made fully explicit in Offred's nightly "Our Father": "My God, Who Art in the Kingdom of Heaven, which is within. I wish you would tell

82 Atwood 1998, 268 (with the concept of creation through God's word in Gen. 1:3 possibly in the background).

83 Atwood 1998, 84.

84 Atwood 1998, 84.

85 For the central role of the name(s) of God in Jewish mysticism, see Maier 1995, 19–23; see also Schäfer 2009, 396 (general index under "names, divine").

86 Atwood 1998, 84.

87 Atwood 1998, 143.

88 Atwood 1998, 270.

me Your Name, the real one I mean. But *You* will do as well as anything."[89] Memories and expectations are condensed within the preservation of a real name, not only in the cause of survival but also in hope of genuine sympathy with her fate, even if it should occur only within a future remembrance. Atwood has emphasized the ethical importance of commemorating all the victims of history whose distinctiveness has been erased with their names: "Why do we never learn the real name of the central character, I have often been asked. Because, I reply, so many people throughout history have had their names changed or have simply disappeared from view."[90]

Concluding Remarks

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* contains statements and reflections on religion as a social reality on all levels of the novel (Offred's account, the narrative framework about the scholars in the future, and the meta-level of the author, who provides information about her book in the Introduction from 2017). Religion is not criticized or evaluated *per se*, but – like the whole fictional world of the novel – is introduced in its actual human complexity. On the one hand, it is ideologically abused by the rulers in Gilead, as in many totalitarian regimes, where it serves as merely a tool of power and oppression not so very different from corporeal punishment and guns. On the other hand, it cannot be regulated in total. There is always the possibility of a subversive inner rebellion driven by religious insights, as is evident when it comes to the different ways in which biblical texts are reflected in Offred's report. In this respect, the novel can be considered neither anti-Christian nor anti-religion. Rather, it juxtaposes the misuse of religious symbolism by rulers and the possibility for individual religious practice to serve as an outlet for the oppressed. Both realities use set pieces and elements of biblical and Christian (especially Protestant and Evangelical) traditions.

Religion thus appears as a social fact in the sense identified by Emile Durkheim. Specifically modern is, however, the extent to which *The Handmaid's Tale* introduces moments of autonomy and enlightenment that are 'historically' indebted to the origins of the main character, Offred, so to the period before Gilead. She and others like her have memories that enable them to

89 Atwood 1998, 194.

90 Atwood 2017, xv.

look at the new conditions in Gilead in an ideologically critical way. Despite all the loss of individual freedom for the Handmaids, Atwood's novel makes clear that the belief that at least in the future people will feel compassion and listen to the Handmaid's story can be a means of survival.

Offred inspires great sympathy in readers precisely because she is a human being like us, with weaknesses and a limited vision, but also with amazing strength and common sense. Especially in light of its reflections on working on one's own biographical memory (under the keyword "reconstruction"), the novel thematizes that every attempt to communicate injustice and oppression to later generations represents an act of hope beyond the existing conditions. The double "you" of the imagined addressees (human listeners of the future and the always silent "God") is evidence of the promise contained in writing or recording such events and fates.[91] This hope is fully expressed in the reflections on one's true name: our names signify who we were and are. All names and stories deserve to be remembered, because their complete erasure would signify the end of the political affect par excellence: outcry in the face of injustice.

Finally, through many subtle references to biblical texts such as Genesis 2–3, *The Handmaid's Tale* expresses a realistic awareness of a culture's tradition, which always remains ambivalent – like all human products and symbols. But precisely in this ambivalence, as the leitmotif of seeing and being seen in the novel makes clear, lies the faint possibility of liberation. Violent oppression does not necessarily have the last word. The great global success of Atwood's creation could itself be considered evidence in support of this proposition.

Bibliography

Atwood, Margaret, 1998 [1985], *The Handmaid's Tale*, New York: Anchor Books.

Atwood, Margaret, 2017, Introduction, in: Atwood, Margaret, *The Handmaid's Tale*, New York: Anchor Books, [98th printing], xiii–xix.

Atwood, Margaret, 2019, *The Testaments*, New York: Anchor Books.

Blumenberg, Hans, 2006, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Bridge, Edward J., 2014, A Mother's Influence: Mothers Naming Children in the Hebrew Bible, *Vetus Testamentum* 64, 389–400.

Dick, Philip K., 1995 [1978/1985], How to Build a Universe that Doesn't Fall Apart Two

91 This seems true even though in the "Historical Notes" (Atwood 1998, 299–311) the scholars of the future lack any sensibility for the human tragedy in Offred's record – another ironic angle in Atwood's plot construction.

Days Later, in: Dick, Philip K., *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick*, New York: Pantheon Books, 259–280.
Fischer, Irmtraud, 1994, *Die Erzeltern Israels*, Berlin / New York: de Gruyter.
Foucault, Michel, 2006 [2004], *Die Geburt der Biopolitik*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
Foucault, Michel, 2008 [1976], Überwachen und Strafen, in: Foucault, Michel, *Die Hauptwerke*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 701–1019.
Gertz, Jan Christian, 2018, *Das erste Buch Mose (Genesis)*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
Hartenstein, Friedhelm, 2019, Clothing and Nudity in the Paradise Story (Gen 2–3), in: Berner, Christoph / Schäfer, Manuel / Schott, Martin / Schulz, Sarah / Weingärtner, Martina (eds.), *Clothing and Nudity in the Hebrew Bible*, London / New York: T&T Clark, 357–378.
Heinsohn, Nina, 2010, *Zwischen Verheißung und Verborgenheit*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag.
Honneth, Axel, 2003, *Unsichtbarkeit*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
Kaute, Lore, 1968, Auge, Auge Gottes, in: Kirschbaum, Engelbert (ed.), *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, vol. 1, Rome / Freiburg et al.: Herder, 222–224.
Kessler, Rainer, 2006, Die Frau als Gehilfin des Mannes? Gen 2,18.20 und das biblische Verständnis von Hilfe, in: Kessler, Rainer, *Gotteserdung*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 35–40.
Kessler, Rainer, 2009, Benennung des Kindes durch die israelitische Mutter, in: Kessler, Rainer, *Studien zur Sozialgeschichte Israels*, Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 113–123.
Köckert, Matthias, 2017, *Abraham: Ahnvater – Vorbild – Kultstifter*, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.
Maier, Johann, 1995, *Die Kabbalah: Einführung – klassische Texte – Erläuterungen*, Munich: C. H. Beck.
Oeming, Manfred, 1998, *Biblische Hermeneutik: Eine Einführung*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
Orwell, George, 1949, *1984*, https://www.planetebook.com/1984/.
Pezzoli-Olgiati, 2021, The Handmaid's Tale: Religion und Gender künstlerisch verdichtet, in: Höpflinger, Anna-Katharina / Jeffers, Ann / Pezzoli-Olgiati, Daria (eds.), *Handbuch Gender und Religion*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 533–561.
Schäfer, Peter, 2009, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Seebass, Horst, 1997, *Genesis II/1*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag.
Seebass, Horst, 1999, *Genesis II/2*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag.
Van Seters, John, 1968, The Problem of Childlessness in Near Eastern Laws and the Patriarchs of Israel, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87, 401–408.
Van Seters, John, 1975, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, New Haven / London: Yale University Press.
Willi-Plein, Ina, 2011, *Das Buch Genesis*, Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk.

Ann Jeffers

The Handmaid's Tale as Palimpsest

Biblical (Re)Imaginings in Margaret Atwood's Novel

Abstract

The Handmaid's Tale inhabits an imaginary space defined by biblical narratives and set in the near future, when low fertility has reached a critical point. The solution provided by the Bible-based totalitarian regime in Gilead is to offer "handmaids" as surrogate mothers to members of the ruling elite. The biblical basis is chillingly re-enacted through the set reading of Genesis 30:1–3 that precedes and legitimises the ritual rape of the household-dedicated handmaiden. While this text from Genesis clearly provides the rationale for addressing issues of fertility in Gilead, I focus here more specifically on how the book of Judges (specifically Judges 19–21) is marshalled to provide an implicit framework for *The Handmaid 's Tale*. This article analyses the complex ways in which the Bible is used and abused in both the novel and the fourth season of the TV series, using literary and feminist lenses. It will be argued that both narratives, the book of Judges and Atwood's tale, contain elements of subversion and deconstruction.

Keywords

The Handmaid's Tale, Biblical Reception, Palimpsest, Feminist Reading, Book of Judges

Biography

Ann Jeffers is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy in the United Kingdom. She lectured for nearly thirty years at Heythrop College, University of London, where she was Senior Lecturer in Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism and also Director of Research. Her research interests are varied but focus on Bible reception, gender and ecology.

Margaret Atwood's sixth novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), has had a substantial impact, especially since reaching our television screens with the Hulu series of the same name. The sheer prescience of the book, tackling issues of totalitarianism, religious fundamentalism, environmental disaster, loss of fertility and subsequent control over women's bodies, has contributed to its cultural visibility and generated a surge of studies. Using literary and feminist lenses, my investigation will focus on one of these areas: the

DOI: 10.25364/05.10:2024.1.3

complex ways in which the Bible is used and abused in the fundamentalist state of Gilead. Furthermore, I posit that the manuscript is in effect a palimpsest, for when we read the characterisation of the handmaid as a victim of gender-based violence, Judges 19–21 can be discerned beneath the words of the modern narrative.[1]

Reading Texts as Palimpsest

According to the Collins Online Dictionary, a palimpsest is "a parchment, tablet, etc. that has been written upon or inscribed two or three times, the previous text or texts having been imperfectly erased and remaining, therefore, still partly visible".[2] In his analysis of the multidimensionality of texts in his book *Palimpsests*, Gerard Genette writes of hypertexuality as "any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of a commentary".[3] *The Handmaid's Tale* is the hypertext of an underlying biblical hypotext. While Atwood uses *palimpsest* with reference to the society on which Gilead has superimposed itself, the term can be understood to refer to a complex network of literary traditions, a patchwork of multiple references to works ancient and modern, ranging from the Bible to Ancient Greek literature, Ovid, Geoffrey Chaucer, Puritan literature, fairy tales and modern dystopias, as the multiple references to George Orwell's *1984* demonstrate.[4] The novel also refers to totalitarian rule from the past, in particular Nazi and Stalinist regimes.[5] But while we can glimpse many literary references, the central plot of the novel makes explicit references to the Bible, and closer examination of the text itself unveils a number of biblical quotes, misquotes and echoes.

The idea of the palimpsest is useful in other ways: studies of biblical narratives about women have uncovered a patriarchal bias in the way the stories were recorded, with women's voices and agency severely curtailed. Although Atwood has expressed reservations about feminism, she nonethe-

1 Atwood 1996, 9 uses the word. On the idea of *The Handmaid's Tale* as palimpsest, see Ketcham 2019, 147.

2 Collins Online Dictionary 2023, http://tinyurl.com/3jrpsmvc [accessed 10 August 2023].

3 Genette 1997, 5.

4 Scarano D'Antonio 2021, 593–594; Nordström 2008, 1.

5 Lawson 1987, 496.

less situates herself within a feminist tradition[6] and has described her novel as "a study of power".[7]

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the women have lost their rights to work and to have a bank account, and they have also lost the right to choose whether to become pregnant, with fertile female bodies coerced into the national task of child-bearing. With Simone de Beauvoir's affirmation in mind that women's bodies need to be viewed as "autonomous subject",[8] *The Handmaid's Tale* is a clear illustration of the erasure of women's whole selves by reducing them to "bodies" whose sole purpose is in the service of the state: "I am a national resource",[9] says the protagonist, Offred, in one of her internal discourses. That function is achieved through state-sponsored ritualised rape and the eradication of sexuality (an echo of George Orwell's *1984*), with a handmaid redefined as a "two-legged womb".[10] According to Hélène Cixous, *The Handmaid's Tale* can be read as a feminist dystopia: "It is men who have driven away women from writing and it is men who have confiscated their bodies, their voices, and thus their writing in order to defend patriarchal order."[11] Carla Scarano D'Antonio suggests that the palimpsest presupposes "dissent"[12] from the text it is grafted onto. If we take that point seriously and analyse Atwood's novel (and the Hulu series) as a palimpsest of the Bible, we can expect to uncover a number of strategies like "subversion", "sedition", "blasphemy" and "heresy".[13] The narrative also exposes and attempts to rewrite the autonomy of Offred as a subject.

Trapped by the Bible

Much has been written on the prominence of the Bible in *The Handmaid's Tale*: the patchwork of biblically inspired hymns, religious traditions and

6 Although Margaret Atwood has been reluctant to call herself a feminist, she agreed with the broad definition of feminism as "a belief in the rights of women". See Munro Prescott 2019, 206.

7 Somacarrera 2006, 37.

8 de Beauvoir 1952, 39.

9 Atwood 1996, 71.

10 Atwood 1996, 142.

11 Cixous 1976, 339. See also Landis 2018, 18; Filipczak 1993, 171; Sugg 2019, 169.

12 Scarano D'Antonio 2021, 594.

13 Bertrand 2020, 177.

biblical references is extensive.[14] As has already been discussed by a variety of scholars, prophetic literature (Isaiah in particular) as well as Deuteronomy, Leviticus, Luke's gospel and Pauline writings – to name just a few – have all been cited as evidence of the importance of the Bible in the novel. Here I shall give only examples specifically concerned with women's relation to procreation to show the diverse ways in which the Bible is used as the hypotext and deliberately misconstrued. A greeting frequently uttered to and by the handmaids is "Blessed be the fruit", a shortening of a verse from Luke 1:42, which reads, "Blessed is the fruit of your womb", in the context of Mary's encounter with Elizabeth which each woman is pregnant with her first child.[15] The veils which are part of the women's outfits are a reference to 1 Corinthians 11:6–7, with the addition of 1 Timothy 2:9 to reinforce the modesty of their attire. The decontextualised use of "she shall be saved in childbearing", from 1 Timothy 2:8–15, with its emphasis on the "submission" of women to men[16] and on the role of women as procreators, reinforces much of Gilead's characterisation of handmaids as silent and powerless.[17]

The "aura"[18] of the sacred text as hypotext is used effectively in developing these ideas. Thus another example of the misuse of the Bible by Gilead occurs in the context of a handmaid giving birth: Offred remembers being told at the Red Centre, "From each according to her ability; to each according to his needs",[19] a quote attributed by the Aunts to the book of Acts. In its original context, the last part of this verse comes from Acts 4:35 ("they distributed to each as anyone had need") and is about food distribution among those who need it. In the context of the novel, the first part of the verse is a

14 Scarano D'Antonio 2021 and Dvorák 2006 have discussed a wide range of aspects of biblical references. Filipczak 1993 exposes the multiple references to Gilead as "beacon city on the hill" but also as corrupt and stained by blood. See also Tan 2009 on Isaiah and McCrossin 2019 on the book of Job.

15 Atwood 1996, 25. Here the greeting recurs when Offred encounters her shopping partner, Offglen. All quotations from the Bible in this article are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

16 Atwood 1996, 229.

17 This passage has been frequently deployed to suppress women's voices within the Christian tradition. See Neufeld Redekop 1990 for its localised contextualisation within second-generation Christians. The message about suppressing women's speech is reinforced by Aunt Lydia: "Do your duty in silence" (Atwood 1996, 229).

18 Swindell 2010, 5 speaks of the "aura" of the original text.

19 Atwood 1996, 123.

new addition that legitimises the role of the handmaids.[20] Other texts relating to the procreation and bearing of children are alluded to, for instance Amos 1:13, where the prophet warns that the Ammonites will be punished for they have "ripped open the women with child in Gilead, that they might enlarge their territory". In the novel, the handmaids' own children have been forcibly taken from them so that these "two-legged wombs" could become the property of a state mobilised to invade all private spaces. Echoes of the grief and loss suffered by Rachel in Jeremiah 31:15 are sounded by Offred and every other handmaid whose children have been taken away from them; as Rachel is a symbol of the nation, she represents everywoman. A last example of how *The Handmaid's Tale* reworks the biblical text is the reference to the 'Jezebels'[21], a generic designation which refers to prostitutes working in Gilead's brothels and which reinforces the dichotomy between the roles of women.

The Ceremony: Amplification and Intensification

I now turn to the section of the book dedicated to the Ceremony.[22] I look at the main characters and offer an analysis of how Offred inhabits an imaginary space broadly defined by Genesis 30:1–3 but interwoven with other biblical narratives too.

At a time in the near future when low fertility has reached a critical point, the Bible-based totalitarian regime in Gilead offers handmaids as surrogate mothers to members of the ruling elite.[23] The biblical basis for this act is chillingly re-enacted through the set reading of Genesis 30:1–3 that precedes and legitimises the ritual rape of the household handmaids. According to that text, while Leah, Jacob's first wife, is fertile and gives birth to sons, Rachel, Leah's sister and Jacob's second wife, is barren and despairs of ever giving her husband a son. Rachel gives Jacob her handmaid Bilhah to sleep with and Bilhah gets pregnant and gives birth to Dan and, later on, Napthali.

20 The verse can also be read as a quote from Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*: "From each according to his capacity, to each according to his need." See Marx 1933, 31 and Larson 1989, 48.

21 Queen Jezebel's story is told in 1 Kings 16–2 Kings 9:37. The sexual associations belong to the history of interpretation (see Brenner 1999).

22 This can be found in Section VI, "Household", chapters 14 to 17. Atwood 1996, 85–106.

23 In the Bible as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, children from polycoity have the same status as children from the patriarch's wives.

The process is repeated in the competition between the two sisters, with Leah's maid Zilpah also being given to Jacob and impregnated with two sons, Gad and Asher (Gen. 30:1–13). The biblical handmaids from Genesis are voiceless, as are the handmaids of Atwood's novel. There is no attempt to contextualise the Genesis story aside from the mandate to use a handmaid for reproduction. The most direct and explicit reference is the story read on the night of the Ceremony,[24] with the Commander taking the Bible from a locked box[25] before reading out the account of Rachel and Bilhah. A woman's God-given role, the state holds, is to bear children: "she shall be saved by childbearing", one of the Commanders says, quoting 1 Timothy 2:15.[26] The second direct allusion to Genesis 30:1–3 is found in the name "Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre" (also known as The Red Centre), the place where the handmaids are trained.[27]

The broad patriarchal history that starts with the Adam and Eve story and includes the injunction to "be fruitful and multiply" is invoked to reinforce the role and function of women as child-bearers.[28] The context of the latter text is the renewal of creation and sealing of the Noahic covenant, which articulates the promise that the earth will not be destroyed again by God.[29] There is irony in quoting a text which in the context of Atwood's novel refers to ecological destruction brought about by humankind.

Present at the ceremony is the Commander's wife, Serena Joy. Although in the re-enactment of Genesis 30:1–3 she stands for Rachel, the infertile wife,[30] her name also recalls Sarah, who was given "joy" when she became pregnant in old age with Isaac. The Commander stands for Jacob,[31] a reference to Ra-

24 The quote from Gen. 30:1–3 also appears at the beginning of the book, before the table of contents.

25 Atwood 1996, 94.

26 Atwood 1996, 229.

27 Offred's internal voice offers here an irreverent, satirical and possibly rebellious counter stance to Gen. 30:1–3, by calling it "the mouldy old Rachel and Leah stuff" (Atwood 1996, 95).

28 Atwood 1996, 95.

29 In Genesis the command appears in 1:28 and in 8:17, where it is given to animals. Note the selective "God to Adam", "God to Noah", which emphasise the patriarchal framework: there is no mention of God speaking to women despite, for instance, speaking to Hagar, Sarah's handmaid in Gen. 16:11–12.

30 Christou 2016.

31 The characters in the Ceremony re-enact Gen. 31. The historical notes following Offred's tale provide some information about the Sons of Jacob as the instigator of Gilead's regime; see Atwood 1996, 314.

chel's husband, and the "Marthas" are a clear reference to the Martha who is one of Lazarus's sisters from John 11 and is traditionally associated with domestic tasks. The generic "handmaid" presents a more complex set of references, standing not just for Bilhah but also for all women whose voices have been silenced by the biblical tradition: Hagar, Zilpah, Sarah, Rachel, Leah, Rebecca, Jephthah's daughter, Ruth, Jezebel, Mary and many others, both named and unnamed, "missing persons without textual authority".[32] Another echo comes from prophetic literature, specifically Joel 2:28, where handmaids prophesise against corrupt governments, a theme that Offred's testimony and the Hulu series develop. The handmaid's name Offred proclaims her as a possession "of Fred" and is written over her own name. Her patronymic can also be read as "offered",[33] thus presenting her as a sacrificial victim.

While the book of Genesis occupies a central place in the Ceremony, a closer examination of the chapters relating to the cruel ritual unearths more biblical references. Offred's memory of another reading illustrates the manipulation of the biblical text for propagandistic purposes: "For lunch it was the Beatitudes",[34] with the additional non-biblical "Blessed are the silent". This much-shortened version is taken out of context (as is the Commander's prayer) and is used to reinforce the power of the patriarchal theocracy over women, overwriting the original vision of a new world order. Offred's prayer "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum"[35] is a subversive, irreverent and satiric digression that interrupts the patriarchal narrative led by the Commander's call to prayer before the ritualised rape. In another of her memories,[36] Offred reminisces about Moira's attempt to escape the Red Centre and her punishment: the torture which turned her feet into "pulp",[37] destroying a part of her body Aunt Lydia deems unnecessary. It is a brutal inversion of 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul affirms that all body parts work in unison as Christ's body.

32 Lawson 1987, 496.

33 Christou 2016 reads Offred as a sacrificial victim, an echo of the sacrificial lamb of Exodus 12:1–14. See especially Atwood 1996, 123: "We know the sacrifices you are expected to make", which also echoes Aunt Lydia's admonitions: "Think of yourselves as seed" (page 24) and "you are the shock troops. Take a risk" (page 118).

34 Atwood 1996, 96. Bertrand 2020, 175: "The selection of Beatitudes and the addition of new Beatitude about silence serves the ideology of passive acceptance of one's fate promoted by Gilead."

35 "Don't let the bastards grind you down", in Atwood 1996, 97, 98, 193.

36 Atwood 1996, 97 and 98.

37 Atwood 1996, 98.

Finally, the Commander's own prayer, "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to know himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect towards him",[38] is a direct but truncated quote from 2 Chronicles 16:9, leaving out "In this you have done foolishly; therefore from now on you shall have wars." In fact, the Commander's quote is also the chorus of one of the scripture-inspired songs popular in the 1980s,[39] perhaps as a satiric nod to Serena Joy's previous career as a singer of evangelical songs.[40]

Song of Songs as a Hypotext to the Ceremony

When the Commander, his wife and Offred enter the bed chamber, "Serena Joy's territory",[41] for the last part of the Ceremony, there is a distorted echo of Song of Songs, which holds the "house of my mother"[42] and its inner chamber as a place of safety and nurture for the woman. In that space, Offred detects the scent of lily-of-the-valley, a direct allusion to Song of Songs 2:1–2.[43] When the entire ritualised rape is read side by side with Song of Songs 2:1–13, it becomes an inversion and devastating parody of the lovers' tenderness and affection. A couple of examples will suffice: "It has nothing to do with sexual desire"[44] can be contrasted with Song of Songs 2:3, "I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste"; "He is humming to himself, […] like a man who has other things on his mind"[45] overwrites Song of Songs 2:4, "Let his banner over me be love" or Song of Songs 2:6, "His left arm is under my head, and his right hand embraces me." The dark and violent note in the Song of Songs (5:6–7) is reflected in the performance of the Ceremony.[46]

38 Atwood 1996, 99.

39 As examples see https://tinyurl.com/yz4cb3zz and https://tinyurl.com/ysmaf5jc [both accessed 31 August 2023].

40 Atwood 1996, 22.

41 Atwood 1996, 93.

42 Song of Songs 3:4; 8:2.

43 Atwood 1996, 86; 100. Although Landis (2018, 114) does not refer to Song of Songs, she has noted the role flowers play in the novel and their relation to sexuality: "Even at her age she still feels the urge to wreathe herself in flowers. No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving, you can't use them anymore, you're withered. They're the genital organs of plants. I read that somewhere, once" (Atwood 1996, 87).

44 Atwood 1996, 101.

45 Atwood 1996, 101.

46 According to Landis (2018, 114), "this story of imprisonment, coercion, and dehumanization is leavened by flowers".

These digressions from Offred's inner voice illustrate the use of "double-consciousness"[47] and fight the monologic discourse of the state: Scarano D'Antonio suggests that the complex intertextuality brings forth "a different way of being human",[48] one which is not solely defined by one's procreative ability.

Women "~~Under Erasure~~"

In this section I read *The Handmaid's Tale* as a palimpsest of the book of Judges, more specifically of Judges 19–21.[49] By highlighting the many parallels between the book of Judges and *The Handmaid's Tale*, I can examine strategies of re-writing, imaginative filling of gaps, and ironic reversals, which both expose and denounce the erasure of women. While the book of Judges is the edited product of an ancient patriarchal culture, *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a fictive insight into a patriarchal future. Both books are framed by stories about the swift and brutal erasing of culture,[50] in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale* through the replacement of democracy with a mock-theocracy headed by the Sons of Jacob.[51] Ironically, the men are not called by God as in the book of Judges, but like some of the characters from the book of Judges, they use scripture to establish a patriarchal state for their own purposes: indeed, like the men in Judges, "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 21:25). They inscribe their own regime onto the old political structure which has been wiped out/erased overnight.

Another echo between the two narratives is that both societies have brought disaster upon themselves: having made catastrophic decisions in the past, they suffer from a lack of fertile women. Another parallel between the book of Judges and Gilead's society is the localised focus on family.[52] In

47 Ketcham 2019, 148. Offred lives in two worlds and two chronological times, with two languages, her internal, private voice and the patriarchal, public voice of the state. She is a counter voice to Aunt Lydia's either/or perspective.

48 Scarano D'Antonio 2021, 596–597.

49 The complexity of any analysis of Judges 19 is brought into relief by the fact that there are other biblical texts which have been read as "intertext", most notably Genesis 19: Lot and his daughters at Sodom and Gomorrah.

50 Erasure of culture is a prevalent theme in Judges. See Ketcham 2019, 154.

51 Atwood 1996, 128–129.

52 Clifton (2022) has argued for the primary importance of the family in Judges.

The Handmaid's Tale, the household of the Commander (and the households of all the other commanders) does not recognise as "legitimate" households like that of Offred's marriage to the divorced Luke and the child issuing from that relationship.

The overall framework of Judges highlights the behaviour of some of its characters as signs of social disintegration,[53] culminating in the gang rape of one woman and the kidnapping and collective rape of 600 young women to remedy the near erasure of the tribe of Benjamin and to provide the surviving men with a chance for reproduction and thus the survival of their tribe. The parallel with the story of Offred and its subsequent development in the Hulu series is striking. Furthermore, in Judges 19–21, Atwood's novel and the Hulu series, the focus is on internal political struggles.[54] The solution callously decided upon by the men of the various Israelite tribes is worked out in the name of restoring unity among them. The erasure of culture inherent in both narratives is explicit in both stories: the initial erasure of Canaanite culture is continued in Judges 19–21, with the erasure of the female characters, of their names,[55] voice,[56] body,[57] freedom and agency. Atwood's novel is a palimpsest from which the women's erased identity, agency and voice can, perhaps, be recovered.

Judges 19–21: Amplification and Intensification

The first parallel between the woman of Judges 19 and Offred is that, initially at least, both are active agents: they take the initiative to depart from the place they inhabit, one to leave her husband[58] and go back to her father's place and the other to leave behind a dangerous political situation, taking

53 Fewell 1992, 68.

54 While the book of Judges tells initially of a lack of unity between the tribes, which often act independently of each other, in the *Historical Notes* following the transcript of Offred's story, Professor Pieixoto tells of internal purges among the Sons of Jacob (Atwood 1996, 302).

55 Both the Levite's wife/concubine and Offred are nameless. The Levite's wife/concubine and Offred have been given names: "Bat-Shever", which means Daughter of Breaking (see Exum 2012, 123), and "June" in the Hulu series.

56 In Judges 19–21 none of the female characters speak. Bertrand (2020, 263–304) exposes the many deafening silences in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

57 Ketcham 2019, 151 and 155.

58 The motive of the woman of Judg. 19 is unclear. The Masoretic text reads "she played the harlot against him" which differs from the translation in Greek in the LXX: "she was angry with him", see Schneider 2000, 249.

her husband and daughter with her. This is their one and last act of agency. A further parallel is given by the designation of the woman of Judges 19:1 as a *pîlegeš*, who was "taken" by a "certain Levite". The text says nothing of their back story or whether the Levite was previously married. Although the use of the Hebrew term *pîlegeš* is relatively unclear, we know that it referred to a low-status wife or even a slave, and it is possible that if she was a secondary wife, the Levite had a main wife.[59] This is an attractive suggestion, as it reinforces the parallel between both stories. In Atwood's novel, the main character is also considered a secondary wife: she lost her status prior to Gilead because she was in an "adulterous" relationship with a divorced man[60] and as such she is now part of an anonymous "pool"[61] of women, as were the young women of Jabesh-Gilead[62] and Shiloh in Judges 21.

The woman's silence is overwhelming throughout Judges 19: she is not consulted at any point, her words are never recorded and when it becomes clear that she is to be sacrificed by her husband and bodily thrown to the men of Gibeah, she never utters a cry or expresses despair or protest.[63] Throughout the story we have only the perspective of a male narrator, who never tells us what had happened between her and her husband to make her leave. After four months of unexplained delay, her husband sets off "to speak kindly to her" at her father's house, but nothing is said about how she felt about her husband coming for her and whether she wanted to go back with him. The Commander in Atwood's tale, by contrast, offers Offred nuggets of comfort during their secret nightly meetings in his study, playing Scrabble with her, giving her forbidden women's magazines and hand cream[64] and taking her out (albeit to a brothel).

59 However, the woman is not consistently referred to as *pîlegeš*; she is *'iššâ* in relation to her husband (e. g. Judg. 19:1). See Clifton 2022.

60 The *Historical Notes* explain that second marriages from the previous society were declared illegal in Gilead. Atwood 1996, 312.

61 Atwood 1996, 312.

62 The name of the city which failed to respond to the call to arms against the Benjaminites offers a striking parallel with Atwood's novel. Both the women of Jabesh-Gilead in Judges and the women of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* constitute a "pool", with members of which the men can have children .

63 She has lost both voice and agency. Likewise, Offred has not only lost her voice, but she has also lost all agency: "I am leashed […] manacled" (Atwood 1996, 209), "handmaids are corralled" (page 222).

64 Atwood 1996, 144; the Commander wants to bestow on Offred "tenderness" (Atwood 1996, 217).

The woman from Judges 19 continues to be portrayed as silent and passive when the Levite decides to bring her back home: she is not asked whether she wants to stay with her father or where she wants to pass the night when they finally set out on their journey to the Levite's home. She continues to be silent in the scene of the encounter with the man from Ephraim at Gibeah and when her host and her husband attempt to negotiate with the perverted men's sexual demands (19:22). After a night of being subjected to sexual violence, she comes back to the house of her host and collapses on the threshold, where she is addressed directly for the first time by the Levite (19:28: "Get up and let us be going"). She does not answer. The horror of the situation is brought out by the ambiguity of the Hebrew text, which does not say whether she is dead or still alive. Her husband cuts her up into twelve pieces, with each piece sent to a tribe in Israel (19:29).

While reflecting the rape and erasure of the woman of Judges 19:25, Offred's tale elaborates on both its physicality and its metaphorical quality. Memories of rape pepper the novel, from Offred remembering writing a paper on date rape,[65] to her recalling Janine publicly testifying to her own experience at the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre,[66] to the intersecting with the re-enactment of Bilhah's story in the rape of the Ceremony in the home of the Commander and in all the other homes of Gilead's high officials. The Hulu series develops the extensive state-sanctioned rape of the handmaids, thus filling in gaps in the story of the young kidnapped fertile women of Jibesh-Gilead and Shiloh.

Dis-memberment and Re-membering as Means of Reinforcing Tragedy

Dismemberment as fragmentation is imaginatively reflected in the treatment of the handmaids in Atwood's novel. Its horrific depictions of tortured and cut-up women in the compulsory viewing of old pornographic films[67]

65 Atwood 1996, 43.

66 "It was my own fault. I led them on. I deserved the pain" (Atwood 1996, 78). Atwood offers a critique of the history of interpretation of the story by stating that "she got what she deserved" (Gunn 2005, 254). It is only with the advent of feminist criticism that the story was looked at from the woman's point of view (Exum 2012, Fewell 1992). Deut. 22:25 spells out the punishment for the rape of a woman in the open countryside, which is enacted in the "Particicution" of a man accused of rape (Atwood 1996, 286).

67 Atwood 1996, 124.

by the trainee handmaids echoes the body of the Levite's wife literally fragmented into twelve pieces. Dismemberment is expressed in the novel in various ways. Thus, for example, Offred experiences dissociation from her body and fragmentation after ritualised intercourse with the Commander.[68]

By rewriting the story of the woman of Judges 19, Atwood's novel makes the abused woman visible. She overwrites her story by giving Offred a position of subject. The protagonist's internal voice and memories are interrupting, such that the abuse perpetrated during the Ceremony and later on in the parallel sexual encounter with the Commander can be contrasted with two reimagined scenes, the memory of a better time with her husband Luke[69] and her experience as subject in her relationship with Nick.[70] Also, Offred's narrative shows an awareness of the fragmentation of her own story: "I am sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force."[71]

At a metaphorical level, the fragmented body of the woman of Judges 19 and the fragmented consciousness of the handmaid are mirrored by the amputated, disjointed and manipulated use of biblical quotations. This brings to the fore the literal, symbolic and metaphorical tragedy of women without voice and agency.[72] The metaphorical fragmentation of the women's bodies and experiences is explicitly connected with "approximately thirty tape cassettes" found in no specific order[73] and edited by Professors Pieixoto and Wade,[74] two male historians, two hundred years later.

A final note about the narrative editors of *The Handmaid's Tale* is warranted here, as they form a significant point of contact with Judges: in both books, the editors' framework is patriarchal, and they speak about the degeneration of society and how this moral decline is mirrored in its treatment of women. The ultimate irony of *The Handmaid's Tale* is that it is revealed at the end that what we thought was a genuine female voice is in fact a reconstructed narrative originally made up of fragments. Doubts

68 "One detaches oneself. One describes" (Atwood 1996, 102).

69 Atwood 1996, 104.

70 "I am alive in my skin" (Atwood 1996, 269) contrasting with "I lie there like a dead bird" (page 263). See Scarano D'Antonio 2021, 592.

71 Atwood 1996, 275.

72 Scarano D'Antonio 2021, 595.

73 Atwood 1996, 309.

74 They are "instrumental in transcription, annotations, and publication" (Atwood 1996, 300).

as to the authenticity of her voice in light of what the reader now knows to be an edited text are compounded by the word play in the name of the university hosting the conference in the *Historical Notes*, "Denay, Nunavit",[75] or "Deny none of it". In the fiction frame, we have been reading a story authored by men,[76] relegating the experience of the anonymous women's voice to a historical footnote.[77]

Finally, where is God in both the hypotext and the hypertext? This question stands in sharp relief in the two narratives. God is not consulted in either the book of Judges or *The Handmaid's Tale*. The authority of the Judges and of the Commanders is nowhere bestowed or indeed ratified by God. In Judges 20–21 the men tie themselves into knots over ill-judged vows and curses. They go into battle against their own, only consulting the deity after they have marched against the Benjaminites and lost the battle, illustrating that the men had done what was right in their eyes, not the deity's (20:23).[78] "Do you think God listens to these machines?",[79] Ofglen asks her companion as they pass by the Soul Scrolls, a chain of stores that prints out five types of prayers, introducing an ironic critique of a fundamentalist regime that manipulates scripture to its own end and does not consult God. Violence against women is what happens when God is not consulted. Reading *The Handmaid's Tale* as a palimpsest of Judges 19–21 exposes the horrors faced by the women and gives voice to the experience of the handmaids. It also underlines the violence perpetrated against women in our own time.

Writing, Erasing, Rewriting and Uncovering

By reading *The Handmaid's Tale* as a palimpsest of the Bible, a range of hermeneutical strategies have been uncovered: while the Bible is decontextualised, it is not completely erased, retaining many echoes, truncated verses, misreadings, and revisionist, subversive and satirical re-readings. As an imaginary (and not so imaginary) exercise in what happens when the Bible is used as legitimation for reinforcing oppressive power structures, the hy-

75 Atwood 1996, 307.

76 This contributes to Offred's ultimate voicelessness. See Landis 2018, 93.

77 Historico-criticism has similarly offered a critique of the times of the Judges but without engaging with the brutal treatment of women (Gunn 2005, 272).

78 Schneider 2000, 278.

79 Atwood 1996, 173.

pertext subverts scriptures and functions as a warning against monologic interpretation. As such it is also a call to political awareness. As a protest, it is a warning against uncritical acceptance of both biblical texts and their reception in history. In its questioning of scriptural and political authority, *The Handmaid's Tale* reimagines the experience of silenced and oppressed women in a way that offers hope and life.

Above all, reading Atwood's novel as palimpsest also causes us to pay attention to the present erasure of culture as expressed in a variety of human experiences. The monologic constructed biblical discourse ironically leaves out the life-giving message of the Torah and the ideal of social justice embedded in the covenant. Instead, it offers a ruthless and satiric narrative constructed solely to support a patriarchal, monolithic and monologic culture determined to keep strict and hierarchical boundaries between genders. Indeed "hope" and "love" have been left out, leaving only a faint "faith" in the process of erasure.[80] In weaving biblical hypotexts through a richly reimagined narrative, Offred's story calls us to "listen to whatever has been silenced and is clamouring to be heard".[81] It invites us to question, re-evaluate and reappropriate creatively the biblical stories for our times, a process that is open and never-ending. It is fitting to end with Margaret Atwood's own words: "The dead may guard the treasure, but it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more – which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change."[82] And so we too "step up, into the darkness within; or else the light".[83] The choice is ours.

Bibliography

Atwood, Margaret, 1996, *The Handmaid's Tale*, London: Vintage.

Atwood, Margaret, 2002, *Negotiating with the Dead. A Writer on Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

de Beauvoir, Simone, 1952, *The Second Sex*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Bertrand, Ingrid, 2020, *Biblical Women in Contemporary Novels in English. From Margaret Atwood to Jenny Diski*, Leiden/Boston: Brill.

80 See 1 Cor. 13:13 "And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love."

81 Tan 2009, 105.

82 Atwood 2002, 178.

83 Atwood 1996, 303.

Brenner, Athalya, 1999, Jezebel: Bible, in: *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, 31 December 1999, Jewish Women's Archive, http://tinyurl.com/4hnf3udf [accessed 20 August 2023].
Christou, Maria, 2016, A Politics of Auto-Cannibalism: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Literature and Theology*, 30, 4, 410–425.
Cixous, Hélène, 1976, The Laugh of the Medusa, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1, 4, 875–893.
Clifton, Bruno John, 2022, *Family and Identity in the Book of Judges*, Paderborn: Brill Schöningh.
Collins Online Dictionary 2023, http://tinyurl.com/3jrpsmvc [accessed 10 August 2023].
Dvorák, Marta, 2006, Margaret Atwood's Humor, in: Howells, Coral Ann (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 124–140.
Exum, Jo Cheryl, 2012, Judges: Encoded Messages to Women, in: Schottroff, Luise / Wacker, Marie-Theres (eds.), *Feminist Biblical Interpretation. A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 112–127.
Fewell, Dana Nolan, 1992, *Judges*, London: SPCK, 67–77.
Filipczak, Dorota, 1993, Is There No Balm in Gilead? Biblical Intertext in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Literature and Theology*, 7, 2, 171–185.
Genette, Gerard, 1997, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
Gunn, David M., 2005, *Judges*, Oxford: Blackwell.
Ketcham, Christopher, 2019, Gilead as Palimpsest, in: Robison-Greene, Rachel (ed.), *The Handmaid's Tale and Philosophy: A Womb of One's Own*, Chicago: Open Court, 147–156.
Landis, Courtney, 2018, A Woman's Place is in the Resistance: Self, Narrative, and Performative Femininity as Subversion and Weapon in *The Handmaid's Tale*, MA Thesis, Millersville University of Pennsylvania, http://tinyurl.com/3dnbwwfh [accessed 31 August 2023].
Larson, Janet J., 1989, Margaret Atwood and the Future of Prophecy, *Religion and Literature*, 21, 1, 27–61.
Lawson, Janet Karsten, 1987, Margaret Atwood's Testaments: Resisting the Gilead Within, *Christian Century*, 496, http://tinyurl.com/28zr9tr9 [accessed 20 June 2023].
Marx, Karl, 1933 [1875], *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, London: Martin Lawrence.
McCrossin, Trip, 2019, From *The Handmaid's Tale* to *The Handmaids' Tale*, in: Robison-Greene, Rachel (ed.), *The Handmaid's Tale and Philosophy: A Womb of One's Own*, Chicago: Open Court, 91–107.
Munro Prescott, Heather, 2019, You Don't Know What We Had to Go Through. Feminist Generations in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in: Goldie, Janis L. / Ritzenhoff, Karen A. (eds.), *The Handmaid's Tale. Teaching Dystopia, Feminism, and Resistance across Disciplines and Borders*, Lanham, MD / Boulder, CO / London / New York: Lexington Books, 206–215.
Neufeld Redekop, Gloria, 1990, Let the Women Learn. 1 Timothy 2:8–15 Reconsidered, *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses,* 19, 2, 235–245.
Nordström, Dan Monssen, 2008, Religion, Sex and Language. Three Means of Gov-

ernmental Control in *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, Extended Essay, Department of Languages and Culture, Luleå University of Technology, Sweden, http://tinyurl.com/nhjy69zw [accessed 10 June 2023].

Scarano D'Antonio, Carla, 2021, *The Handmaid's Tale*: An Intertextual Transformation through Storytelling, *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 51, 4, 592–610.

Schneider, Tammi J., 2000, *Judges*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

Somacarrera, Pilar, 2006, Margaret Atwood on Questions of Power, in: Howells, Coral Ann (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 32–46.

Sugg, Katherine, 2019, Literary Narration, Complicity, and Political Dystopia in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, in: Goldie, Janis L. / Rizenhoff, Karen A. (eds.), *The Handmaid's Tale. Teaching Dystopia, Feminism, and Resistance across Disciplines and Borders,* Lanham, MD / Boulder, CO / London / New York: Lexington Books, 43–55.

Swindell, Anthony C., 2010, *Reworking the Bible. The Literary Reception-History of Fourteen Biblical Stories*, Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.

Tan, Quiyi, 2009, Textual Highjacks: Between the Book of Isaiah and *The Handmaid's Tale*, in: Hawkins, Benedix Beth (ed.), *Subverting Scriptures. Critical Reflections on the Use of the Bible,* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 95–108, http://tinyurl.com/2vvjwz4e [accessed 2 September 2023].

Bina Nir

Biblical Narratives in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Abstract

Through her dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Margaret Atwood fuels the debate surrounding the global plight of women. Atwood weaves many biblical concepts, names, and motifs relating to the status of women into the novel, with a particular focus on the concept of the handmaid, whose sole function is childbearing. Atwood thus warns against fundamentalist readings of the Bible and other canonical texts that are the foundations of our culture. In order to reach a fuller understanding of the contextual biblical sources of the novel, in this article I take an in-depth look at the biblical source of the name "Gilead", as Atwood chose to set her tale in the "Republic of Gilead". Furthermore, as the novel presents a radical social hierarchy among women based on their childbearing duties, I will also examine the biblical narratives foundational to the hegemonic male interpretation that gave rise, according to the novel, to this dystopian reality. In this terrifying novel, the transformation of women into childbearing handmaids is based both on the biblical story of the handmaids and on the proprietary relationship of men over women in the Bible. I argue that the novel's critical approach deconstructs the unspoken assumptions of a particular way of life.

Keywords

Handmaidens, Women, Atwood, Bible, Gilead, Social Hierarchy

Biography

Bina Nir completed her doctoral thesis in the Faculty of Humanities at Tel Aviv University. Since 2000, she has been a lecturer at Yezreel Valley College and Department Head of the Honors B.A. Program. Her research focuses on the interface of Western religions and contemporary cultures, specifically the genealogies of cultural constructs rooted in the Western religions in areas such as perceptions of time, judgement, leadership, and success and failure. Her book *Failure of Success* [in Hebrew] was published by Resling Press in 2016.

DOI: 10.25364/05.10:2024.1.4

Introduction

As I write these lines, women wearing red cloaks and white wimples that hide their faces have taken to the streets of the State of Israel to protest impending judicial reform that they believe will worsen the situation for women. Their choice of dress alludes to the Canadian author Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985. In this novel, Atwood paints a radical picture of the future by employing many elements from our cultural past and present. When asked in 2015 whether the book is more relevant today than when published, Atwood responded that many people, especially in the United States, believe that it is more relevant now and noted that the novel's title was cited on social media in the last elections in 2012. She pointed out that absolutist regimes have generally expressed excessive interest in women's procreative powers.[1]

We need to ask ourselves whether it is reasonable to conduct a scholarly conversation about the status of women in the 21st century using a fictional work as a springboard for that discussion. Usually, such political questions are debated in forums dedicated to political or social thought and are not the province of scholars of literature.[2] According to Michael Keren, literature should be seen as a stage in the development and distillation of political ideas that rally the masses or, at least, infuse them with a sense of values.[3] As such, this literature deepens our engagement with contemporary issues even if it contradicts reality. Keren maintains that we must facilitate a productive dialogue between abstract theory and literature.[4] Paul Dolan proposes that it is not enough for politics to be viewed through the eyes of political scientists, historians, and even philosophers. In his estimation, the novel provides us with its own special kind of knowledge – "the unconscious experience of politics as a human, moral, psychological, and aesthetic phenomenon".[5] Atwood does not agree with the widespread assumption that authors ought to be political actors or that they are so anyway, but she does believe that many authors confront the political system just as the boy revealed the emperor's lack of clothes. They point to the naked truth. A sign

1 The article *Reflections on the Story of a Slave Girl* was written in 2015 but was published as a collection of articles in 2022; see Atwood 2022, 284.

2 Keren 1999, 11.

3 Keren 2015, 7–16.

4 Keren 2015, 7–16.

5 Dolan 1976, 3.

of a society that is progressing toward liberty is that space is preserved for the human imagination and voice. For this reason, she believes that writing is of the utmost importance.[6]

By taking matters to the extreme, Atwood's dystopian novel becomes a moral cautionary tale, necessary because of humanity's great propensity for acclimation: "Truly amazing what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations."[7] The story takes place in the not-too-distant future, in which radical Protestant Christians foment a revolution and establish the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic military dictatorship located on the edge of what was once the United States of America. "That's how they were able to do it, in the way they did, all at once, without anyone knowing beforehand [...] That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn't even any rioting in the streets [...] The thing to do, they said, was to continue as usual."[8] In this society, people are separated based on status and gender, and they are required to dress in clothing signaling their function in society. During the chaos that had been created by a second American civil war, the revolutionaries took power and instituted a new world order based on the Old Testament and ultra-conservative values. The women were returned to the "normal" status that had been theirs since the dawn of time, as handmaids dedicated to childbearing – "The Commander said [...] all we've done is return things to Nature's norm."[9]

The leaders in *The Handmaid's Tale* pore over the Bible trying to find what they take to be useful instruction. The story is told from the point of view of an educated woman named Offred, who finds herself wearing a wimple and occupying the new status of a handmaid, serving as a concubine used for reproductive purposes by the men of the ruling class: "This way they're protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace."[10] In her epilogue, the author explains why it is necessary to learn about women's status from literary works and not just academic scholarship. She describes an academic symposium that takes place after the fall of the Gileadite regime, at which Professor Pieixoto – who along with his colleague Professor Knotly Wade discovered Offred's tapes in a sealed iron chest and transcribed them – speaks.

6 Atwood 2010, 58–63.
7 Atwood 1985, 273.
8 Atwood 1985, 172.
9 Atwood 1985, 222.
10 Atwood 1985, 221.

The topic of the symposium is "Problems of Authentication in Reference to the Handmaid's Tale".[11] The fact that Atwood chose to conclude the book with this academic symposium attests to her criticism of the academic discussion of women's rights that are done out of distance and alienation.

In his lecture, Professor Pieixoto tells the story in a manner entirely devoid of empathy, as he objectively – as it were – analyses the Gileadite Period:

> In my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans. Surely, we have learned by now that such judgments are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (Applause).[12]

In her critique of the academic world, Atwood ascribes to it detachment, remoteness, and even hypocrisy, which, as Michael Keren notes, characterize those who deal with the problems of others and are certain that they will never find themselves in such circumstances.[13]

Atwood identifies her work *The Handmaid's Tale* as a classic dystopia, for which she partly drew inspiration from George Orwell's *1984*.[14] The author notes that much has been written about the "natural" inferiority of women, mainly by philosophers and founders of religions upon whose ideas Western society is based. Atwood sought to write a dystopia from a female perspective.[15] The crux of the author's criticism is male interpretation of the biblical text, which she associates in the novel with the ruling group in the Republic of Gilead. She contends that the background for the novel was drawn from a variety of sources, not a few of which come from recent history, such as the Puritan era in New England, Ceaușescu's dictatorship in Romania, the policy of polygamy for SS men, and the junta period in Argentina. An additional influence is, of course, the Bible, that complex creation which began as a collection of scrolls written in different periods by different authors and later became one book containing many conflicting messages. It conveys support

11 Atwood 1985, 302.
12 Atwood 1985, 303.
13 Keren 1999, 90–91.
14 Atwood 2022, 283.
15 Atwood 2022, 281.

for widows, orphans, the poor, and slaves, along with the destruction of enemies, including curses borne for generations. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the ostensible literal interpretation of the Bible serves to control women for political reasons.[16]

The book addresses a slew of questions fundamental to feminism: relationships between women, the reproductive role and the ability to procreate, sexuality, subjugation, violence against women and opposition to it, and a series of forewarnings that we must heed.[17] Atwood calls upon all of us not to ignore the systemic unfairness, violence, and discrimination against women:

> We lived, as usual, by ignoring […] Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it. There were stories in the newspapers of course […] but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew […] We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print.[18]

Atwood weaves many biblical concepts, names, and motifs relating to the status of women into the novel, with a particular focus on the concept of the handmaid, whose sole function is childbearing. The role of the Bible in the Republic of Gilead is not clear. The book itself is locked in a special wooden box, becoming a totem of the totalitarian system in every household. Not everyone has access to it. Daily life in the state is based on principles claimed by its founders to be rooted in the biblical model. The society is controlled by a male elite that relies on the precedents of the patriarchal history of Israel and the first letter to Timothy by Paul.[19] The author returns from the fictional future to the Christian-Jewish past from which Western culture developed and reminds us that this past, with its potential for extreme interpretations, has not vanished entirely. It remains present in the culture.

In this article, I now delve into the radical interpretation of the Bible adopted by the leadership of the Republic of Gilead, and into the narratives

16 Atwood 2022, 282.
17 Williamson 2017, 261.
18 Atwood 1985, 56.
19 Filipczak 1993, 171.

and motifs that appear in the biblical text and function as the background to this story, while always keeping in mind the critical understanding that arises from the interweaving of these motifs.

When we discuss the status of women in the Bible, we must be careful not to generalize, because the biblical narrative contains a panoply of diverse voices. We discover in the Bible two parallel phenomena, a patriarchal social structure in the children of Israel's families and alongside it, a group of female leaders and leading women in ancient Israelite society. In general, we find a small but diverse group of women in biblical literature: seductresses (Eve), handmaids (Hagar, Bilhah, Zilpah), betrayers (Delilah), the homicidal Jezebel, and along with them prophetesses (Miriam, Huldah) and women who filled significant societal and public roles and served as symbols of might, wisdom, and courage (Shifrah and Puah, Deborah and Yael, Ruth and Naomi, and more).[20]

The power dynamics between man and woman are delineated at the very beginning of the biblical text and then undergo changes and fluctuations. For this reason, as the author warns us, they are subject to a wide range of interpretations.[21] In the first story of creation, man and woman are portrayed as equals – both are created in the image of God, and both are given dominion over the Earth and its creatures:

> Then God said, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness […]" So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Gen. 1:26–28; JPS (1985), used throughout)

However, the second creation story differs: Adam is created first, from the earth, and woman is only created after neither the beasts of the field nor the birds of the sky were found suitable as "helper" (Gen. 2:20). Woman is then created to fill the deficiency of man.[22] The name given to her by Adam reflects her origin:

20 Shenhar 2008, 11–13.

21 Atwood 2022, 254–255.

22 Zakowitz 1987, 14–32.

> And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken" (Gen. 2:22–23)

The lesson drawn from this story in the New Testament is even more pronounced: "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve" (1 Tim. 2:11–13, NRSV, rev. edn).

Nevertheless, man's authority over woman is not absolute, as he leaves "his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). However, as the story unfolds, the woman tempts her husband to eat from the forbidden fruit, and as part of her punishment, man is given dominion over her: "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16).

The biblical text undoubtedly reflects the particular social arrangement of the era in which it was formed. When discussing the stories of Sarah and Hagar, Leah and Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah, among others, Athalya Brenner notes that these are women in pairs, married or living under the legal protection of one male figure.[23] This complex arrangement undoubtedly signifies the existence of a patriarchal-polygamous society, replete with traditional domestic challenges inherent in such a situation for the individuals involved. Each pair of women is defined as rivals linked by both familial ties and societal competition, as if there were no alternative social behavior patterns for them in such a situation.[24]

Judith Plaskow writes of the status of women in Jewish sources, "Women's specific disabilities are symptoms of a far more basic problem in that the Otherness of women is embedded in the central categories of Jewish thought."[25] Even after they have been secularized and are no longer connected to the religious world they came from, deep structures remain in a culture. When certain concepts appear frequently in canonical literature such as the Bible and last for a long time, they attest to psychological, societal, and cultural structures used by individuals and groups to guide their behavior.[26] Atwood

23 Brenner 1986, 259.
24 Brenner 1986, 258–259.
25 Plaskow 2005, 785.
26 Nir 2016, 11.

calls upon us to return to the biblical roots of Western culture and to evaluate the extreme interpretations that have been given to these texts over the generations in the different traditions. Engaging in such contemplation will enable us to take a fresh look at our ideological positions and accept responsibility for them.[27] As psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung argued, when a "Weltanschauung" is deeply rooted in religious experience, it has an innate ability to maintain itself within the secular experience.[28]

Gilead

The novel takes place in the Republic of Gilead. The Bible tells us that Jephthah the Gileadite was the son of a prostitute, so his brothers, the sons of his father's legitimate wife, drove him away from the house of his father, Gilead.[29] In the biblical narratives, the son of an illegitimate wife invariably possesses an inferior status to that of the sons of the legitimate wife. After Jephthah is banished from his home, he journeys north to the Land of Tob, on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. There, an assortment of "low" men coalesce around him and he gains notoriety as a successful brigand chief.[30] When the Ammonites wage war on the Gileadites, the elders of Gilead are forced to ask Jephthah to become their chieftain, to save them from the Ammonites. Jephthah only grants their request when they agree to make him the lord of all the inhabitants of Gilead.[31] He then wages war against the Ammonites and prevails.

Before he goes off to war, Jephthah makes a promise: "And Jephthah made the following vow to God: 'If you deliver the Ammonites into my hands, then whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me on my safe return from the Ammonites shall be God's and shall be offered by me as a burnt offering'" (Judg. 11:30–31). However, when he returns home after his victory:

> there was his daughter coming out to meet him, with hand drum and dance! She was an only child; he had no other son or daughter. On seeing her, he rent his clothes and said, "Alas, daughter! You have brought me

27 Foucault 1977, 152.
28 Jung 1987.
29 Judges 11:1–2.
30 Judges 11:3.
31 Judges 11:4–10.

low; you have become my troubler! For I have uttered a vow to God and I cannot retract." (Judg. 11:34–35)

His daughter, unaware of his vow, had innocently come out to greet her father, playing a musical instrument and dancing, and thus had sealed her fate. Jephthah's daughter understands that a vow made to God cannot be annulled even when its fulfillment requires human sacrifice.[32]

Jephthah allows his daughter one last request:

> He let her go for two months, and she and her companions went and bewailed her maidenhood upon the hills. After two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. She had never known a man. So it became a custom in Israel for the maidens of Israel to go every year, for four days in the year, and chant dirges for the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite. (Judg. 11:38–40)

In mourning his daughter, Jephthah mainly relates to the fact that "she had never known a man", and he therefore weeps for her "maidenhood". Biblical women are often described as fertile, virginal, or barren. In Atwood's Gileadite society, the language of male infertility has been excised from the lexicon: "There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law."[33] Fertility is the women's domain – they are either fruitful or barren. The barren women are deemed "Unwomen" and sent to the Colonies, where the average life expectancy is three years: "Go to the Colonies […] With the Unwomen, and starve to death."[34] Aliza Shenhar points out that in the Bible as well, we find no sterile men. For the biblical narrator, barrenness is always presumed to be the woman's fault.[35]

The biblical narrator expresses no admiration for Jephthah's daughter's obedience, for her willingness to accede to the demands of her society. For generations, obedience has been deemed a virtuous, female quality. This quality is also demanded of the women in the Gileadite Republic, taken to an extreme: "Yes, ma'am, I said again, forgetting. They used to have dolls, for

32 Judges 11:36–37.
33 Atwood 1985, 74.
34 Atwood 1985, 10.
35 Shenhar 2011, 18.

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."[36]

Some believe that the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter hints at the ancient practice of consecrating virgins for cultic use.[37] Jephthah makes no mention of the tragedy befalling his daughter; rather, he sees the tragedy as his own, and he even blames her for coming out to greet him when he returns victorious. The link between the "Republic of Gilead" – the name Atwood chose for her fictional country where women have been turned into handmaids – and the original biblical Gilead is clear. Jephthah was driven from his father's home in Gilead because his mother was a prostitute and the hierarchy of sons is based on their female progenitors' hierarchy. Jephthah sacrifices his daughter in much the same way that all the women in Gilead were sacrificed – they lost their freedom and became childbearing handmaids. Jephthah's daughter laments that "she never knew a man". To know a man and bear his child is the primary purpose of the Gileadite women in the novel.

Social Hierarchy—The Biblical Foundations

The Bible portrays creation as fundamentally hierarchical in multiple domains. God is at the top of the ladder, distinct and superior to all the other deities: "You shall have no other gods besides Me" (Exod. 20:3). On the second rung is humanity, the crowning glory of creation. The Western tradition, based on biblical cosmology, deems human beings superior to all other creatures. This conceptual paradigm is evident in Descartes – human beings are the crowning glory of creation and God granted them freedom of choice or a will that is comprehensive and perfect enough.[38] The rest of the ladder distinguishes between human beings – the Chosen People and the other nations, along with particular individuals selected by God. The Bible makes many references to the concept of the Chosen People, for instance, "of all the peoples on earth the Lord your God chose you to be His treasured people " (Deut. 7:6).

The notion of chosenness also occurs in the Bible in the context of tribes and other groups. God distinguishes the tribe of Levi from the other tribes: "I hereby take the Levites from among the Israelites" (Num. 3:12). The

36 Atwood 1985, 16.

37 Shenhar 2011, 187–189.

38 Descartes 2001, 97–103.

priests are chosen from the already-chosen Levite tribe: "Take a [separate] census of the Kohathites among the Levites, by the clans of their ancestral houses" (Num. 4:2). Aaron the priest, from whom all subsequent Israelite priests descend, is the son of Amram the son of Kehat the son of Levi. Their chosenness destines them "to perform tasks for the Tent of Meeting. This is the responsibility of the Kohathites in the Tent of Meeting: the most sacred objects" (Num. 4:3–4). In the Bible, individuals are also described as chosen. God's choice of an individual may well be a source of joy to the chosen one, but if they perceive their chosenness as deserved, that hubris will endanger both them and their surroundings.[39]

As we have noted, the Bible places humanity at the pinnacle of creation, above all of nature. In the creation story, human beings receive divine permission to conquer and master nature: we recall that "God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth'" (Gen. 1:28). In the West, humanity's relationship with nature's other living creatures is one of mastery.[40] Sigmund Freud referred to this sense of superiority over all other living creatures that humanity in the West had arrogated to itself as humanity's delusion of grandeur.[41]

Peter Singer, Elizabeth Fisher, and others have argued that women's subjugation to the domination of men ultimately stems from two factors: (1) the hierarchical assumption that humanity has mastery over the animals and (2) the domestication of the animals. Fisher maintains that the vertical hierarchical structure that situated the human master above the animals fueled humanity's tendency to cruelty and prepared the human psyche for enslaving human beings. Denying animals rights accelerated the process of depriving human beings of their rights.[42] John Stuart Mill, the nineteenth-century philosopher, argued that according to England's ancient laws, the man is considered his wife's master. Mill believed that the status of women in the English law of his day was worse than that of slaves. There are almost no legal systems, including Roman law, in which a slave is expected to work all day and at any given moment as women are expected to do.[43]

39 Schweid 2004, 165.

40 Luria 2007, 64.

41 Cited in Patterson 2006, 17.

42 Fisher 1979, 190–192; Singer 1998, 3–36.

43 John Stuart Mill 2009, 17.

In Gileadite society, women are divided into two basic hierarchical categories: "legitimate women" and "illegitimate women", with the latter living outside of mainstream society. The legitimate women include the wives of the commanders at the top of the women's hierarchical structure; the handmaids, fertile women whose social function is to bear the commanders' children in place of their wives ("We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices"[44]); and the aunts, the women tasked with training the handmaids. These aunts work to further the causes of religion and the regime, and they preach the justice of the social order: "They can hit us, there's Scriptural precedent."[45] The illegitimate women are composed of barren women, widows, feminists, lesbians, nuns, and any woman who opposes the regime or the social order: they are all women who cannot be assimilated into Gilead's regimented, gendered division. Handmaids who do not manage to give birth after three two-year placements join the ranks of illegitimate women. Jezebels are women who have been forced into prostitution and function as entertainers for the male elite. They are usually attractive and well-educated women who have not managed to adapt to the handmaid role. They have been sterilized – a process denied the other women. They work in brothels, unofficially run by the government, and they are named for the biblical Queen Jezebel: "it doesn't matter what sort of vice we get up to".[46]

The Jezebels are talented and corrupt, like their biblical namesake. The biblical Jezebel championed the cult of Baal in Israel. She is portrayed as a domineering first lady who overshadowed and negatively influenced her husband: "Indeed, there never was anyone like Ahab, who committed himself to doing what was displeasing to the Lord, at the instigation of his wife Jezebel" (1 Kgs. 21:25).

However, Jezebel found herself with a forceful adversary in Elijah the prophet. In response, she hunted him without mercy, forcing him to flee across the border into neighboring countries. Biblical women are rarely accorded the kind of glorious death in the spotlight that Jezebel got.[47] The author of the Book of Kings does not harbor any affection for Jezebel; however, he does portray her as a woman who knew how to die like a queen. Even though Jezebel was aware that she was going to die and that Jehu had

44 Atwood 1985, 136.
45 Atwood 1985, 16.
46 Atwood 1985, 252.
47 2 Kgs. 9:30–37.

already killed her son the king, she wished to look her best: "When Jezebel heard of it, she painted her eyes with kohl and dressed her hair, and she looked out of the window" (2 Kgs. 9:30). Her brief retort to Jehu also drips with mockery: "Is all well, Zimri, murderer of your master?" (2 Kgs. 9:31), alluding to Jehu's murderousness and expressing her desire for his imminent downfall – Zimri ruled for seven days before he was murdered in turn.[48] However, the narrator also pays back Jezebel measure-for-measure for her pride. At Jehu's command, the eunuchs throw Jezebel out of the window, "They threw her down; and her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses, and they trampled her" (2 Kgs. 9:33), and her flesh was consumed by the dogs, fulfilling Elijah's prophecy, "The dogs shall devour the flesh of Jezebel in the field of Jezreel" (2 Kgs. 9:36).

Women as Childbearing Handmaids in the Bible

In the Gileadite Republic, powerful men use women's bodies as tools to further their own political and personal ends. This radical approach, based on the objectification of women as bodies and as sexual objects through the use of power, including rape, appears in the Bible several times: the concubine in Gibeah,[49] the rape of Tamar,[50] and the case of Dinah – "Now Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her and disgraced her" (Gen. 34:1–2). The fact that Shechem, the rapist, having lain with Dinah and disgraced her, falls in love with her prevents us from painting him in an exclusively negative light. Our feelings toward Shechem become more ambivalent, and since his request to marry Dinah is in accord with biblical law, we become somewhat more forgiving of the cultural milieu in which he grew up.[51] Susanne Scholz argues that rape was an element of the power structures of the period.[52]

Dinah is silent, and when the men from her family take responsibility for handling the affair, she is referred to as the "daughter of Jacob". Hamor,

48 1 Kgs. 16:15.
49 Judg. 19–21.
50 Sam. 2:13.
51 Shenhar 2011, 10–103; Elboim 2022, 63–72.
52 Scholz 2017, 164–166.

Shechem's father, comes with his son to request Dinah's hand in marriage; however, he does not mention the disgraceful act his son perpetrated on Dinah and he expresses no regret.[53] This refusal to even acknowledge the despicable act adds insult to injury and attests to the attitude toward women and to how much men of status and power permit themselves.[54] Jacob's sons propose that the Hivites circumcise themselves to unite with the Hebrews and become one people. They do so.

> On the third day, when they were in pain, Simeon and Levi, two of Jacob's sons, brothers of Dinah, took each his sword, came upon the city unmolested, and slew all the males […] The other sons of Jacob […] plundered the town, because their sister had been defiled […] Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites […] But they answered, "Should our sister be treated like a whore?" (Gen. 34:25–31)

Women in Gileadite society have no rights and they are not allowed to leave the environs of the house. "Men highly placed in the regime were thus able to pick and choose among women who had demonstrated their reproductive fitness by having produced one or more healthy children."[55] Because fertility and the birth rate in the population had fallen steeply due to environmental factors – "plummeting Caucasian birth rates […] not only in Gilead"[56] – the government created the handmaids as a new class of women whose role was to bear children for the elite male members of society. The primary purpose of every woman is childbearing. "I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely."[57]

Offred, the hero of the story, who records a memoir about her life in the Gileadite Republic, tells us about the biblical verse that has been imprinted on the women's consciousnesses to ensure they understand the purpose of their lives.

53 Sternberg 1973, 193–231.
54 Shenhar 2011, 105.
55 Atwood 1985, 306.
56 Atwood 1985, 306.
57 Atwood 1985, 62–63.

> "You want a baby, don't you?" "Yes," I say. It's true, and I don't ask why, because I know. *Give me children, or else I die*.[58] There's more than one meaning to it.[59]
>
> It's the usual story … God to Adam, God to Noah. Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. Then comes the mouldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Center. *Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.* And so on and so forth. We had it read to us every breakfast […][60]

When the story begins, Offred has just been consigned to her third handmaid position. Every month at the appropriate time during her menstrual cycle, a religious ceremony is performed in which the Commander has sex with Offred while her head rests between the legs of Serena, his wife. At the beginning of the ceremony, the man, in this case the Commander, declares, "'And Leah said, God hath given me my hire, because I have given my maiden to my husband,' says the Commander […] 'Now we will have a moment of silent prayer,' says the Commander. 'We will ask for a blessing, and for success in all our ventures.'"[61] The regime claims that the ceremony is based on Sarah's instruction to her husband, Abraham, in Genesis: "And Sarai said to Abram, 'Look, the Lord has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her'" (Gen. 16:2), and it attributes the positioning of the women during the ceremony to another verse uttered by Rachel: "She said, 'Here is my maid Bilhah. Consort with her, that she may bear on my knees and that through her I too may have children'" (Gen. 30:3). Serena is suspected of being barren, even though her own and her husband's sexual histories indicate that he is the sterile one. As we have noted, the childbearing-sanctifying regime only permits the assumption of female infertility. Given the circumstances, Serena is forced to accept a marriage in which the Commander is assigned a handmaid and she must be present when he has intercourse with the handmaid. (Knowing that the Commander is sterile, Serena encourages Offred to sleep with Nick, the driver, so that Offred can conceive and bear a child.)

58 These words are from Genesis 30:1, said by Rachel to her husband, Jacob.

59 Atwood 1985, 61.

60 Atwood 1985, 89.

61 Atwood 1985, 91.

Every handmaid is degraded, silenced, subjugated, inferior, and obedient. The story of the Gileadite Republic's handmaids is based, although taken to an extreme, on the biblical handmaid narratives. The voice of the biblical Hagar goes unheard.[62] She is the repressed Other of society, her voice insignificant. Sarah refers to Hagar as a "handmaid", without mentioning her by name, and Hagar's sole responsibility is to resolve the discrepancy between Sarah's infertility and Abraham's fertility. Hagar is a surrogate mother, much like Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid, whom the barren Rachel gave to Jacob. After Bilhah has given birth to a child conceived with Jacob, Rachel declares, "And [He has] given me a son" (Gen. 30:6). Hagar suffers, flees, and while pregnant sets off alone on a lonely road. There, in the wilderness, an angel of the Lord finds her and asks, "'Hagar, handmaid of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?' And she said, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.'" (Gen. 16:8). Even when questioning Hagar, the angel emphasizes her status as Sarai's handmaid. The expectant mother is supposed to relinquish her independence and suffer in order to guarantee her son's future.

The Bible and Men as Masters Possessing Women

Offred lives in the first generation of the Gileadite Republic, so she still remembers life before the revolution. She uses a Dictaphone to record her memoirs, telling of her existence as a sex slave whose role in life is to bear a child for a commander in the new regime and his wife. The name "Offred" is a slave name, meaning "of Fred", denoting the handmaid's status as the possession of the particular man she is consigned to at any given time. "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden […] I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day […] Like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past."[63] Atwood bases her protagonist on the biblical rendering of quite a few women who lived in the shadows of men and sometimes went completely unmentioned.

As we have noted, the second creation story in Genesis relates that man was created first, from the earth, while woman was created second, as a

62 Shenhar 2011, 19.

63 Atwood 1985, 84.

partner who will serve man as his helper (Gen. 2:18). Gileadite ideology is founded on this creation story: "For Adam was first formed, then Eve."[64] The biblical creation story is the only ancient creation story in which a male creator created the world all by himself, without a mate. This fact has a profound impact on women's status in Scripture, and on the status of the female in the West as history unfolds.[65]

Sarah, staying true to the prevailing custom in the Ancient Near East, called her husband *adoni*, my master: "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment – with my master so old?" (Gen. 18:12). The Bible relates that King Abimelech of Gerar "took" Sarah for a wife: "So King Abimelech of Gerar sent and had Sarah taken to him. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, 'You are to die because of the woman that you have taken, for she is a married woman.' Now Abimelech had not approached her" (Gen. 20:2–3). And when Sarah gave birth to Isaac, she bore a son to Abraham – "Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken. Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had born him, the name of Isaac" (Gen. 21:2–3). The Bible refers to Jephthah, the Gileadite's daughter, only as "daughter of Jephthah" (Judg. 11:30–40). Lot's wife is referred to only in relation to her husband, as "Lot's wife", and that only once, during the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah: "Lot's wife looked back, and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt" (Gen. 19:26). We do not know Noah's wife's name. The names of Jacob's daughters-in-law go unmentioned, except for that of Judah's wife, "Bat-Shua" (literally, the daughter of Shua). Not only is the name of Jephthah's daughter absent, but so too is the name of her mother. While there are exceptional cases where women are named, in these instances there is always a reason related to the role they play in the story.[66]

Atwood creates a radical regime that ranks women by their fertility. From time immemorial the patriarchy has defined women by their bodies, as receptacles that function as sexual objects and as childbearing vessels.[67] The biblical narrative places women at the center of the story when they are about to give birth to a son – only then are they worthy of our full attention. In Moses' birth and early childhood story, his father's role is mar-

64 Atwood 1985, 223.
65 Ankori/Ezrahi 2004, 196.
66 Zakowitz 1987, 14–32.
67 Nardi 2007; Grant 1988.

ginalized entirely to the initial act of marriage: "A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman" (Exod. 2:1). From that point on, the protagonists are all women: his mother hides him and is later hired to be his wet nurse, and his sister watches from afar when he is set adrift on the Nile, "And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him" (Exod. 2:4). His sister mediates between Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter – also referred to as the king's daughter – who adopts Moses and names him: "She named him Moses, explaining, 'I drew him out of the water'" (Exod. 2:10).

If a woman should happen to defeat a man on the field of battle, the dishonor is crushing. Thus the story of Abimelech: "a woman dropped an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and cracked his skull. He immediately cried out to his attendant, his arms-bearer, 'Draw your dagger and finish me off, that they may not say of me, "A woman killed him!"' So his attendant stabbed him, and he died" (Judg. 9:53–54).

Unfortunately, having his armor-bearer deal the death blow did not remove the eternal stain on his honor, for we find Joab, King David's military chief of staff referring to the incident derisively many years later: "Who struck down Abimelech son of Jerubbesheth? Was it not a woman who dropped an upper millstone on him from the wall at Thebez, from which he died?" (2 Sam. 11:21).

In the Hebrew Bible we find undeniable hints of a primordial status of the feminine, even though, as a rule, the masculine Hebrew Bible rejected the feminine completely. Indeed, the Hebrew Bible's spiritual break from the matriarchy was its greatest achievement, although it had to pay a price: relinquishing the feminine and the understanding of it.[68] The ancient Babylonian and Assyrian creation stories describe a struggle between the masculine and the feminine and the patriarchy's victory. The transition to a patriarchal order occurred gradually, and by the time the era was reached in which humanity began transcribing its laws and myths, the patriarchy was firmly established and the men were the ones writing the legal code,[69] in which the woman is defined and distinguished in terms of her relationship to the man. She is secondary and is not crucial – she is the Other.[70]

68 Ankori/Ezrahi 2004, 199–201.

69 De Beauvoir 2001, 114–115.

70 Brisson 2001, 419.

Among the Hebrews in the biblical period, the head of the family was polygamous, and he was permitted to divorce his wives at will. The young bride was given to her mate in her youth (while still a virgin) and was bound to a life of childbearing and domestic chores. Many of the Ancient Near Eastern nations possessed a levirate tradition. The Laws of Hammurabi in Babylon were less severe and granted women certain rights. Relatively speaking, the Egyptian woman's lot was the best. The fundamental social unit was the couple, and the woman was considered to be connected to and a completion of the man. She could inherit and own property. Greek custom was similar to the Near Eastern nations, but the latter did not permit polygamy.[71]

According to Yair Zakowitz, the hyperfocus of the biblical authors on men led to the loss of earlier traditions about female figures.[72] The epilogue of the Book of Job sees no reason to name the sons Job had after God restored his good fortune, merely treating us to the succinct "and he had seven sons"; however, when it adds that he also had "three daughters", the narrator takes the unusual step of naming them: "The first he named Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. Nowhere in the land were women as beautiful as Job's daughters to be found" (Job 42:13–15). Doubtless, there is a rich tradition concealed behind this laconic verse. We may be able to glean some of this lost tradition from the apocryphal work *The Testament of Job*, which details the wondrous nature of Job's daughters in chapters 46 through 51.

Epilogue

Offred, Atwood's protagonist, says in her memoir, "I wish this story were different, I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier […] or about sudden realizations important to one's life, or even about sunsets, birds, rainstorms, or snow."[73] The reader's identification with the hero, who retells the story of her painful experiences in the first person, causes the reader to think about the status of women in the present and the past throughout the globe. As Offred shares, "'I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story […] But there is nothing I can do to change

71 De Beauvoir 2001, 121–126.

72 Zakowitz 1987.

73 Atwood 1985, 269.

it.'"[74] Gilead's architects were called "the sons of Jacob", but the minimal knowledge about the period was mostly gleaned from a journal written in code: "Wilfred Limpkin, one of the sociobiologists present. (As we know, the sociobiological theory of natural polygamy was used as a scientific justification for some of the odder practices of the regime, just as Darwinism was used by earlier ideologies)."[75] Atwood warns us not to allow our societies to resurrect ideological trends from the past that seem to be based on scientific theories, a phenomenon we are all too familiar with from the not-too-distant past.[76]

The feminist movement was born out of a sense that women were in distress and it was high time that the lot of women across the globe be improved through a combination of social activism and academic theory and thought. Atwood was well aware of the gap between feminist achievements and the actual plight of women around the world.[77] Women's rights are still often systematically and grotesquely violated. Many women still lack basic freedoms because, among other things, they lack the basic right to make their own decisions about their bodies and their sexuality. In many places in the world, the attainment of women's human rights still seems like a distant dream. This notwithstanding, women have certainly begun taking their rightful places in politics and society, a positive trend that should not be belittled. Concepts like gender equality and gender integration have become part of normative political discourse.[78]

Notwithstanding all the progress made in improving women's lives, the fundamental disparity between the sexes derives from the fact that we live in a society founded upon patriarchal values. Many of these patriarchal societal assumptions are so deeply rooted within society and are so deeply imprinted on both men and women that they go entirely unquestioned. Patriarchal culture forces women to define themselves via their bodies, in the best-case scenario as sexual objects and child-rearing vessels.[79] Tovi Browning argues that a sense of alienation from the feminine stems from a primal fear of the feminine that has been inculcated by diverse cultures

74 Atwood 1985, 269.
75 Atwood 1985, 308.
76 Atwood 2022, 250–253.
77 Keren 1999, 89.
78 Fogiel-Bijaou 2011.
79 Tamir 2007; Nardi 2007.

throughout the world for thousands of years.[80] Atwood wants to shine a spotlight on the biblical past which is foundational to Western culture. Her novel explicitly points out the dangerous possible interpretations of foundational principles from the biblical narrative that inspired the establishment of the Gileadite Republic, with emphasis placed on the handmaids' biblical stories. Atwood claims that the ancient biblical past resounds in our culture to this very day: "As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes."[81]

When we tell a story about the cultural past and the sources of a certain cultural phenomenon – in our case, the patriarchal attitude toward women – we learn about the present and are spurred to proactively create a different future. This is the type of criticism that Nietzsche promotes in "On the Genealogy of Morals", when he suggests that the primary purpose of his approach is to question the assumptions that go unquestioned in a certain cultural context. Human beings, according to Nietzsche, live historically – with an awareness of their past and with the reality of their having been conditioned by it.[82] "And now we realize how necessary it is for a human being looking back at the past to frequently opt for the third path, the critical one […] man needs to possess the strength, which he occasionally must use, to shatter and dissolve the past so that he may live, and this he accomplishes by putting it on trial, examining and questioning it harshly and ultimately convicting it."[83] Nietzsche suggests that we must put our cultural past on trial, just as Atwood chose to do in her novel when she indicted our historical attitude toward women – the very foundation of Western culture – by radically and terrifyingly fictionalizing it in a manner that urges us to *wake up!*

Bibliography

Ankori, Micah / Ezrahi, Ohad, 2004, *Besod Livyatan: Mahshevet Yisrael Bemabat Mitologi-Psihologi*, Ben Shemen: Modan.

Atwood, Margaret, 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale*, London: Vintage.

Atwood, Margaret, 2010, Don't Tell Us What to Write, *Index on Censorship* 39, 4, 58–63.

80 Browning 2003.

81 Atwood 1985, 314.

82 Nehamas 1994, 270–272.

83 Nietzsche 2000, 36.

Atwood, Margaret, 2022, *Burning Questions. Essays and Occasional Pieces, 2004–2021*, London: Chatto & Windus.
Brenner, Athalya, 1986, Female Social Behaviour: Two Descriptive Patterns within the "Birth of the Hero" Paradigm, *Vetus Testamentum* 36, 3, 257–273.
Brisson, Valerie, 2001, Hareka Lefeminizem Moderni, in: Keren, Michael (ed.), *Toldot Hamahshavah Hamedinit*, Haifa: Open University Press, 414–425.
Browning, Tovi, 2003, *Eikh Hafkhah Haisha Legever: Al Hapahad Mehanashi Vehitmotetut Hahevra*, Kfar Kasim: Lior Saraf Hafatzot.
De Beauvoir, Simone, 2001, *Hamin Hasheni*, Vol. 1: *Hauvdot Vehamitosim* [The Second Sex: Facts and Myths, orig. Le Deuxiéme Sexe], translated by Sharon Freminger, Tel-Aviv: Babel.
Descartes, René, 2001, *Higyonot* [Meditations on First Philosophy, orig. Méditations metaphysiques], translated by Dori Manor, Tel-Aviv: Yedioth.
Dolan, Paul J., 1976, *Of War and War's Alarms: Fiction and Politics in the Modern World*, New York: Free Press.
Elboim, Eti, 2022, *Gibboret Hatanakh*, Rishon Letzion: Mishkal Book Publisher – Yedioth Books & Hemed Books.
Filipczak, Dorota, 1993, Is There No Balm in Gilead? – Biblical Intertext in the *Handmaid's Tale*, *Literature and Theology* 7, 2, 171–185.
Fisher, Elizabeth, 1979, *Woman's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society*, New York: Doubleday.
Fogiel-Bijaoui, Silvie, 2011, *Demokratiyah Ufeminizem: Migdar Ezrahut Uzekhuyot Adam*, Raanana: Open University Press.
Foucault, Michel, 1977, Nietzsche, Genealogy, History, in: Bouchard, Donald F. (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 139–164.
Grant, Tenoi, 1988, *Lihiyot Ishah*, Tel-Aviv: Daniella Di-Nur.
Jung, Carl Gustav, 1987 [1973], *Hapsihologiyah Shel Halo Muda* [Psychology of the Unconscious], translated by Hayim Issac, Tel-Aviv: Dvir.
Keren, Michael, 1999, *Sifrut Politit Bemeah Haesrim*, Tel-Aviv: Ministry of Defense Publishing House.
Keren, Michael, 2015, *Politics and Literature at the Turn of the Millennium*, Calgary: University of Calgary Press.
Luria, Yuval, 2007, *Mavo Lekismey Hafilosophiyah – Etika Umussar*, Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press.
Mill, John Stuart, 2009, *Shiabud Haishah* [The Subjection of Women], translated by Shunamit Lifshitz, Tel-Aviv: Resling Books.
Nardi, Rivkah, 2007, *Nashim Haserot Manoah: Siah Nashim Al Darkan Leshivvyon*, Haifa: Pardes Publishing.
Nehamas, Alexander, 1994, The Genealogy of Genealogy: Interpretation in Nietzsche's Second *Untimely Meditation* and in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, in: Schacht, Richard (ed.), *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 269–283.
Nietzsche, Friedrich, 2000, [1978], *Keytzad Moilah Umazikah Hahistoriyah* [On the Uses and Abuses of History], translated by Yisrael Eldad, 4th ed., Jerusalem / Tel-Aviv: Shoken.
Nir, Binah, 2016, *Kishalon Hahatzlaha*h, Tel-Aviv: Resling Books.

Patterson, Charles, 2006, *Kol Yom Hu Treblinka* [Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust], translated by Oded Wolkstein, A Hefah: Pardes Publishing.
Plaskow, Judith, 2005, Jewish Feminist Thought, in: Frank, Daniel / Leaman, Oliver (eds.), *History of Jewish Philosophy*, London / New York: Routledge, 785–793.
Scholz, Susanne, 2017, On the "Ordinary" Inclusion of Rape in the Teaching of the Hebrew Bible, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 33, 1, 164–166.
Schweid, Eliezer, 2004, *Hafilosofiyah shel Hatanakh Keyesod Tarbut Yisrael: Iyyun Besippur, Behoraah Uvehakikah shel Hahumash*, Tel-Aviv: Yedioth Books.
Shenhar, Aliza, 2008, *Zeman Ishah – Nashim Bamikra, Bemidrash Ubesifrut Haivrit Hahadashah*, Shoham: Kinneret Zmora-Bitan – Emek Yizrael Academic Press.
Shenhar, Aliza, 2011, *Ahuvot Usenuot. Nashim Bamikra, Bemidrash Ubesifrut Haivrit Hahadashah*, Haifa: Pardes.
Singer, Peter, 1998, *Shihrur Baalei Hayyim* [Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement], translated by Shmuel Dorner, Tel-Aviv: Or'am Books.
Sternberg, Meir, 1973, Izun Adeen Besippur Oness Dinah, *Hasifrut* 4, 193–231.
Tamir, Tal, 2007, *Nashim Beyisrael 2006 – Ben Teoriyah Lemitziut*, Ramat Gan: Shedulat Hanashim Beyisrael.
Williamson, Emma, 2017, The Handmaid's Tale, *Journal of Gender-Based Violence* 1, 2, 261–269, https://doi.org/10.1332/096278917X15048755283779.
Zakowitz, Yair, 1987, Haishah Besipporet Hamikrait – Mitvveh, *Bet Mikra*, 22/1, 14–32.

Simon Spiegel

The Restrictions of Genre

The Television Series The Handmaid's Tale as a Classic Dystopia

Abstract

While there is a long tradition of literary utopias, there are hardly any positive utopias in film. Cinematic dystopias, by contrast, abound. The typical dystopia usually features a protagonist who is in opposition to the ruling regime, a built-in dramatic conflict that makes dystopias particularly well-suited for films. Although the huge success of Hulu's The Handmaid's Tale seems to confirm the affinity between film and dystopias, the show also highlights that a series spanning multiple seasons has very different dramaturgical demands than a feature film. Those demands are at odds with the narrative structure of a typical dystopia. While the standard rebellion plot provides the needed tension, it cannot be prolonged endlessly. Sooner or later the rebellion either succeeds or fails, at which point literary dystopias normally end. A series like The Handmaid's Tale needs to be able to continue that plot, which is the primary reason why the protagonist Offred never leaves Gilead despite having several opportunities to do so.

Keywords

Utopia, Dystopia, The Handmaid's Tale (TV series), Genre, Science Fiction

Biography

Simon Spiegel is a senior researcher and lecturer at the Department of Film Studies at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. From 2014 to 2018 he was a collaborator in the research project *Alternative Worlds. The Political-activist Documentary Film*, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, which resulted in his professorial thesis on utopias in nonfiction films (published in German with Schüren as *Bilder einer besseren Welt* in 2019, and in English with Palgrave Macmillan as *Utopias in Nonfiction Film* in 2021). He has published widely on science fiction, utopias and the theory of the fantastic and is co-editor of the interdisciplinary *Zeitschrift für Fantastikforschung*.

DOI: 10.25364/05.10:2024.1.5

In the medium of film, the genre of dystopia – the depiction of a bleak totalitarian future ruled by a merciless leader or party – has proven to be extremely popular. Starting in the early 1970s with films like THX 1138 (George Lucas, US 1971), Soylent Green (Richard Fleischer, US 1973), and Logan's Run (Michael Anderson, US 1976), it has become one of the dominant forms – if not *the* dominant form – of cinematic science fiction. This trend seems only to have intensified since the turn of the millennium, with productions like Children of Men (Alfonso Cuarón, UK/US/JP 2006) and Snowpiercer (Joon-Ho Bong, US/FR/SK 2013), various young adult dystopia franchises such as the The Hunger Games (US 2012–present), The Maze Runner (US 2014–2018), and The Divergent (US 2014–2016) series, and TV series like Black Mirror (Channel 4 / Netflix, UK 2011–present), The handmaid's Tale (Hulu, US 2017–present), and, more recently, Brave New World (Peacock, US 2020).

In this contribution I will analyze The Handmaid's Tale (Hulu, US 2017–present) in terms of genre and look at how the show and the Margaret Atwood novel on which it is based fit within the dystopian tradition. After reflecting on utopia and dystopia, first in general and then specifically in relation to film, I will focus on the Hulu series, arguing that dystopias are, perhaps surprisingly, an ill fit for a long-running TV show.

Looking for a Positive Future

But first a few words about the enduring popularity of dystopias. Explanations for the genre's lasting success vary. One reason often given is that dystopias reflect the dire state of the world we live in. The films speak to us because we recognize our own miserable situation in their bleak scenarios. Or, as Heather Hendershot puts it in reference to the alleged surge in sales of dystopian fiction following the election of Donald Trump as US president: "Dark times call for dark stories."[1]

This line of reasoning is by no means specific to the Trump era, for it has been a staple of columnists and op-ed writers for some time. Often it is combined with a more or less explicit lament that cinema – or TV, for that matter – is no longer capable of depicting a positive future, in effect confirming the famous Fredric Jameson quotation "It's easier to imagine the

1 Hendershot 2018, 13.

end of the world than the end of capitalism."[2] Things are so bad that we are simply unable to imagine that they could be better one day. An inverse take is also common: filmmakers could very well show us visions of a better future, but they fail to do so – because of either cynicism or laziness. Whatever the cause, they are failing in their responsibility as artists to provide us with the inspiring positive images and stories we so desperately need.

As common as the idea is that the popularity of dystopias reflects the misery of our times (and judging from the many newspaper articles that have rehashed it over the years, it is very common), it is probably wrong. The "dark times call for dark stories" argument could be easily turned on its head in making the case that it is natural for audiences to crave escapism in a time of crisis. The success of Hollywood musicals during the Great Depression is often explained in exactly this way.

Ultimately, this kind of simplistic one-to-one relationship between sociohistorical developments and artistic creation never holds up under close examination, but in our case, the whole premise that no positive films about the future are produced *anymore* is demonstrably false. While we rarely see desirable futures in the cinema, this is by no means a new trend. On the contrary, the good future has never been a popular theme in cinema. Not only that, but for roughly the first fifty years of its existence, cinema had very little to say about the future in general.[3]

While non-Western movie traditions may have developed along different lines, Hollywood – and Western cinema in general – produced only a few films set in the future until the mid-20th century. There are noteworthy exceptions like Metropolis (Fritz Lang, DE 1927), Just Imagine (David Butler, US 1930), or Things to Come (William Cameron Menzies, UK 1936), but these are really just that – exceptions. Science fiction as we know it today only started to hit the screens in the early 1950s.[4] And although this decade saw a veritable boom in science fiction films, very few of these early productions

2 Although it is probably Jameson's most quoted line, the provenance of this phrase is not completely clear. In *The Seeds of Time* Jameson uses a similar phrase: "It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism" (Jameson 1994, xii). In a piece from 2003 he uses the quotation as given above with the addition "Someone once said that" (Jameson 2003, 76), but without saying who this "someone" is.

3 The following remarks follow the argument I lay out in Spiegel 2021, 7–69.

4 There were forerunners, though. Besides the examples just mentioned, there were numerous examples of science fiction in the 1930s in the form of serials and short animations. It is no coincidence that these were narrative forms with little prestige that

take place in the future. There are several possible explanations for this development, but the most convincing is that it is likely much more expensive to produce a movie that requires futuristic sets than one that takes place in the present. And as most of the early science fiction films were low-budget B-movies, the necessary resources were simply lacking. During the 1960s, largely owing to the rise of a new generation of both filmmakers and moviegoers, science fiction gradually gained status, and the films became more expensive and more sophisticated. However, from the moment that science fiction cinema entered the future, it was dystopian. Be it Planet of the Apes (Franklin J. Schaffner, US 1968), The Omega Man (Boris Sagal, US 1971), A Clockwork Orange (Stanley Kubrick, UK 1971), Silent Running (Douglas Trumbull, US 1971), or the aforementioned THX 1138, Soylent Green, and Logan's Run, none of them depicts a desirable future.[5]

Still, it seems odd that we find almost no examples of a good future in film, especially if we look at the situation in literature. Beginning with Thomas More's 1516 foundational text *Utopia*, there have been countless literary descriptions of better worlds and more just societies in which people live happily. Today, outside of specialized scholarship, most of these works are forgotten, but some, such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888), were proper bestsellers in their day.[6]

Thus, the question remains: if so many literary utopias have been produced, with some of them even highly successful, why are there no positive utopias in film? Are audiovisual media inherently more dystopian than literature for some reason? As it turns out, the question is wrongly posed, as we commit a category error when we compare utopian literature and feature films. Although the term "novel" is often used when we talk about the utopian tradition initiated by More, typical utopian literature does not correspond with our modern understanding of a novel. Utopias are not about telling a gripping story with well-rounded characters. They are first

were mostly cheaply produced. The big studios were simply not interested in science fiction at that time.

5 The notable exception here is 2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, US/UK 1968), which, from the few hints given in the film, takes place in a world very similar to the one of its year of production. For example, the Cold War still seems to be going on. But all in all, this world seems neither particularly utopian nor dystopian.

6 Apparently, in the US before the turn of the century, only *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) sold more copies than *Looking Backward*. In addition to its commercial success, Bellamy's novel spawned a whole subgenre of books reacting to it, and it even inspired a political movement; see Bould 2015, 86.

and foremost concerned with describing an alternative – better – society. And while many literary utopias feature a narrative frame – most often, some kind of travel chronicle – it is often really just a device that serves as a pretext for lengthy explanations of how the specific utopia is superior to the contemporary world. This is true of early examples like More's *Utopia* or Francis Bacon's *Nova Atlantis* / *New Atlantis* (1627, published posthumously), but also for later examples like Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440* / *Memories of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred* (1770), which is often described as the first utopia set in the future, Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist *Herland* (1915), B. F. Skinner's behavioral utopia *Walden Two* (1948), and Ernst Callenbach's ecological *Ecotopia* (1975).

Granted, modern authors like Bellamy or Gilman spend more time constructing a plot and creating nuanced characters, but even in their books the descriptive parts dominate. No one reads *Herland* or *Walden Two* in search of an enthralling yarn. The classic positive utopia in the Morean tradition, despite its narrative-fictional framework, is in many ways closer to a philosophical tract or a political manifesto. It is a generic hybrid and, to put it bluntly, more directly linked to reality than most fiction.

Once we understand that literary utopias are not fiction proper, but rather a hybrid genre where the fictional-narrative element is not dominant, it becomes evident why there are no utopian movies. Utopias in the vein of More and his successors simply do not fit the paradigm of a mainstream movie, where a protagonist with clearly defined traits must overcome obstacles to reach their goal. The fact that none of the classic utopias has ever been adapted for the screen only underscores this observation.[7]

Dystopias

While positive utopias and fiction films are not a good fit, the same is not true of dystopias and film. As we have already seen, dystopian films abound. But the reason for this has less to do with how much they might reflect the audience's experience and more to do with the genre's basic narrative

7 It should be noted, however, that although *fiction* films are not suited for utopias, this does not mean that the medium of film as a whole does not offer the possibility of depicting positive utopias. As I have argued in my study *Utopias in Nonfiction Film*, there are plenty of positive utopias once we leave the realm of fiction and turn to documentary and propaganda films.

structure. Historically, dystopias grew out of the utopian tradition, but from their inception in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they have been much more focused on a traditional adventure plot.[8] The prototypical dystopia tells the story of a protagonist in conflict with the ruling order. In the beginning, this character is often an exemplary member of the respective society, but inevitably they end up in total opposition, attempting to overthrow the dystopian leader(s).[9]

The hero's rebellion is essential for the genre, as it serves to mark the society portrayed as negative. Today, as has often been noted, classic Morean utopias do not strike us as very appealing, as they usually present a more or less totalitarian society that depends on the individual blending in seamlessly, a mere cog in the smoothly running machinery of the state. This is very similar to typical dystopias, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949). In dystopias, the subordination of the individual, which is the prerequisite of the classic utopia, has become the central bone of contention. Ultimately, the main difference between a classic utopia and a typical dystopia is not so much the actual structure of the described state, but the point of view from which it is presented. You could turn almost any classic utopia into a dystopia by inserting a non-adjusted protagonist.

In addition, and especially relevant for our purposes, the hero's rebellion changes the dramatic structure in crucial ways. With a few nonconformists fighting against the inhuman system, dystopias have the dramatic story arc utopias usually lack. In positive utopias, the plot is merely a framing device with no narrative significance; dystopias, in contrast, feature by default an exciting plot and well-defined characters with clear goals.

The classic Hollywood movie contains two intertwined storylines: a line of action and a (traditionally heterosexual) love story.[10] Typical dystopias follow this model almost naturally, as the hero's rebellion usually goes

8 In the past, the term "anti-utopia" has often been used synonymously with "dystopia". Today, most scholars distinguish between dystopias, which warn against specific political-societal trends, and anti-utopias, which target the utopian principle. The main difference is that for all their alleged negativity, dystopias are utopian insofar as they represent the possibility of changing society and human beings for the better. Anti-utopias, by contrast, often satirize specific progressive political projects and their implicit message that things can (or even should) be improved; on the distinction between dystopia and anti-utopia see Balasopoulos 2011.

9 Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921) is often considered the first full-fledged dystopia, but there are notable forerunners like H. G. Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899).

10 Bordwell/Staiger/Thompson 1999, 16.

hand in hand with a love story. It is, in fact, often love – or rather, socially unsanctioned forms of sexuality – that makes the hitherto well-adjusted protagonist aware of his – and the male pronoun is used on purpose here, since in early dystopias, the hero is almost always male – individuality and inspires him to oppose the existing order.

Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tal*e largely follows the structure I have just outlined. The main difference is that Offred[11] does not experience a moment of "dystopian recognition", but is in opposition to the state of Gilead right from the beginning. In addition, the novel's dramatic plot is rather muted. Offred's opposition is limited, the "action" much reduced; she never establishes proper contact with the resistance and does not engage in rebellion in any meaningful way. Ultimately, her most oppositional acts are her secret meetings with the Commander and her affair with the driver Nick. But neither of these actions is initiated by her, nor do they have any significant impact on her own situation or on the state of Gilead.

In the prototypical dystopia, the conflict between the oppositional hero and the ruling system builds to a clear showdown. Sooner or later, the two must collide, and the hero will either fail or succeed. Exactly what success means in this context varies: it can be anything from merely escaping the dystopian state to completely overthrowing it. Either way, there is a clear-cut resolution. We know the trajectory of the narrative in advance, and we know when it has run its course. The ending of Atwood's novel partially bypasses clear closure, as we do not know what happens to Offred after the book is finished, namely whether the men who take her away are members of the secret police or of the resistance. Although this uncertainty somewhat undermines the topical structure by leaving us with an open ending, the alternatives we are left with are still those of the classic model. Either Offred fails or she succeeds—we just do not know which.

Serial Dystopias

Arguably, the most momentous trend the film industry has gone through in the last 20 years is franchising. Today, big-budget films are produced not as single, self-contained works, but as parts of large narrative universes span-

11 Discussing Atwood's novel, I use the name "Offred" for the protagonist, while "June" refers to the same character in the Hulu series.

ning multiple media. The economic benefits of this setup are obvious. The studios, which today all belong to huge media conglomerates, can monetize their intellectual property across different media, tailoring various offerings for specific audiences. This strategy is complemented by another development: the rise of what is generally referred to as "narrative complexity", mainly in TV series. Coined by Jason Mittell, the term refers to a bundle of formal traits which distinguish newer *quality* series from earlier shows.[12] Among the characteristics Mittell mentions are a juggling of self-contained episodes and an overall story arc, the use of non-chronological narration, plot twists, and, in general, a high degree of self-reflexivity. Mittell's article was originally published before the advent of streaming, and many of the trends he describes have considerably intensified since then. What he deems narrative complexity is in a way what we have come to expect from a contemporary prestige TV series and can be found everywhere, from Mad Men (AMC, US 2007–2015) and Breaking Bad (AMC, US 2008–2013) to Game of Thrones (HBO, US 2011–2019) or Fleabag (BBC, UK 2016–2019).

Complex narration is an ideal fit for franchising as the story is presented not as a straightforward narrative sequence, but as a puzzle which the attentive viewer gradually needs to solve. While traditional shows are also often built around a mystery – who is the murderer? will the lovers will finally get together? – they take place in a world which we understand from the beginning. Modern shows, by contrast, are based on the principle of hyperdiegesis: the world we initially encounter turns out to be "a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text".[13] We never get the full picture, only bits and pieces, and we are constantly trying to make sense of the various flashbacks, flash-forwards, and story twists. This form of storytelling lends itself perfectly to franchising, as it shifts the focus from a traditional plot with a beginning, middle, and end to the construction of a narrative universe. There is no longer a fixed sequence of events which sooner or later must come to an end, but instead a vast narrative landscape which can endlessly be peopled with new characters and their stories. There are, in other words, ample opportunities for prequels, sequels, and tie-ins.

Hulu's adaptation of Atwood's novel in many ways exemplifies today's quality series. Besides the main protagonist, June, there are a number of

12 Mittell 2006.

13 Hills 2002, 104.

secondary characters with their own storylines. Moreover, the series uses flashbacks and self-conscious voice-over narration, and it employs a host of carefully chosen aesthetic devices, among them

> chiaroscuro and back lighting; profilmic surfaces such as curtains, mirrors, and windows; a color scheme in which red and to a lesser extent blue are set against mono-chrome backgrounds that are predominantly dark brown and occasionally bright white (the hospital, the supermarket) inside and pale gray (outside); Dutch angles; frame-within-the-frame compositions; off-center compositions; lens flares; blurring effects; and jump-cuts.[14]

The world of The Handmaid's Tale is not mysterious in the same way as the worlds of The X-Files (Fox, US 1993–2002), Lost (ABC, US 2004–2010), or Game of Thrones. The story essentially takes place in our world, and there is no underlying big conspiracy to uncover, no magical realm or foreign species with special powers. Still, the series does follow the principle of hyperdiegesis, a fact which becomes especially visible in its use of flashbacks.

The flashback is an old formal device that can be employed for a variety of narrative purposes. Traditionally, flashbacks are often used to retroactively fill in narrative gaps; when used in this way, they are essential to making sense of the plot. The Paris flashback in Casablanca (Michael Curtiz, US 1942) is important because it tells Rick and Ilsa's backstory; without this inserted episode, we would not understand why Rick reacts the way he does to Ilsa's appearance in his bar. The purest example of this kind of flashback comes at the end of a typical whodunnit, when the identity of the murderer is revealed. Here, the flashback provides the crucial missing piece of information, bringing the story to a close.

While there have always been many kinds of flashbacks, one distinct form has come to special prominence in TV series in the last two decades: these days, flashbacks are often used to fill out the back story of a character without necessarily contributing something vital to the plot.

The type of flashback we see in Casablanca or in a murder mystery provides a central plot element. In The Handmaid's Tale, by contrast, many flashbacks mainly serve "atmospheric" purposes. In the series, a typical flashback will tell us how close June was to Moyra, Luke, or her daughter

14 Roche 2021, 141.

Hannah, or how badly she was treated by Aunt Lydia, but it rarely tells us something which is vital if we are to understand what is going on. While we need the Paris sequence to make sense of Casablanca's plot, many of the flashbacks in The Handmaid's Tale could simply be left out, and we would still be able to follow the plot.[15]

One could argue that this use of flashbacks mirrors the nonlinear structure of Atwood's novel to some extent, but I would still posit that the flashbacks in the series have a different effect from the flashbacks in the book, as is typical of contemporary serial narration. Although The Handmaid's Tale jumps seamlessly between time periods, it is not non-linear in the way the novel is, or, to take a completely different example, a film like Pulp Fiction (Quentin Tarantino, US 1994). Atwood's novel and Tarantino's film are truly non-linear in that there is no main line of narration and no temporal (or narrative) point of departure to which we return. In a sense, these examples do not even use proper flashbacks, as that would require a main narrative thread from which the narration could flash back. We can still discern which event happens when and build a temporal sequence in our minds, but there is no privileged strand of narration. The TV series proceeds differently. Here we do have a main thread that moves forward and serves as a point of departure.

Neither the assessment that the narration of The Handmaid's Tale is not truly non-linear nor the fact that many of its flashbacks are not essential for understanding the plot should be construed as a value judgment. My point is not that these flashbacks are badly done, but rather that they serve a different purpose than a traditional "plot-driven" flashback. They serve to embellish the fictional world, to provide "background" in the true sense of the word. Their function is less narrative than architectural; they are in the service of hyperdiegesis. However hyperdiegesis in The Handmaid's Tale does not have the same approach as in a series like the original Twin Peaks (ABC, US 1990–1991), The X-Files or Game of Thrones. Over the course of Game of Thrones, we learn more and more about the many strange creatures and cultures in Westeros, and we slowly begin to understand the inner work-

15 These remarks on flashbacks should be taken with a grain of salt. While I find it evident that the use of flashbacks in mainstream TV and cinema has undergone significant change, this is not an area I have researched in any detail, and there is, as far as I can see, basically no literature on the subject. The classic study on flashbacks in film by Maureen Turim was published in 1989 and therefore has nothing to say about more recent developments.

ings of this universe. This is not the case in The Handmaid's Tale, where we actually learn remarkably little about how Gilead is organized. Instead, the past of this world, or rather of its characters, is fleshed out in more detail. It is a temporal form of hyperdiegesis, so to speak.

To some extent, this is also a consequence of the longer format. A series offers more time to provide "superfluous" details and to add nuances that have to be left out in a feature film. However, even more importantly, the flashbacks are also a consequence of a different narrative logic, one that is more concerned with constantly fleshing out its world than with bringing a story to its conclusion. Again, the economic advantages of such an approach should be evident.

Dystopia's Limitations

The success of The Handmaid's Tale seems to prove that dystopias are suited not only for feature films but also for longer formats and that they can be smoothly combined with elements of narrative complexity. However, even though the show has found a large audience, for the remainder of this article I will make the argument that the exact opposite is true: if anything, The Handmaid's Tale demonstrates the problems that inevitably arise when a typical dystopian plot is stretched out over multiple seasons. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that all of the show's major problems stem from its "dystopian origin".

As I have suggested, Atwood's novel can be characterized as a kind of reduced or muted dystopia. What I mean by this is that not much happens on the plot level. A large part of the book is dedicated to establishing the world of the story. Offred's life is characterized by repetition – her walks with other handmaids, the Ceremony, and so on. The only real plot developments are her meetings with the Commander and her affair with Nick.

Offred's lack of action is no accident, but rather in a way one of the novel's points. The protagonist has been stripped of any agency and individuality – in the novel we do not even learn her real name – and she is therefore simply unable to do anything of real consequence. The series is well aware of this and extensively depicts June's powerlessness. There are whole episodes in which she is mostly passive; for example, S01E04 "Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum" (Mike Barker, US 2017) spends considerable time just showing her lying on the floor.

While the show's creators apparently want to do justice to the literary source, there are limits to what can be done in a long-running series aimed at a mass audience. A commercial show has to offer more than a main character vegetating on the floor and reminiscing about the past; it needs a certain amount of action. You could also argue that a completely passive female protagonist would not be appropriate for a contemporary show that wants to be taken seriously as a political intervention.

The moments of extended passivity are therefore counterbalanced by very eventful – and sometimes very violent – scenes. Episode S01E04 is typical in this regard, as it ends with a display of empowerment and determination. June, feeling a new sense of solidarity toward both an earlier incarnation of Offred and the other Handmaids, is finally allowed to leave her room. The episode's last shot shows her joined by other Handmaids walking in slow motion towards the camera; on the soundtrack we hear powerful music and June's voice: "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum, bitches" – Don't let the bastards grind you down.

It is typical of the series that after dwelling on June's helplessness, the episode ends on a rather energetic, almost upbeat note. It is also characteristic that her new-found confidence hardly carries over to the next episode. While June is less passive than in the previous episode, the events of S01E05 "Faithful" (Mike Barker, US 2017) – Serena arranging a sexual encounter between June and Nick, Emily killing a guard with a car and being deported – are not really a consequence of her previous experiences.

Compared to Atwood's novel, the series substantially expands the number of both characters and plot lines. This is standard procedure for this kind of adaptation and more or less unavoidable. A 300-page novel simply does not provide enough material for a multi-season series. But although most of what happens after the first half of Season One has no direct equivalent in the literary source, what does not change is the basic conflict underlying everything. It is June against Gilead, and the overarching question that drives the entire series is whether she will be able to escape or overthrow the government. Once that question is answered, the show is over.

Because The Handmaid's Tale was conceived not as a limited series but as a long-running prestige show, none of the storylines can ever be fully resolved. This is why every major plot development is immediately followed by a moment of retardation. June can never be completely successful; she only ever manages to *almost* leave Gilead or to *almost* get Commander Waterford

or his wife, Serena, on her side. If she actually succeeded, there would be nothing more to tell.

According to Matt Hills, hyperdiegesis in cult series goes hand in hand with what he calls "endlessly deferred narrative".[16] What he means by this is that many shows have a central enigma at their core that they slowly reveal over time – Who killed Laura Palmer? Will Mulder and Scully prove the existence of aliens and will they get together? What is it with flight Oceanic 815?

It is important to note, however, that an endlessly deferred narrative, according to Hills, is a specific characteristic of *cult shows* and not just of any series. Also, an endlessly deferred narrative is not the same as a typical cliffhanger or the unanswered open question that can be seen in most series. Rather it is more like a nucleus or center of gravity, accumulating more and more details over time.

The central question of The Handmaid's Tale – or of any typical dystopia, for that matter – has, I would argue, a very different quality. Whether June will be able to escape from Gilead can be answered straightforwardly. It is not a mystery that can continuously accumulate new layers of complexity. It is no surprise, then, that by the third season at the latest, it has become obvious that the basic mechanics of the genre do not smoothly gel with the demands of a long-running series. We surely get a lot of deferrals in The Handmaid's Tale, though not of the kind Hills has in mind, in that they are rather blunt plot reversals. For example, by Season Two we are already seeing a constant back and forth in alliances: In S02E07 "After" (Kari Skogland, US 2018), Serena seeks June's help, and the two find a kind of mutual respect. However, only three episodes later, in S02E10 "The Last Ceremony" (Jeremy Podeswa, US 2018), Serena mercilessly helps her husband rape June. Nevertheless, by the end of the season Serena accepts that it would be better for her – or rather June's – daughter not to be raised in Gilead.

Serena's attitude toward June can change from moment to moment, depending on the current needs of the plot. Many series display such constant reversals after a certain running time; normally, it is an indication that a show has run out of steam, that there simply is not much left to tell. As the original plot has run its course, the writers resort to this rather mechanical way of creating new conflicts to keep the story going. What is unusual in the case of The Handmaid's Tale is that we see these symptoms as early as Season Two.

16 Hills 2002, 98.

This phenomenon becomes even more pronounced in Season Three. At the end of Season Two, Serena has agreed that June can take her daughter to Gilead. But with the beginning of Season Three, the big climax of the preceding season is simply undone. Suddenly, Serena has another change of heart and does everything in her power to get hold of the baby again. The big twist at the end of Season Two is immediately reversed by a new, rather unmotivated twist. Later in the season, we also learn that another climax of the previous season finale did not endure either. Aunt Lydia has actually survived Emily's attack and is getting back on her feet.

These examples of heavy-handed plot reversals are not accidental or simply signs of lazy screenwriting; they are a direct consequence of the basic dystopian plot. At its most fundamental level, The Handmaid's Tale is about one question: Will June make it out of Gilead? This question is made more complicated as the series progresses, but only slightly. For the first three seasons, the main strategy for countering the simplicity of the basic plot and prolonging the story is retardation. In a way, the specific "hyperdiegetic" use of flashbacks described above already serves this purpose. Instead of continuing the story and moving toward a conclusion, the series will often insert a flashback that does not advance the narration but instead slows it down.

What we see here is another example of how well a certain kind of narration fits the commercial needs of a TV network. The combination of complex narration and hyperdiegesis allows not only for prequels, tie-ins, and so on, but also for constantly stretching and extending the narration. With the kind of temporal hyperdiegesis visible in The Handmaid's Tale – and particularly in its specific use of flashback – retardation becomes part of the very structure of the narration.

On top of this form of structural retardation, we also get retardations on the level of the plot, like the kind described above. Most salient in this regard are the endings of Season Two and Season Three. In both cases, June has the opportunity to leave Gilead, but ultimately she stays behind.

One could object that June does finally leave Gilead toward the end of Season Four and that the series does still continue. This is certainly true, but it is also obvious that from that point on, June has very little to do, which is why she now has to display all kinds of irrational and depressive behavior as well as aggression toward Luke.

There is one provision in the series' setup that ensures that it can be prolonged almost endlessly, and that is the fate of Hannah – June's first daugh-

ter – who is a kind of dramaturgical wild card that the series always brings into play when an ending is looming. Even when June escapes Gilead and is reunited with Luke, Nichole, and some of her closest friends, she cannot find closure as she still misses her daughter.

What I find particularly interesting about this narrative device – and Hannah is really not much more than a narrative device – is that it runs counter to the supposed feminist agenda of the series. The Handmaid's Tale presents itself as a commentary on the role of women in modern society. It is supposedly about women's empowerment, about their right to have control over their own lives and bodies. But below the emancipatory veneer is an elemental force that proves to be stronger than all the talk of female self-determination, and that is motherly love. If there is one thing that is never in doubt, which is never even up for discussion, it is the fact that June, as a mother, needs to be with her children. She may be able to leave Gilead, but without her daughter, the story is not over yet. Thus, the series may be able to escape the confines of the dystopian plot, but it can only do so by resorting to what is, ultimately, a very traditional understanding of motherhood.

Conclusion

It has probably become apparent that I have some reservations regarding The Handmaid's Tale. In fact, I think that the show has serious flaws on the level of plot and dramatic construction. As I have tried to show in this article, these largely stem from its origin as a classic literary dystopia.

There are countless other series with dystopian elements, for, as I have explained, very few science fiction films set in the future are without at least a hint of dystopia. However, most of them tell a much larger story and, unlike The Handmaid's Tale, do not stick to the basic dystopian plot. As much as the series expands on Atwood's novel, at its core it still adheres to the structure of the book, which is deeply rooted in the tradition of the genre.

It is instructive to compare The Handmaid's Tale to another series that draws on a – if not *the* – classic of dystopian literature: Brave New World, based on Aldous Huxley's famous novel of the same name. On a structural level, the creators of Brave New World faced very similar problems to those of The Handmaid's Tale, for they also had to expand on the limited plot of the original novel. But they chose a different strategy. Brave New World also builds a much larger story world, but unlike The Handmaid's

Tale, the series constructs an intricate backstory in which the dystopian world turns out to be the product of a rogue AI.

Thus, the two series engage in very different kinds of hyperdiegesis. While The Handmaid's Tale ultimately sticks to the classic dystopian plot, Brave New World considerably expands its plot and story world beyond the novel. Brave New World quickly proved to be much less successful than The Handmaid's Tale and was canceled after only one season. While its lack of success may have nothing to do with the issues raised in this article, the fact that the series dispenses with Huxley's novel, more or less, and comes up with completely new storylines again suggests that the basic dystopian plot does not work well for a long-running series.

Bibliography

Atwood, Margaret, 2019 [1985], *The Handmaid's Tale*, London: Jonathan Cape.

Bacon, Francis, 1999 [1627], New Atlantis, in: Bruce, Susan (ed.), *Three Early Modern Utopias: Utopia, New Atlantis, The Isle of Pines*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 149–186.

Balasopoulos, Antonis, 2011, Anti-Utopia and Dystopia: Rethinking the Generic Field, in: Vlastaras, Vassilis (ed.), *Utopia Project Archive, 2006–2010*, Athens: School of Fine Arts Publications, 59–67.

Bellamy, Edward, 2009 [1888], *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Bordwell, David / Staiger, Janet / Thompson, Kristin, 1999, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema. Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, London: Routledge.

Bould, Mark, 2015, The Futures Market: American Utopias, in: Canavan, Gerry / Link, Eric Carl (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction*, Cambridge / New York: Cambridge University Press, 83–96.

Callenbach, Ernest, 1975, *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston*, Berkeley: Banyan Tree Books.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, 1979 [1915], *Herland*, New York: Pantheon Books.

Hendershot, Heather, 2018, *The Handmaid's Tale* as Ustopian Allegory. "Stars and Stripes Forever, Baby", *Film Quarterly* 72, 1, 13–25, https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2018.72.1.13.

Hills, Matt, 2002, *Fan Cultures*, London: Routledge.

Huxley, Aldous, 1955 [1932], *Brave New World*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Jameson, Fredric, 1994, *The Seeds of Time*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Jameson, Fredric, 2003, Future City, *New Left Review* 21, 65–79, http://newleftreview.org/II/21/fredric-jameson-future-city [accessed 10 June 2023].

Mercier, Louis-Sébastien, 1974 [1770], *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*, New York: Garland.

Mittell, Jason, 2006, Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television, *The Velvet Light Trap* 58, 29–40.

More, Thomas, 1965 [1516], *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 4: *Utopia*, edited by Edward Surtz and J. H. Hexter, New Haven: Yale University Press.
Orwell, George, 1997 [1949]. *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, vol. 9: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, ed. Peter Davison, London: Secker & Warburg.
Roche, David, 2021, Shallow Focus Composition and the Poetics of Blur in The Handmaid's Tale (Hulu, 2017–), in: Wells-Lassagne, Shannon / McMahon, Fiona (eds.), *Adapting Margaret Atwood: The Handmaid's Tale and Beyond*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 127–141.
Skinner, B. F., 1976 [1948], *Walden Two*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
Spiegel, Simon, 2021, *Utopias in Nonfiction Film,* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
Stowe, Harriet Beecher, 1998 [1852], *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press.
Turim, Maureen Cheryn, 1989, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History*, New York: Routledge.
Wells, H. G., 1994 [1899], *When the Sleeper Wakes*, London: Dent.
Zamyatin, Yevgeny, 2006 [1921], *We*, New York: Modern Library.

Filmography

2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, US/UK 1968).
A Clockwork Orange (Stanley Kubrick, UK 1971).
Black Mirror (Created by: Charlie Brooker, Channel 4 / Netflix, UK 2011–present).
Brave New World (Created by: David Wiener, Peacock, US 2020).
Breaking Bad (Created by: Vince Gilligan, AMC, US 2008–2013).
Casablanca (Michael Curtiz, US 1942).
Children of Men (Alfonso Cuarón, UK/US/JP 2006).
Fleabag (Created by: Phoebe Waller-Bridge, BBC, UK 2016–2019).
Game of Thrones (Created by: David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, HBO, US 2011–2019).
Just Imagine (David Butler, US 1930).
Logan's Run (Michael Anderson, US 1976).
Lost (Created by: Jeffrey Lieber, J. J. Abrams, and Damon Lindelof, ABC, US 2004–2010).
Mad Men (Created by: Matthew Weiner, AMC, US 2007–2015).
Metropolis (Fritz Lang, DE 1927).
Planet of the Apes (Franklin J. Schaffner, US 1968).
Pulp Fiction (Quentin Tarantino, US 1994).
Silent Running (Douglas Trumbull, US 1971).
Snowpiercer (Joon-Ho Bong, US/FR/SK 2013).
Soylent Green (Richard Fleischer, US 1973).
The Divergent (div. directors, US 2014–2016).
The handmaid's Tale (Created by: Bruce Miller, Hulu, US 2017–present).
The handmaid's Tale. S01E04 "Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum" (Mike Barker, US 2017).
The handmaid's Tale. S01E05 "Faithful" (Mike Barker, US 2017).
The handmaid's Tale. S02E07 "After" (Kari Skogland, US 2018).
The handmaid's Tale. S02E10 "The Last Ceremony" (Jeremy Podeswa, US 2018).
The Hunger Games (Gary Ross (1) and Francis Lawrence (2–5), US 2012–present).

The Maze Runner (Wes Ball, US 2014–2018).
The Omega Man (Boris Sagal, US 1971).
The X-Files (Created by: Chris Carter, Fox, US 1993–2002).
Things to Come (William Cameron Menzies, UK 1936).
THX 1338 (George Lucas, US 1971).
Twin Peaks (Created by: Mark Frost and David Lynch, ABC, US 1990–1991).

Open Section

Milja Radovic

Framing the War: The Calvary of Serbia (YU 1932/1940)

Innovation, Faith, History in the Early Documentary Film

Abstract

This article examines early documentary film from the Yugoslav space, assessing the innovative deployment of film language to communicate faith and history in the context of the First World War. The pioneering work involved in developing war cinema in the Yugoslav space has been largely overlooked by scholars. The research introduces readers to the rich heritage of such documentary film and encourages new approaches to researching history and religion through this medium. The article is a case study of the documentary film The Calvary of Serbia (Golgota Srbije, Stanislav Krakov, Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 1932/1940), which was assembled from various forms of footage and is regarded as the best documentary made in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia prior to the Second World War. Incorporating different modes and codes of representation, The Calvary of Serbia is a milestone in the development of film language. How the author(s) saw and framed faith and history within the context of the war resulted in a unique cinematic space, in which on-screen and off-screen spaces are (re)negotiated. To examine the language of film is to study film as a historical document, and in this sense this article approaches film as a primary source. Its overarching goal is to advance and enrich scholarly inquiry into early cinema and to introduce novel avenues for accessing documentary film.

Keywords

The Calvary of Serbia, Great War, History, Faith, Frame, Space

Biography

Milja Radovic is a scholar of religion, media, culture, and the arts. Her primary focus has been on film, history, nationalism, religion, acts of citizenship, and Orthodox theology. She has published two monographs with Routledge, *Film, Religion and Activist Citizens: An Ontology of Transformative Acts* (2017) and *Transnational Cinema and Ideology: Representing Religion, Identity and Cultural Myths* (2014), and she lectures internationally. She has also served as a jury member with Interfilm, the International Interchurch Film Organisation, at international film festivals (Berlin, Cottbus, Karlovy Vary, Locarno, Oberhausen, St. Andrews). She is Principal Investigator for the Project "Reframing Space: Film as History" at the University of Vienna.

DOI: 10.25364/05.10:2024.1.6

Introduction

With their depictions of faith, history and war, the first makers of film in the Yugoslav space[1] exhibited remarkable originality and innovation. To date, however, this superb contribution has been neglected by scholarship on world cinema. Similarly, pioneering efforts in war cinematography, impelled by historical circumstance, have been largely overlooked, yet the birth of war cinema is above all associated with the Balkan wars in 1912 and 1913, when, on the initiative of Duke Živojin Mišić, a "Film Section" was established within the army of the Kingdom of Serbia. With an emphasis on historical material, historical truth, and historical memory,[2] this article discusses the war film Golgota Srbije (The Calvary of Serbia, Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), which reflects the evolution of the documentary over the decades.

The Calvary of Serbia is held by many to be the best documentary produced in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The article considers its depiction of faith and history within the context of the First World War. Serbia entered the war with the Austro-Hungarian Empire's declaration of war on 28 July 1914.[3] The ideas of Pan-Slavism were widespread among the South Slavs, leading to the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in

1 This article is dedicated in loving memory of Marko Jovičić and of Stevan Jovičić (1936–2018), a film historian and head of the Film Archive of the Yugoslav Cinematheque.
I wish to express my gratitude to the Österreichischer Wissenschaftsfonds FWF, University of Vienna, Sigrid Müller, Kurt Appel, Claudia Bernal Diaz, and Božidar Zečević; my special thanks also to the Yugoslav Cinematheque, Aleksandar Erdeljanović.
I use the term "Yugoslav space" to refer to the geographical space known for most of the 20th century as "Yugoslavia". The films I focus upon were produced mainly by local filmmakers who rose from the grassroots level in the area in which the "Land of the South Slavs" was formed: in 1918 as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and from 1929 as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (after the Second World War Yugoslavia became a Socialist Republic). Some film societies and production companies were using the name "Yugoslavia" by 1918. The term "Yugoslav space" reinforces the focused approach to this specific geographical area and to the local filmmakers of diverse backgrounds who worked continuously in this geo-cultural space of changing borders.

2 According to Božidar Zečević "historical material" refers to the fabric of film, to film stock, and does not necessarily contain the "historical truth"; "historical truth" is a factual event, in early film usually shot in one take (or with necessary montage); "historical memory" refers to remembering or reconstruction. Historical material, historical truth, and historical memory constitute a historical film. Professor Božidar Zečević, personal interview, Belgrade, 27 September 2023.

3 While the causes of the Great War, such as the contemporary geo-political reconfiguration,

1918 – the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, formed in 1929, represented its practical realisation. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia gathered all South Slavs into a single state, along with other ethnicities, nationalities, and religions that had existed in this area prior to its formation.

This research enriches scholarly understanding of the documentary film The Calvary of Serbia, its historical significance and the language deployed within the cinematic space. In examining the framing of the Great War within the film, this article asks specifically (1) how is faith conceived and transcended within the cinematic space? and (2) how is faith represented within the context of the Great War? The analysis is conducted through the "frame" method: the frame contains the cinematic space and through frame we can validate the film as a historical document. The relationships between film and history and between film and religion date to the birth of cinema. Film has long provided historians with access to how history has been read, and they have explored how and whether cinematic visions of history are valid in scholarly terms. Matters are somewhat different in the field of religion and film, where scholars have developed diverse approaches in their examination of religion and early cinema, generating a rich body of scholarly literature on areas ranging from the early Hollywood era to world cinema. We still lack, however, scholarly research on faith, history, and innovation in the early cinema of the Yugoslav space.[4] The majority of existing work, largely by domestic authors, has focused on production and the history of the medium and has tended to remain untranslated. Most recent

have been much discussed by historians, the specific motive for the declaration of war was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria on 28 June 1914 in Sarajevo.

4 Early cinema in the Yugoslav space has been addressed by domestic authors such as Dejan Kosanović, Stevan Jovičić, Petar Volk, and Bosa Slijepčević, but international scholarship has exhibited little to no interest in this subject; see Kosanović 2011; Jovičić 2019; Volk 1996; Slijepčević 1982. The Routledge *Encyclopaedia of the Documentary Film* states that "documentary production was very lively" in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia but neither provides further details nor explores the rich documentary heritage prior to 1918; see Aitken 2005, 1495. The *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema* summarizes cinematic developments in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Romania on one page; see Abel 2010, 58. Daniel J. Goulding and Pavle Levi begin their research with the socialist period and omit the pre-1945 period from their analysis; see Goulding 2002; Levi 2007. Other focused research on Yugoslav cinema also remains limited to the socialist and post-socialist periods and thus lacks critical study of its beginnings. The bulk of scholarship focuses on either post–Second World War feature films or on films made at the time of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, exploring industry, festivals, or subjects such as political ideologies, nationalism, ethnic conflict, and the mythological representations of the Balkans.

work has considered religion, faith, history, and film in Yugoslavia (and the Balkan peninsula) of the post–Second World War era. Studies of early film from the Yugoslav space that depicts expressions of faith and history have been lacking. This article seeks to fill that gap.

The territory that for most of the twentieth century was known as Yugoslavia provided a home for many roving cinematographers and was the birthplace of a unique cinematic culture. The first film screening on the Balkan peninsula took place on 6 June 1896 at the Golden Cross on Terazije Square in Belgrade, Kingdom of Serbia. "Moving images" aroused great interest amongst people of different backgrounds and professions, who often operated independently and at a grass-root level. This freedom resulted in the development of film language and innovative techniques to record "reality". In the Yugoslav space, documentaries that explored life in times of war and times of peace developed distinguishing characteristics, such as converging narratives and deep focus cinematography. Early film makers and writers[5] understood cinematic space as a space of truth-telling, in which they could depict facts and reality with film language. Reality, often conveyed poetically, unfolded through multi-layered stories, the merging of past and present, and negotiation between on-screen and off-screen spaces. The writers held that film language and film space could convey both historical reality and ontological enquiry.

The Calvary of Serbia itself has an interesting history: its final form, on the eve of the Second World War, was a product of various distinct stages and had emerged from changes in title and censorship. The film was inspired by Léo Lasko's documentary Der Weltkrieg (DE 1928) and by The Balkan War (Balkanski rat, YU 1928), assembled by Josip Novak and Milan Hofman from archive footage by the film pioneer Đorđe Bogdanović.[6] Andreja Glišić and Zarija Đokić, who had founded the production company Artistik Film in 1926, invited Stanislav Krakov[7] to make a homage to the Serbian people and their struggle

5 The Manaki Brothers, Kosta Novaković, Josip Novak, Miodrag Mika Djordjević, Stevan Mišković, Žarko Djordjević, Andrija and Zarija Djokić, Đorđe Bogdanović and Svetozar Botorić, Mihajlo Al. Popović and Aleksandar Lifka are some of the most important creators of early film.

6 Paraphrased, Erdeljanović 2015, film essay in The Calvary of Serbia, DVD Edition Film Pioneers Vol. 4, Beograd: Jugoslovenska Kinoteka.

7 Krakov was invited as he was a well-known author, journalist, and filmmaker who had received 18 war medals. Erdeljanović 2015.

in the Great War.[8] On 1 May 1930 the documentary was released under its first title, For the Fatherland's Honour, as a silent film. However, that version lacked original material from the Great War that had been lost or destroyed, and to address that issue the producers engaged Stevan Mišković and Andreja Glišić to reconstruct some of the events.[9] Nonetheless, Krakov continued to travel, collecting material from around the world that by 1932 had enabled the creation of what we today know as The Calvary of Serbia, later with music by Milenko Živković and a number of folk songs from the time of the Great War.[10] The film was initially banned in 1940, postponing its premiere to August that year, but after alterations and revisions that addressed, for example, the role of Bulgaria in the Great War, The Calvary of Serbia, alternatively titled Balkans Burning, was screened throughout the country.[11]

With the German occupation in 1941, the film was hidden. It was unearthed after the war, and banned footage was returned to it in the 1970s, when the film was restored by experts led by Stevan Jovičić, a film historian and head of the Film Archive of the Yugoslav Cinematheque.[12] The film had been hidden, Petar Volk argues, not because of the idea as such but rather because of the "politicisation of the film", which required its reduction to "pure factography", with the past detached from any emotional memory.[13] The spiritual dimension related to suffering in war was not permitted, although in fact Krakov had been interested not in victimisation but in the idea of sacrifice rooted in a desire for freedom.[14] When factuality is reduced to factography,[15] it loses not just artistic impact but also its historical meaning. For the purposed of this article "factuality" is used to describe the depiction of a historic event in association with personal and emotional memory. "Factuality", then, is not symbolic, for it is precisely the image, the "everydayness" in effect, that can transcend the ontological.

8 Erdeljanović 2015.

9 Scenes reconstructed with the help of soldiers made available by Army Minister General Stevan Hadžić depicted the legendary crossing of the Albanian mountains, the entry of the troops into liberated Belgrade, and everyday life in occupied Serbia. According to Erdeljanović, no amateur eye would recognise that the footage is not original; see Erdeljanović 2015.

10 Erdeljanović 2015.

11 Erdeljanović 2015.

12 Erdeljanović 2015.

13 Volk 1996, 56.

14 Paraphrased. Volk 1996, 56.

15 Professor Božidar Zečević, personal interview, Belgrade, 27 September 2023.

Approaches and Methods to the Interaction between Film and History

In scholarly investigation of the reality created within the cinematic space, film can be understood as a primary historical source. This article examines the elements of film language that contain and compose the cinematic space.[16] Historian John E. O'Connor developed four major approaches to film and history,[17] and Robert Rosenstone examined how historical films convey the past[18] through six "codes of representation" in mainstream film and in experimental film.[19] While Bill Nichols was concerned with modes of documentary, Rosenstone identified two prevailing approaches: explicit and implicit.[20] The existence of key differences between Nichols and Rosenstone[21] is indicative of the need for further investigation of documentary film, in particular its ability to present reality in a unique and factual way. Rosenstone's has called for the creation of a new frame,[22] and this article proposes a focus on the language with which history is written upon the reel as a method of analysis. Examining *how* something is framed communicates both the historical context (off-screen) and the capacity of the director to negotiate the on-screen (what we see) and off-screen (what we do not see) spaces, allowing the filmed subjects and the immediate conditions in which they are filmed to meet. In this sense, this article proposes a novel category: history *as* film language – an overarching category, with film language central for both historians and documentarists. History and historical content (including the actual events recorded by the camera, such as war, the people, and diverse religious and ethnic communities, events and celebrations) are expressed by the film language. Only if they

16 For discussion of modes and codes of representation see Nichols 2001; Rosenstone 1995; 2012.

17 O'Connor 1990.

18 Rosenstone 2012.

19 Rosenstone 1995, 9–10.

20 According to Rosenstone, the explicit approach "takes motion pictures to be reflections of the social and political concerns of the era in which they were made", while the implicit approach "essentially sees the motion picture as a book transferred to the screen, subject to the same sorts of judgments about data, verifiability, argument, evidence, and logic that we use for written history". Rosenstone 1995, 5–6.

21 Thus Rosenstone, unlike Nichols, has argued that Leni Riefenstahl's work cannot be considered poetic cinema. Robert Rosenstone, personal interview, online, 11 December 2022.

22 Rosenstone 1995, 6.

understand the film language can historians fully assess the on-screen and off-screen realities.

Film language shapes the filmic space, separating what we see from what we do not see. This article considers the continuity of space achieved through fine interactions between physical spaces and the camera, between the on-screen and off-screen spaces. The *who* of this investigation concerns the subjects represented – here individuals and groups in the case of human persons, sacred vessels and religious symbols in the case of objects, and places of worship and public gatherings in the case of physical spaces – while the *how* is the way in which the content is "framed" by means of the film language: narrative, sound, mise-en-scène, camerawork, montage, sound, and editing, for example. It is the "how" that facilitates the reading of the historical and the ways in which content and historical context correspond.

Early film makers developed notable methods for depicting reality and historical events, methods that included unconventional perspectives (found, for example, in the military newsreel), meta-cinematic technique,[23] deep focus,[24] converging narratives, crane photography, an informal approach to formal events, spontaneity, and a multilayered storyline. The way directors built the cinematic space reveals artistic development and the recognition that film language could express what no prior medium could communicate. Their approach, often poetic, revealed emotional and historical realities and their relationship to their subject(s). Nichols noted that "polished artistic expression" might be sacrificed for the sake of actual "history in the making".[25] This is a paradox of "observational documentaries",[26] where camera movement might be not a sign of artistic expression but a consequence of a real-time event, on the battlefield for instance. Although the filmic frame separates "what we see" from "what we do not see", it therefore often includes, implicitly or explicitly, the surrounding context.

23 Zakletva regruta Vardarskog puka (Oath of the Vardar Regiment Soldiers, Đorđe Bogdanović, Cvetković Brothers and Slavko Jovanović, SR 1914).

24 Pogreb potporučnika Živojina Marinkovića (The Funeral of Lieutenant Živojin Marinković, Đorđe Bogdanović, SR 1913).

25 Nichols 1983, 20.

26 Nichols 1983, 20.

The Calvary of Serbia

The Calvary of Serbia's inclusion in the "List of Film Material of Exceptional Significance" is evidence of its great significance for the history and culture of Yugoslavia.[27] On the basis of the extant film material and additional research, Stevan Jovičić was able to reconstruct the banned version of the film, using missing sequences that had been preserved during the Second World War and were in the possession of Đokić's family.[28] No material depicted the scenes of the army's great retreat through Albania and the entry of the army into the liberated capital, but they were reconstructed and added subsequently by Stanislav Krakov and cameraman Stevan Mišković, filmed on authentic locations and with the help of survivors.[29]

For the explanatory intertitles Krakov chose the words of statesmen, historians, and military observers in order to preserve a certain objectivity.[30] The film's opening, with shots of sky and nature creating a sense of peace, is followed by the words of British stateman Edward Grey about "the international skies seemingly looking brighter at the beginning of 1914", so after the Balkan wars. But it cuts immediately to 28 June 1914 and panoramic views of Sarajevo including mosque and city hall, with the change in music an ominous sign of the war to come. The film displays the document containing the Austro-Hungarian Empire's ultimatum of 23 July, followed by intertitles with Edward Grey's commentary and images of clouds enveloping the sky. Intertitles quoting Nikola Pašić, the prime minister of the Kingdom of Serbia – "we do not want the war […] we will not allow them to represent Serbia as a murderous nation" (00:04:49–00:05:03) – cut immediately to preparations by the Serbian army and the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers in Belgrade. The stormy sky is symbolic of the development of the crisis, with the intertitles quoting the telegram sent on 24 July from Regent Aleksandar to the Russian tsar, Nikolai II, and his reply on 27 July[31] and images of Tsar Nicholas II Romanov with the Imperial Russian army and the flag depicting the Icon Not-Made-By-Hands (fig. 1 and fig. 2).

27 *Službeni glasnik SRS* 19/80 in Erdeljanović 2015.

28 Erdeljanović 2015.

29 Erdeljanović 2015.

30 Erdeljanović 2015.

31 "In no case will Russia be indifferent to the fate of Serbia" (DVD Edition), 00:05:32.

Fig. 1: Tsar Nicholas II, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:05:43. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

Fig. 2: Icon and soldiers, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:05:54. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

The intertitles tell viewers of the declaration of war on 28 July with the words of Count Berchtold, "Austria-Hungary considers itself to be in a state of war with Serbia from this moment on" (00:06:03), contrasted with images from newspapers and the message from Regent Aleksandar, "Serbs, defend your hearth and the Serbian people with all your might" (00:06:17). The close-up of soldiers with trumpets and drums, accompanied by music, announces the beginning of the Great War, which will spread to the rest of the world.

The war on the horizon is communicated by the dynamics of the composition: the trumpets and drums, the trenches, the Kalemegdan fortress,

the soldiers on the move are all connected by eclectic montage,[32] which anchors the quick response of the people to the Regent's call. The Battle of Cer is assembled as befits one of the most important battles in Serbian history: the Serbian army forms a human wall, standing before the much stronger enemy (fig. 3), the troops move onto the battlefield (fig. 4), and artillery blasts are seen (fig. 5). The portrayal of the battle ensure the viewer experiences the resolution and perseverance of the unit in challenging circumstances. The army's relationship to the terrain is mapped by means of a remarkable wide shot in which which the soldiers appear to sink into the earth. The shots of the blasts offer a visceral account of the horror of the battle, which consumes people and nature, day and night, in what appears as total destruction.

After what can be considered the first chapter of the story, on the outbreak of the war and the first victory, the film moves on to the counterattack in 1915 and Wilhelm II inspecting his soldiers and to the retreat of the Serbian army and Serbian people following the invasion. The image of a train (fig. 6) conveys the powerful military invasion, displayed through the visual invasion of the frame, with the steel and engine workings entering the shot and consuming the space. That consumption signifies the consumption of the land by the powerful army.

The retreat of the Serbian army, described in the words of Lieutenant-Colonel de Ripert d'Alauzier as "the most difficult in known history" (00:11:21, fig. 7), is depicted by means of a long shot of a bridge. Rising in the background, the mosque is rather a part of the mise-en-scène, and communicates the diversity of religions in the region. The idyllic scenery is ruptured by the soldiers in retreat. This shot is followed by a series of similar crossings: through continuous movement and anticipation of bridges to come, the continuity of space and a sense of uninterrupted time are achieved.

The patriarchate of Peć, the heart of Serbian statehood and faith, is framed by the army and the mountains. Placed behind smoke and with soldiers in the foreground and high mountains rising in the background, the silhouette of the patriarchate is merged within the space (fig. 8). The shot conveys the sanctity of the space (the whiteness and stillness of the build-

32 Unlike the rhythmic montage of Eisenstein, here the montage concerns the dynamic connection of images. It does not connect the shots conceptually but instead has diverse images speak to one another through a masterful tension between movement and stasis and an often-surprising order.

Fig. 3: A human wall (restaged), film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:07:00. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

Fig. 4: The battlefield (restaged), film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:07:14. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

Fig. 5: The blast, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:07:21. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

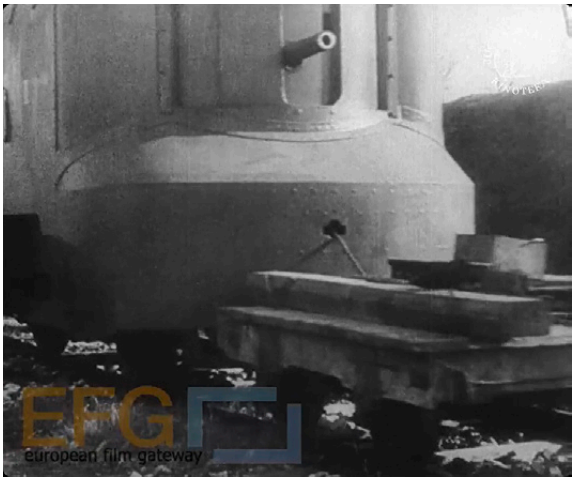


Fig. 6: The invasion, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:09:51. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

Fig. 7: The retreat (restaged), film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:11:28. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

ing) in which the soldiers seek refuge, but it serves simultaneously as an image of Golgotha, or Calvary, that is, of trials yet to come.

The film includes the retreat across the Albanian mountains, restaged because no original film was available. Kravoc re-enacted the event with the help of survivors and the military.

The film captures the horror of the "Albanian Golgotha" in one particular shot: a commander inspects frozen soldiers on the mountain; finding no one alive, he pauses, removes his hat, and crosses himself, before continuing farther with his own men (fig. 9). Framed on a steep terrain and contrasted

Fig. 8: The Serbian patriarchate of Peć (restaged), film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:13:37. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

Fig. 9: "Albanian Golgotha", film still (restaged), The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:15:26. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

with the whiteness of the snow, the image of the stillness of the commander above the dead soldiers transcends the ontological, binding together life and death. The shot provides a poetic negotiation between on-screen and off-screen spaces: on the one hand it provides a durational experience of horizontality, with a stream of soldiers moving through the frame, carrying their experience of war into the shot, where they come face to face with death, and then onward, out of the shot; on the other hand, the shot lyrically goes beyond verticality, with the immensity of the mountain whose ascent awaits the soldiers beyond the screen.

The film follows historical events chronologically, moving on to shots of the Thessaloniki front and to the island of Corfu, showing surviving soldiers, their recuperation, and their activities. The images are followed by the Serbian folk song "There, Faraway" ("Tamo daleko"), which was composed on Corfu in 1916. Inducing a slower pace and introducing a sense of the sacred, the images of the soldiers and the scenes in which they appear create a country life, with the focus on the faces of the children conveying a memory of home. Here the director achieves a continuity of space, in which image, time, and memory merge.

Here the core of the film is created through the integration of the sacred into a story of the Great War. The Easter Troparion, sung during religious services, conveys the resurrection of the spirit of the survivors of the Albanian Golgotha. Faith is expressed as a source of life and strength for the "peasant-soldiers" and is strongly connected to the idea of home. Krakov includes the traditional Serbian *Slava*, a celebration of the patron saint of each family and a commemoration of the living and the dead.[33] The preparation of the food and the ceremonial prayer (fig. 10) in the presence of Regent Aleksandar (fig. 11) provide an almost unique cinematic record of the importance of wartime religious ritual in the life of Serbs. This material, particularly the Slava celebration, is significant both for ethnologists and historians in presenting a formative aspect of Serbian Christian Orthodoxy in a time of war.

Lacking any sense of spectacle and pietism, this footage, which is neither staged nor manipulated and has the camera moving seemingly "without a plan" (as is often the case in early cinema from this region), shows exactly what is happening – a religious ritual that embeds a memory of life and death within Orthodox Christianity. Yet while the Slava celebration is shown as an actual event, it is given an ontological dimension within the film, for inserted in the midst of the battles (chronologically), it provides a certain silence and stillness to the action. This footage, which contains historical factuality, serves as a metaphor for memory (the custom of Slava as memorial of the living and the dead) and in a broader sense functions as historical material, for it contains the story of the calvary. The filmmaker(s) thus sidestep ideological pitfalls, and through this observation of a religious custom Krakov further contemplates the suffering of war.

This ceremony serves as a depiction of the life of the survivors between battles. Slava is cerebrated in a foreign land, but it is a feast tied to the

33 The Slava traditionally marks the day on which a family ancestor was baptised, a moment that is then passed down from generation to generation. It forms an image of the Eucharist, see Paković 2015, 128.

Fig. 10: Celebrating Slava during the war, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:22:05. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

Fig. 11: Regent Aleksandar and Slava prayer, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:22:07. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

family home. Slava, a domestic-religious event and deliberate act of commemoration, is depicted as integral to life, as a source of inner strength and motivation. The shot is followed by music, with the national anthem and the Troparion of the Holy Martyrs.[34] The review of the reinvigorated army by Regent Aleksandar in 1916 is illustrated in his own words: "May the great and powerful Yugoslav Empire be realised" (00:23:46). The Regent

34 The Troparion of the Orthodox Church, celebrating the 40 Holy Martyrs of Sebaste, is sung at weddings and in Serbian tradition also at Slava celebrations.

Fig. 12: "The French boat is sailing" – Serbian soldiers, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:27:30. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

is filmed in close proximity as he interacts with the soldiers who surround him, standing as one of the people. The film then follows the assembling of various army groups from Corfu, which prepare for battle in Old Serbia.[35]

The departure of the army on the sea, waving to the camera, provides an iconic image (fig. 12) that transcends other meanings of departure to suggest departure from this world, the final farewell. It depicts the historical context and the soldiers themselves in Thessaloniki, as would be described in many poems and songs in the decades to come. The inclusion of the song "The French boat is sailing" ("Krece se lađa francuska") in the sound version reminds the viewer of the friendship and common struggle of the Serbs and the French,[36] but it is essentially a dirge for the fallen soldiers buried in the "blue tomb".[37] Krakov takes his time composing the soldiers at sea, paying great attention to detail. He contrasts the scene with the battle of Jutland (fig. 13), where soldiers sang "It's a long way to Tipperary" as their ship went down, an excellent example of parallel montage in documentary film.[38]

35 "If the direction is Old Serbia, the Serbian army will rush into battle with zeal." Quote by General de Mondesir in the film (DVD Edition), 00:26:23.

36 This Serbian war song, included on the DVD, was sung at the harbor at Thessaloniki; its author was Branislav Milosavljević (1879–1944), a poet and an officer.

37 "Ode to a Blue Sea Tomb" was written during the First World War by the Serbian poet Milutin Bojić (1892–1917).

38 "While the ship was sinking, the crew sang a famous song 'Tipperary.'" Quote by H. W. Wilson in the film (DVD Edition), 00:30:38.

Fig. 13: "Tipperary" – The Battle of Jutland, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:29:57. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

Fig. 14: Thessalonica Camp, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:33:21. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

The film takes us back to "solid Balkan soil", showing the completion of the disembarkation of 118,000 Serbs.[39] It shifts from the depiction of the camp (fig. 14), to the arrival of the Russian troops, to the night attack in Thessaloniki. The depiction of the famous battle of Kajmakčalan is unique: the soldiers are hidden in the trenches with their rifles perched above ground and leaning on a wall that stretches across the frame, with a white stone church standing above it. The wall punctuates the visual divide between earth and sky, life and death (fig. 15).

39 Quote by General Sarrail in the film (DVD Edition), 00:32:53.

Fig. 15: The church and the soldiers, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:38:59. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

Fig. 16: The fallen, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:42:54. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

The scenes from the battlefield include depictions of the cavalry, the conquering of the top of Kajmakčalan, nighttime battles and a panning shot of the mountain swathed in the bodies of fallen soldiers (fig. 16).

The film includes the unique filmic record of King Petar I at Khalkidhiki (fig. 17), followed by shots of destroyed structures at Bitola, which are connected by panning shots, the remarkable continuity giving the impression of one continuous take. This continuity is punctuated by a contrast shot of the mosque and the people who emerge from the destruction. Krakov opens a "new chapter" with the American entry into the war. For five minutes he goes to great effort

Fig. 17: King Petar I of Serbia, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:49:21. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

Fig. 18: The Memorial, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 00:57:55. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

with a combination of wide shots of challenging ascents, close-ups of military action, night photography, and intensive parallel editing. The film returns to Thessaloniki and in a highly succinct fashion, with just three successive shots, shows the commemoration of fallen soldiers in a Serbian camp behind the frontline: a monument, a soldier, and a plaque bearing the names of the fallen. Together they convey a palpable and dynamic connection between the living and the dead, a technique that had first been displayed as early as 1913 (fig. 18).[40]

40 Radovic 2023, 16.

Fig. 19: Krajputaši, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 01:03:26. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

The final year of the war starts with preparations for the counteroffensive. Here Krakov uses staged material – he lacked original film that portrayed everyday life at home – that positions the efforts of the peasant-soldiers that the viewer has seen thus far as a struggle for the preservation of home. The inclusion of Krajputaši – roadside stone memorials to fallen soldiers, carved with soldiers and bearing an epitaph, is an early cinematic depiction of, and thus also recognition of, the unique decentralised cultural memorials erected across the land in remembrance of the Great War (fig. 19).

Krakov connects the images of Krajputaši (fig. 19) – the dead keepers of the land – with soldiers in action,[41] as if the deceased soldiers are looking on at those still alive and continuing their fight, thus connecting the spaces of the past and the dead with the spaces of the present and the living (fig. 20). The successive images of the battle are connected by images of the Regent at his post. The battles connect with images of devastated landscapes, villages, and towns that the Serbian army encounters. Footage of post–First World War Prilep, a lively picture of the town, is contrasted with further difficult progress through steep and poorly passible terrain, "without rest, with the last strength of both men and horses"[42] (fig. 21).

41 *Solunci*, or Thessalonians, is used in the intertitles to denote the soldiers who survived the "Albanian Golgotha" and the Thessaloniki front.

42 Quote by Franchet d'Esperey in the film (DVD Edition), 01:13:08.

Fig. 20: Soldiers in action, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 01:03:43. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

Fig. 21: Advancing through enemy lines, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 01:13:10. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

The film continues with shots of liberated places such as Kavadar and Skopje, displaying buildings with the Allies' flags, and the capitulation of Bulgaria. The liberation of Niš is depicted through "still shots" of crosses that emerge from nature and the stonework to affirm both suffering and sacrifice as landmarks of the new life that will emerge after Calvary (fig. 22).

The film closes with reconstructed shots of the entry of the Serbian army into Belgrade (no original film material was available). The last shot, of a soldier with a half-torn flag in fade-out (fig. 23), is a simple shot that con-

Fig. 22: Liberation of Niš, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 01:17:52. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

Fig. 23: A soldier with a torn flag. Fade out, film still, The Calvary of Serbia (Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940), 01:20:41. Courtesy of Yugoslav Cinematheque.

veys the endurance of a people and the emergence of a new country from the ashes.

Conclusion

The Calvary of Serbia was initially conceived as a compilation of predominantly foreign film material about events between the Sarajevo assassination, in June 1914, and the entry of Serbian troops into Belgrade, in October

1918.[43] The film speaks from the position of the Allied powers, focused primarily upon the Serbian army. The director's primary concern is the meaning of the suffering of Serbia, but he also progressively introduces into the film the struggles of South Slavs for their liberation. Krakov's patriotism, Pan-Slavism and understanding of nationhood, Serbian and Yugoslav, and stance on the First World War must be located within Krakov's own time. They should not be misread, nor should they be miscontextualised by being loaded with the meanings of the Balkans that emerged especially with the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Krakov planned to show the events chronologically and accurately and to claim objectivity, to which end he used the words of generals, army officials, and kings as intertitles introducing, explaining, or connecting scenes and spaces. Later, in the version of the film with sound, Krakov used the score as a form of narration, with the music related to specific events and including a number of songs that originated during the war, and its tempo, including changes in pace, following the montage.

The composition of the film, including the use of intertitles and music, makes evident the director's capacity to construct a full-length documentary film by bringing together historical footage. This single-part documentary of 140 minutes, assembled from original material and reconstructed scenes, demonstrates artistic achievements from the previous decades: deep focus, active panning shots to connect the spaces, people, and objects, parallel editing, spontaneous camera work, informal approaches, long tracking shots that convey the wholeness of spaces, shifts from close-ups to wide shots, people themselves contrasted with the bird-eye perspective and panorama shots; taken together they they create a dynamic aesthetic unique to the documentary film. The attempt to achieve an accurate picture of these events is supported by Krakov's negotiation of on-screen and off-screen space(s), with his personal approach to a specific historical event unfolding subtly and poetically. His framing of the war by juxtaposing sequences of the stillness of nature, on one hand, with battles, crosses, and broken objects, on the other, introduces a certain contemplation of war as a common tragedy.

What kind of documentary is The Calvary of Serbia? The film merges a poetic approach to factual reality (the historical events), intertitles with

43 Kosanović 2011, 131.

quotations that avoid generalisations, observation and "empty" time,[44] presence on the battlefield (through cameramen), realism – how the past actually felt – and makers of different footage to foster participation in the events depicted. The film offers historical evidence and insight into values of the past.[45] The process whereby the film was made was experimental, and the filmed spaces, geographical and physical, "become history because of what they mean to people of a particular time and place".[46]

The film is not explicitly concerned with religion. Krakov is interested in religion only as a part of the story, and religion as shown in the film is neither decisive nor inspirational for the war. But the film *is* concerned with expressions of faith and their role on both personal and communal levels. The explicit approach to the sacred through depictions of religious celebrations and customs such as prayer, commemoration, and the sign of cross (people cross themselves in both tragic and celebratory moments) makes religious faith a source of meaning and strength, a memory of home, and a contemplation of life and death. The memory of home is contextualised within the sacred through group celebrations. By framing the custom of Slava in the midst of the war, the film connects spaces (Greece, where the army is, and Serbia, where Slava is traditionally celebrated). An additional implicit approach to the sacred is present in the film language: the continuity of space produces a continuity of time, in which the memory of home evoked by a sacral event gives past and present an ontological and eschatological dimension. By connecting past and the present, as in the example of the Krajputaši (fig. 19) and the living soldiers (fig. 20), Krakov locates suffering within the sacred and liturgical realty of "timeless time". Overall, Krakov uses the capacities of film language for representation and contemplation of the meanings of faith for the people involved.

An exceptional historical document about the Great War, The Calvary of Serbia has much to contribute to research into documentary cinema, war cinema, and the history of this geographical area. It unites historical facts (events), historical material (including the reconstruction of some events), and historical memory. The facts and material serve to tell a story, but memory, skilfully contemplated through the cinematic space, serves to relay a tragedy. Although imbued by patriotism, the film de-romanticis-

44 Nichols 2001, 112.

45 Welsh 2004, 10–12.

46 Rosenstone 1995, 1–2.

es war and transforms the experience of war, perhaps for the first time on the screen when it comes to feature-length war documentaries. By personalising the human tragedy Krakov shifts away from the heroic story to draw attention to the human condition. His last shot conveys victory, but at the same time it communicates loss and suffering on a far more poetic level. In depicting the Great War, The Calvary of Serbia provides a vivid experience of the past that makes it a vital source for both film and historical studies.

Bibliography

Abel, Richard (ed.), 2010, *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, London / New York: Routledge.

Aitken, Ian (ed.), 2005, *Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film*, Abingdon / New York: Routledge.

Erdeljanović, Aleksandar, 2015, *The Calvary of Serbia (Balkans Burning; For the Fatherland's Honour)*, Belgrade: Jugoslovenska Kinoteka.

Goulding, Daniel J., 2002, *Liberated Cinema: The Yugoslav Experience 1945–2001*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Jovičić, Stevan, 2019, The Cinema in Serbia 1896–1941, *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 10, 3, 288–300.

Kosanović, Dejan, 2011, *Kinematografija i Film u Kraljevini SHS / Kraljevini Jugoslaviji 1918–1941*, Belgrade: Filmski Centar Srbije.

Levi, Pavle, 2007, *Disintegration in Frames: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Cinema*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Nichols, Bill, 1983, The Voice of Documentary, *Film Quarterly* 36, 3, 17–30.

Nichols, Bill, 2001, *Introduction to Documentary*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

O'Connor, John E., 1990, *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television*, Malabar, FL: Krieger.

Paković, Nikola, 2015, Slava ili krsno ime kod Srba, *Glasnik Etnografskog instituta SANU* 63.

Radovic, Milja, 2023, Reframing Space: Religion, History, and Memory in the Early Documentary Film of the Yugoslav Space, *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol. 27, Issue 2, 2023, 1–39.

Rosenstone, Robert A., 1995, The Historical Film as Real History, *Film-Historia* 5, 1, 5–23.

Rosenstone, Robert A., 2012, *History on Film / Film on History (History: Concepts, Theories and Practice)*, Abingdon / New York: Routledge.

Slijepčević, Bosa, 1982, *Kinematografija u Srbiji, Crnoj Gori, Bosni i Herzegovini 1896–1918*, Belgrade: Institut za Film.

Službeni glasnik SRS (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia), 19/80, Belgrade.

Volk, Petar, 1996, *Srpski film*, Belgrade: Institut za Film.

Welsh, Jim, 2004, A Pioneer of Historic Proportions, *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 34, 2, 10–12.

Filmography

Der Weltkrieg (Léo Lasko, DE 1928).
Golgota Srbije (The Calvary of Serbia aka For the Fatherland's Honour aka Balkans Burning, Stanislav Krakov, YU 1932/1940).
Pogreb potporučnika Živojina Marinkovića (The Funeral of Lieutenant Živojin Marinković, Đorđe Bogdanović, SR 1913).
The Balkan War (Balkanski rat, YU 1928).
Zakletva regruta Vardarskog puka (Oath of the Vardar Regiment Soldiers, Đorđe Bogdanović, Cvetković Brothers, and Slavko Jovanović, SR 1914).

Media Reviews

Anna-Katharina Höpflinger

Book Review
Elke Pahud de Mortanges, Bodies of Memory and Grace

Der Körper in den Erinnerungskulturen des Christentums

Zürich: Pano 2022, 238 pages
ISBN: 978-3-290-22062-4

In the beginning was the word? Yes, perhaps. But in the beginning was also the body – and it was and still is the central place of memory in Christianity. This thesis, as clear as it is revealing, is the basis of this work by Elke Pahud de Mortanges. The central Christian themes of remembrance and commemoration – of the incarnation, the passion, and the resurrection, for example – take place in flesh and blood. Different moments can be highlighted. The body of Jesus is a foundation of Christian memory cultures, prominently depicted from childhood to the cross and resurrection and located at the core of various rituals. Additionally, the bodies of believers play a central role in religious acts, in prayers, in vestimentary habits, in strong emotions, for example, but also in more "violent" acts such as self-mortification. And finally, the body in Christianity is part of a wider network of remembrance culture, on which art and popular culture build. The book emphasises the complexity and interrelations of these different moments, skilfully guiding the reader through historical and contemporary examples to demonstrate the centrality of the body to the formation of cultural and religious memory.

The three-part book is held together by the artwork *Gaby* from the series *Vírgenes de la Puerte* by Andrew Mroczek and Juan José Barboza-Gubo. This artwork also adorns the cover of the book: it shows Gaby, a transgender woman, sitting upright on a red sofa and looking at those watching her. She

DOI: 10.25364/05.10:2024.1.7

is wearing a white bra and a long patterned skirt. A huge crown of thorns hovers above her, hanging halfway down her face. Early on (p. 15), the book argues that the crown is a "memorial icon"; it awakens within us memories of Christian imagery. With its connections to the body, imagination, representation, and religion – and the interconnectedness of these four – the cover image is an ideal introduction to and guide through the book.

Following an introduction, Part A, "Grundlegung" (Foundation), is dedicated to locating the concepts of "memory", "body", and "embodiment" in previous research and to explaining the theoretical framework of the study. Pahud de Mortanges defines religion as a system of communication that creates identity by asking fundamental human questions (p. 29). Remembrance is thus important in forming community and tradition. It is a performative act and creates a religious (and cultural) memory based on the body. From this perspective, religion is always plural, both material and bodily. Christianity is thus to be understood not as a homogeneous entity, but as part of a complex of processes with the body at its center (p. 30). As a medium of communication, as a place of memory, as a space for the construction of social and religious reality, and as also a moment of emotion and experience, the body plays the central role in this Christian plurality. "Doing Christianity" and "doing memory" are therefore useful concepts for grasping this bodily foundation of Christian cultures (p. 35). The body can be a writing surface as well as an object of discourse and a platform for negotiation on which fundamental questions are performed and religious worldviews are developed and mirrored.

These thoughts are elaborated in the second and main part of the book. Part B, "Erkundungen" (Explorations), is dedicated to how bodies are shaped and transformed in different Christian cultures of remembrance, with a focus on the *memoria passionis*. This section is a rich and exciting journey through the history of religion and brings insights into a variety of religious environments, groups, individuals, and perspectives – with great pictures, by the way. From bodily painful appropriations of the memory of Christ (by the medieval Flagellants, for example, pp. 115–120) to mysticism and art, the journey leads us into the plurality of cultures of remembrance in Christianity and considers the deep connections between the body, ideas, practices, and religion. Gender is thereby a central topic, especially the body that transcends gender borders. Christ as birth-bearer or as mother is thematised, as is the crossing of gender boundaries by believers. This investigation produces a revealing grasp of Christian memory cultures and their interrelations with the body.

In Part C, "Lehrstück" (Lesson), we find a reflection on the scholarly approach to the interrelation of the body and religion. The author also changes her perspective on the artwork *Gaby*. In parts A and B, this image functioned as a stimulus to further reflection. In this final section, by contrast, the author seeks to do justice to the artwork itself, freeing it from its role as "eye opener". The artwork, the person it depicts, and its artists are not simply "objects" for scholarly analysis; they each have their own agency, and in this case these agencies are intertwined. Gaby, the protagonist of the artwork, has a right to her own story: the artwork refers to Christian cultures of remembrance, but it also tells the story of Gaby and her transgender sisters. In this final part, Pahud de Mortanges focusses on the complex internarrative of this artwork. She takes us back to religious history and combines this journey with reflections on art, and the political activism of the transgender community.

The book ends with a contribution in English by Andrew Mroczek and Juan José Barboza-Gubo, the two artists behind the artwork that guides us through the book – they too have a voice. Their reflections on *Gaby* bring a new perspective on the subject of the study.

The paths followed by this book provide various perspectives: they take the reader into the history of religion, elaborate theoretical reflections on body and religion, and invite the reader into the multifaceted world of art, but the book is also a reflection in itself. It asks what happens if the body is taken as central to understanding religious memory. The author calls for the plurality of Christianity to be recognised and acknowledged both historically and systematically. That approach includes the self-empowerment of the transgender community in Christianity.

Bodies of Memory and Grace is a remarkable book. It is singular, innovative, profound, and refreshing. Starting with a single work of art, it explores an ever-widening circle of questions both theoretically and empirically, opening up a fascinating world for the reader. It does precisely what a good book should do: it stimulates reflection.

This work is particularly insightful in demonstrating how looking at the body questions, alters, and reflects our understanding of religion. Emphasis on the bodily basis for remembrance and memory provides a unique perspective on Christianity (or better: Christianities) and the people within it. This multifaceted approach brings phenomena, perspectives, and questions together, instead of separating them. After all, people are bodies – in all their complexity.

I recommend this book to anyone who wants to reflect on the interplay between religion, memory, and the body and is prepared to question their own assumptions as well as traditions of thought and of memory.

Stefanie Knauss

Series Review
African Folktales Reimagined
(6 Episodes, Various Directors, Netflix/UNESCO 2023)

Since the 1990s, African cinema has developed in national industries across the continent, both as the popular melodramas associated with Nollywood and in arthouse films that markedly depart from the cinema of misery and suffering previously associated with African cinema on the Western festival circuit. Films of diverse styles and genres reflecting African self-confidence while taking on the social and political problems of their context are attracting the attention of film critics and audiences in Africa and beyond.

A short-film competition sponsored by UNESCO and Netflix provides a taste of this new African cinema, its range of visual styles, forms of story telling, and issues to engage with. The six winners were supported in realizing their films, which were released on Netflix in March 2023 in the compilation African Folktales Reimagined (6 episodes, various directors, Netflix/UNESCO 2023), making this cinema accessible to a wider audience. The short films engage folktales in different ways: by explicitly drawing on traditional stories – imagined or with historical aspects – by focusing on mythical figures, or by developing their own folktales.

Katera of the Punishment Island, by Ugandan director Loukman Ali, begins with an animated sequence explaining the function of the (historical) island to which unmarried pregnant women were exiled. It then continues with the story of one of these women, Katera, who takes revenge on the man who killed her family and was responsible for her miscarriage. While the acting and dialogue are somewhat wooden in places, the clever animation and the visuals reminiscent of a Western in this story of a woman taking back power make up well for this weakness.

Halima's Choice, by Nigerian director Korede Azeez, contrasts the traditional life of the village with a futuristic high-tech world in which humans can upload themselves into the virtual world Napata (also the name of the

DOI: 10.25364/05.10:2024.1.8

capital of the ancient kingdom of Kush, today northern Sudan). A stranger (who turns out to be one of Napata's AIs) offers Halima the possibility of escaping from an unwanted arranged marriage into the beautiful, bountiful world of Napata, but she chooses the real world, determined to find her own way in it.

Anyango and the Ogre, by Kenyan director Voline Ogutu, begins with the tale of a woman whose husband turns out to be an ogre whom she has to kill to save herself and her children, set in an unspecified time and place of the past. This tale, at first read by the oldest of Anyango's three children, blends into their own story of domestic abuse, from which Anyango has to rescue her family. Anyango's "reality" is a dystopian world where suitable young women are selected to be married and live in the "blue zone", with all the material comforts of modernity, while single mothers and older women are relegated to the "grey zone", a dusty place of rudimentary huts and simple agriculture supplemented by foraging for food in the trash from the blue zone. Yet when Anyanga escapes to the grey zone, she is greeted by laughter, her children are whisked away to play, and what appears at first to be a poor and desolate place is filled with female companionship and solidarity.

Enmity Djinn, by Mauritian director Mohamed Echkouna, focuses on the tradition of a djinn who can be anchored into a place by an amulet to sow discord and create conflict. This is first shown in the setting of a nomadic family whose members are all killed in a raid but for one small girl, whose touch makes the djinn disintegrate. Decades later, the girl has become an old woman, and the djinn appears again to haunt her family until she is able to use her spiritual powers to make it disappear.

Tanzanian director Walter Mzengi's short film Katope deals with the social stigma of infertility and childlessness and the challenge posed to a desert people by prolonged droughts. In her despair, a woman forms a girl out of clay, her "birth" marking the beginning of a drought. When the girl, Katope, encounters a strange black bird – possibly a herald of rain – the village elders decide that she is instrumental to the success of their rain rituals. While her mother tries to hold her back, Katope joins the ritual, which is granted success but at a cost: as the rain begins to fall, a close-up shows Katope's hand disintegrating under the water, explaining the years of drought which protected her life while threatening that of the others.

The final short film, MaMlambo, by the South African director Gcobisa Yako, returns to the issue of domestic and gender-based violence, connecting it with the tradition of a female water spirit, known under different

names across African cultures. A woman escaping from abuse tries to commit suicide in the River without Return but is rescued by an enigmatic woman living at the river whose responsibility it seems to be to save or at least provide a proper burial for the women who seek escape from violence in suicide. When the water-spirit woman succumbs to an illness and disappears in the river, the younger woman takes over her role as protector and savior of mistreated women.

While the films well reflect the competition's goal of "promoting diverse local stories",[1] three broad themes can be discerned across their wide range of visual styles (these include for example animation, realistic styles, the use of contrast of faded and oversaturated colors) and story lines told for the most part in an array of local languages. First, and most obviously, all the films center female characters, of all ages, from small girls to grandmothers, and the injustices that women face: being punished for pregnancy out of wedlock, pushed into unwanted marriages, forced to adhere to strict gender role expectations, as well as being abused and experiencing violence at the hands of men. These forms of sexism are clearly named and recognized in the films, yet their female protagonists are not represented as simply victims. Instead, they are shown to possess considerable inner strength and spiritual powers, and they claim the freedom to make their own choices. Interestingly, this focus on female empowerment and agency does not come with a one-dimensional characterization of all male characters as villains. While there are those men who abuse women (Anyango's husband, the "ogre", or Gregory, the murderer of Katera's family), there are also others who support their dignity, such as the nameless man who teaches Katera to use a gun when she takes revenge on Gregory, or Umar, the AI who offers Halima the option to upload to Napata, so that she has the power – denied to her by the male elders – to make her own choice about where her life should take her.

The second theme cutting across the films is the way in which tradition and past interact with the present or, in the case of Halima's Choice or Anyango and the Ogre, even the future. The films show the past continuing to be present in the contemporary moment, in the experiences of individuals, the stories they tell each other, the customs that shape their lives. This blurring of the clear demarcations between past, present, and future is accompanied by a critical perspective on both traditional and modern ways of

1 UNESCO 2022.

life: neither romanticizing the past nor glorifying the possibilities of modern technology, they soberly point out the ways in which both can be harmful and how both can also offer positive resources for the flourishing of, especially, girls and women.

A third striking element is the attention that the films pay to the natural beauty of African landscapes in all their variety of lush green forests, lakes and rivers, mountains, and deserts. These images do not serve simply to satisfy Western expectations of seeing the Africa of safaris. They function to integrate their human protagonists into their natural environment, such as Katope into her world of the desert, even if it is also clear that living in such interconnectedness with creation is not necessarily easy.

MAMLAMBO's director Gcobisa Yako has highlighted in an interview that films can preserve traditional stories that might otherwise be forgotten under the influence of colonialism and globalization.[2] This compilation of reimagined or even new folktales suggests that films can do more than function as archives. As folktales themselves, offering new and old compelling stories to be told and retold, watched and rewatched, they tell us about the world with its hidden mysteries and about human life in it, the adversities faced by human beings and the resources they find to flourish.

Bibliography

Kimeu, Caroline, 2023, African Film-makers Reimagine Folktales as Dark Fantasy Dramas for Netflix, *The Guardian*, 10 April 2023, https://tinyurl.com/86zr7n34 [accessed 23 November 2023].

UNESCO, 2022, Netflix & UNESCO Announce the Winners of the "African Folktales, Reimagined" Short Film Competition, 15 March 2022, https://tinyurl.com/4juprwn3 [accessed 23 November 2023].

2 Gcobisa Yako in Kimeu 2023.

Jacques Linder

Music Review
Kesha, *Gag Order*

Kemosabe Records / RCA Records, US 2023

With songs such as "TiK ToK," "We R Who We R" and "Your Love is My Drug", Kesha made her brand of party pop known on American radios and during middle and high school dances during the late 2000s and early 2010s. During the ascendance of popstars such as Katy Perry and Lady Gaga, Kesha's work stuck out as a particular brand of dirtbag pop that disregarded rules and encouraged living for the moment through dancing, partying, and imbibing substances.

However, Kesha's public image would change in 2014, when she sued to be released from her contract with producer Lukasz Gottwald, known as Dr. Luke, for emotional and sexual abuse over many years, including rape and unfair business dealings.[1] Dr. Luke countersued in multiple states for defamation. Kesha's cases were dismissed because the statute of limitations had expired and one judge did not believe her claims lived up to the merits of the accusation.[2] Thus, she was still obligated to create music for Dr. Luke's label, Kemosabe. Though Dr. Luke is no longer a producer on any of Kesha's albums, he will still reap the financial rewards of Kesha's work. Within this context, it is apt that her fifth and final album on the label with which she signed a contact at the age of 18 is entitled *Gag Order*, designed as *GAƆ OЯDER*.

The album's title is a play on Kesha's legal situation. She said to Rolling Stone, "I feel as if there has been an implied gag order for a very long time now […] with my ongoing litigation hanging over my head, I have not been able to speak freely because I know everything I say is scrutinized."[3] The

1 Coscarelli/Rogers 2016.
2 Coscarelli 2016.
3 Ehrlich 2023.

DOI: 10.25364/05.10:2024.1.9

album runs 38 minutes and 58 seconds with 13 tracks. Three tracks were released as singles – "Eat the Acid"/"Fine Line" (dual single) and "Only Love Can Save Us Now". While she cannot speak about her abuse directly, she does gesture at it throughout the album, as she has done on previous records. This album reaches, however, a deeper emotional level than previous records. She has had what she has called a "spiritual awakening".[4] She is conscientious of her trauma and wishes to confront her audience about its aftermath.

While Kesha is not "religious" in the traditional sense herself, religious imagery saturates her album. She considers herself a "seeker", and this album includes passing references to Jesus, God, and resurrection, as well as invocations of spiritual gurus such as Ram Dass, Osho, and Oberon Zell. This is not her first time employing religious allusion. *Rainbow*, her first album after her suit against Dr. Luke, contained the power ballad "Praying", where Kesha sings:

> You brought the flames and you put me through hell
> I had to learn how to fight for myself
> And we both know all the truth I could tell
> I'll just say this is "I wish you farewell"
> I hope you're somewhere prayin', prayin'

In the song's climax, Kesha belts, "Somethings only God can forgive" before hitting the high note. On her 2020 album *High Road*, Kesha declares in the synth-pop song "Raising Hell", "I don't want to go to heaven without raising hell." The spiritual allusions within Kesha's discography are ripe for analysis beyond a short review. However, to pique the interest of the readers of this journal, I will focus on two songs and on some of figures Kesha references in her album.

"Only Love Can Save Us Now" shifts back and forth from synthesizer-based verses to a guitar-centric chorus. She opens the song with a strong stanza:

> Tell a bitch I can't jump this, Evel Knievel
> I'm 'bout to run you down the church and the steeple
> Been baptized in Hollywood in the Cathedral
> The power of Christ compels me, I'm a demon

4 Ehrlich 2023.

Keep singing hallelujah nothing can save us
Goddamn perfection in his image, he made us
Yeah, Jesus take the wheel, I'm going through phases
The bitch I was, she dead, her grave desecrated

The Kesha her audiences are nostalgic for, from the early 2010s with a dollar sign in her name, is now gone. The music industry made her a demon for speaking out against a system from which she cannot be saved. In this way, Kesha's career provides a complex view into the music industry, the power dynamics between producers and artists, and the industry's intersection with gender and capitalism. Listening and reading "Only Love Can Save Us Now" alongside Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) and other studies on demons and witches can provide an intriguing way to think about cultural and political production and theological terms together.

Kesha's own view of the divine can be found in the song "Eat the Acid". The song was inspired by Kesha's mother's warning not to take LSD, which Kesha recounts in the song 23 times with the line "You don't wanna be changed like it changed me." While she has never publicly acknowledged taking acid, Kesha writes that she was changed on a late night in 2020. After that night, there is a world that she cannot unsee, like the world after her mother's psychedelic use. Kesha describes this night as a conversation with God. Writing for *Nylon*, she says, "I felt a wave of golden light pass through my body. A sense of peace. I began to hear what I think of as my true self, my consciousness and soul speak to me. I saw how connected we all are, as cliche as that may sound, and in the damp night in the middle of the summer of 2020 I talked to God."[5] In the song, her lyrics sound ominous during the section that recounts her mother's warning, but then she recounts her own ecstatic moment:

I searched for answers all my life
Dead in the dark, I saw a light
I am the one that I've been fighting the whole time
Hate has no place in the divine

The bridge then has four consecutive repetitions of "in the divine" to bring us to the final chorus. The chorus has the lines, "You said that the universe

5 Sebert 2023.

is magic / Just open up your eyes, the signs are waiting." In the repetition of her mother's warnings, Kesha experiences a spiritual awakening about herself and her trauma in an encounter which she calls divine.

Kesha's spiritual influences are on display throughout the album. A piece of a talk from Ram Dass, author of *Be Here Now*, appears on the "Ram Dass Interlude". Kesha samples Osho, the controversial Indian philosopher and founder of the Rajneesh movement, on "All I Need Is You". While Kesha has not publicly discussed the claims of sexual abuse against Osho and his followers, she notes that this song is about "loving myself, and it's also a love song to my highest form of consciousness and to some sort of God", though the song is about her beloved house cat who died in 2022.[6] Finally, Oberon Zell, self-identified wizard and a founder of the neo-pagan Church of All Worlds, has the first line of the album's final song, "Happy," where he says, "And sometimes you think you're doing the magic/ And sometimes you realize the magic is doing you / And this was one of those moments."

Gag Order speaks of pain, depression, and exploitation. There is hope, divine encounter, but it is mixed with rage. When there is seemingly no one, who is there? Kesha's songs reveal and reflect how one person responds to abuse and loneliness by attempting to make sense of their experience – even when they have been silenced, gagged, or systematically refuted – by finding a source greater than one's self. She did not turn to the outside or to a transcendent force. Rather it was a power from within, a deeper sense of self, which got her in touch with the Kesha we experience on this album. Teachers looking to incorporate music into their curriculum could assign this album or select songs to listen to alongside testimonies of survivors of abuse, theories about the relationship between religion and abuse, or even readings on the question of evil.

In June 2023, a month before their court date, Dr. Luke and Kesha settled his defamation lawsuit. They released a joint statement. Kesha said, "Only God knows what happened that night", a reference to the occasion on when Dr. Luke had allegedly raped her.[7] Dr. Luke continued to deny the allegations. Yet here we find an ever-clear picture that Kesha has faith.

6 Ehrlich 2023.

7 Coscarelli 2023.

Bibliography

Coscarelli, Joe, 2016, New York State Judge Rejects Kesha's Claims in Dr. Luke Case, *New York Times*, 7 April 2016, http://tinyurl.com/46mvdhtn [accessed 10 December 2023].

Coscarelli, Joe, 2023, Dr. Luke and Kesha Settle Defamation Lawsuit, *New York Times*, 22 June 2023, http://tinyurl.com/ys8w2t3d [accessed 10 December 2023].

Coscarelli, Joe / Rogers, Katie, 2016, Kesha vs. Dr. Luke: Inside Pop Music's Contentious Legal Battle, *New York Times*, 23 February 2016, http://tinyurl.com/3ncmp5r8 [accessed 9 December 2023].

Ehrlich, Brenna, 2023, Kesha Reveals Her New Album: "I Really Dug Into my Uglier Emotions", *Rolling Stone*, 25 April 2023, http://tinyurl.com/mtmet48x [accessed 9 December 2023].

Sebert, Kesha Rose, 2023, Kesha Shares Her Manifesto behind New Album "Gag Order", *Nylon*, 25 April 2023, http://tinyurl.com/5n7nujs2 [accessed 11 December 2023].

Discography

Animal (Kesha, US 2010, Kemosabe Records / RCA Records).
Gag Order (Kesha, US 2023, Kemosabe Records / RCA Records).
High Road (Kesha, US 2020, Kemosabe Records / RCA Records).
Rainbow (Kesha, US 2017, Kemosabe Records / RCA Records).

Marie-Therese Mäder

Jury Review
50 Years of the Ecumenical Jury at the Film Festival in Locarno

Adaptions and Transformations

In 2023, the Ecumenical Jury marked its 50th anniversary at the Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland, an event founded in 1946 and now in its 76th edition. The Ecumenical Jury has thus long been a fixture at the festival.

Thanks to artistic director Giona A. Nazzaro and departing president Marco Solari, who served for 23 years, the Ecumenical Jury has maintained a respected position at the festival. The jury is featured prominently in the program book, as the second of the independent juries. Nazzaro and Solari actively participated in various celebrations during the Ecumenical Jury's anniversary year. These events comprised a reception, an ecumenical church celebration, and, as a particular highlight, a panel discussion with Academy Award-winner István Szabó.[1] The internationally acclaimed director received a lifetime achievement award from the churches' film organizations. Simultaneously, the monograph *Menschenbilder in István Szabós Filmwerk* (Schüren, 2023) by Ingrid Glatz, festival delegate and co-president of Interfilm, the International Interchurch Film Organisation, was published. The book delves into analysis of religious motifs and theological themes in Szabó's body of work; its launch was impeccably timed and appropriately celebrated.

These celebrations primarily took place within the church community and marked significant moments during the festival. But the contribution of an ecumenical jury to a festival is not evident to everyone. Members of other juries and festival attendees such as the International Federation of Film Critics, who were viewing entries in the same cinema, approached the Ecumenical Jury with inquiries such as, "What exactly do you do at the Lo-

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUI6QmO3BLY [accessed 13 December 2023].

www.jrfm.eu 2024, 10/1, 150–152
DOI: 10.25364/05.10:2024.1.10

carno Film Festival?" These moments provided an excellent opportunity to discuss the responsibilities and activities of such a jury.

The Ecumenical Jury at the Locarno festival had four members Two members, Micah Bucey and Petra Bahr, represented Interfilm, a Protestant organization (https://www.inter-film.org/), while the other two members, Joachim Valentin and myself, represented the Catholic film organization Signis (https://www.signis.world). This year, the Ecumenical Jury's main prize was awarded to the Italian fiction film Patagonia (IT 2023), by Simone Bozzelli, and a special mention was given to Radu Jude's Nu așteapta prea mult de la sfârșitul lumii (Don't Expect Too Much From the End of the World, RO/FR/KR 2023).

Bozelli's film is distinguished by its artistic quality and a courageous narrative that unfolds as a phoenix-from-the-ashes story, also interpreted as a metaphor for revelation. The focus of the jury's deliberations was how the film communicates values of humanity in a world in crisis, where love is still possible or the only way to survive. The discussion also noted the depiction of human interactions, the care individuals show for one another, their engagement in communities, and the values they either embrace or reject. Additionally, the award recognizes the impact the film has on its audience and how it prompts society to aspire to something better. This perspective is encapsulated in the jury's statement, which highlighted the transformative power inherent in the narrative:

> Yuri leaves his sheltered life to follow the alluring energy of Agostino onto the open road, both must confront the open wounds and scarred histories that have made them who they are and attempt a dangerous journey toward a new horizon: Patagonia hovers precariously between violence and tenderness, obsessiveness and self-discovery, inviting viewers into a space of ambiguity, a place where transgression just might lead to transformation.[2]

Many films in the 2023 Locarno competition demonstrated exceptional artistic accomplishment. Patagonia was recognized by the Ecumenical Jury not just on ethical grounds but also for its artistic quality, with its cinematic portrayal of the challenging relationship of a gay couple, presented as an emotional rollercoaster. The narrative explores human complexities,

2 https://tinyurl.com/rw3ub4yk [accessed 12 December 2023].

achieving a delicate balance between good and bad. It recounts almost insurmountable obstacles between two individuals and suggests that the only true solution is a new beginning founded on love.

Parallels can be drawn between biblical stories and Patagonia, where a new and improved world emerges from complete destruction, reminiscent of the story of Noah's Ark or the Apocalypse. The narrative negotiates social and moral values, sensitizing its audience to existential questions around life and death and to the responsibility each individual and community carries for their fellow human beings.

The value of the Ecumenical Jury's work lies in its substantial contribution to audience awareness of spiritual, social, and ethical values while maintaining a commitment to artistic quality. Its involvement not only promotes public discourse on the role of film in conveying religious narratives and motivations but also underscores within film festival debates how religion adapts to new challenges and undergoes transformations in new contexts. Lastly, the jury members, myself included, found value in engaging in numerous discussions with curious and critical festival attendees about why such a jury should exist. We found a welcome opportunity to explore the role of churches in the public sphere, illustrating the diversity within these institutions.

Bibliography

Interfilm, 2023, Prize of the Ecumenical Jury, Locarno 2023, https://tinyurl.com/rw3ub4yk [accessed 12 December, 2023].

Locarno Film Festival, 2023, Film, Culture and Spirituality: 50 Years Ecumenical Jury in Locarno with István Szabó, YouTube, 10 August 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUI6QmO3BLY [accessed 13 December 2023].

Filmography

Nu așteapta prea mult de la sfârșitul lumii (Don't Expect Too Much From the End of the World, Radu Jude, RO/FR/KR 2023).

Patagonia (Simone Bozzelli, IT 2023).

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

Book Review
Edith Franke / Ramona Jelinek-Menke (eds.), Handling Religious Things

The Material and the Social in Museums

Hildesheim: OLMS, 2022, 233 pages
ISBN: 978-3-487-16077-1, DOI: 10.17192/es2020.0004

Five small statues advance in a neat row, as if part of a procession. They invite us to immerse ourselves in the book *Handling Religious Things. The Material and the Social in Museums*. This cover image gives visual form to key concepts that frame this collection of essays. The statues are diverse, yet although they come from different places and times, have different stories, features and dimensions, materialise different beings, ideas and relationships, they dwell today in the same museum. The statues refer to cultural, religious and museal practices and, most importantly here, they are material things and therefore important sources for reconstructing complex (religious) communication processes that take place every time they are looked at, touched or used.

The collection adopts four approaches, divided across four sections, to unravelling the complexity of things as socio-cultural practices. The first section, "Entering a Complex", offers a general reflection on the roles and transformations of things in museums. The editors of this volume, Ramona Jelinek-Menke and Edith Franke, director of the Religionskundliche Sammlung in Marburg, which was founded in 1927 by Rudoph Otto, introduce the interdisciplinary research project "Dynamics of Religious Things in Museums", whose results are documented in the anthology. The second chapter in this introductory section, "Negotiating Religion in Museums", is co-written by Franke and Anna Matter. Overall "Entering a Complex" focuses on the specific and complex meaning-making processes generated

DOI: 10.25364/05.10:2024.1.11

by objects in relation to their origins, travels and interactions with other things within the specific displays in which they are exhibited and within the various relationships they form with researchers and visitors.

The next three parts of the books are presented as if galleries in a museum. The reader, or visitor, undertakes a fascinating exploration of materiality not simply in terms of the academic study of religion, but also by engaging in an aesthetic relationship with things.

The first gallery, "Religions Things and Social Contexts – Discovering an Entanglement in the Museum", exhibits three essays that provide deep insight into theoretical debates. While Mirko Roth makes a strong argument in favour of considering materiality a fundamental approach to social practices, Peter J. Bräunlein shows by means of analysis of a selected object the challenges and opportunities in considering the inherent agency of things. Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler enriches this section with a historical analysis of the role and function of things and displays in the Near and Middle East. Overall, this section provides an illuminating approach to material religion and the role of the museum from a theoretical perspective, prioritising objects as actively engaged in multipart communication processes that are performed in cultural exchanges and through time.

The second gallery, "Materialisation of Social Processes – Analysing Musealisation", focuses on the status, history and transformations that mould things whose travels have brought them to a museum. The articles collected here are case studies from different times and places. Ekaterina Teryukova, Kerstin Johannsen, Leila Tavangar Ranjbar, Susanne Rodemeier, Ferdinand Liefert, Pardis Eskandaripour and Alisha Meininghaus scrutinise selected things and museums across the world in light of the social processes they materialise as well as the challenges of reconstructing religious settings within a museal context. A cross-reading of this section highlights tensions between the objects, their histories and their contexts, as well as the opportunities and limits of the scholarly categories used to analyse them. Accordingly, this part of the book demonstrates the relevance of the theoretical debate discussed in the introductory part of the volume: things in museums are dynamic and the communication processes they mould and materialise mirror not only socio-religious practices but also the regimes of knowledge that regulate academic approaches.

The third gallery, "Social Transformation by Religious Museum Things – Reflecting Museum Mediation and the Social Environment of Religious Things", enlarges the concept of the museum by considering other social

spaces, such as social media. It critically discusses meaning-making processes arising from museum things in a broader cultural setting, with case studies by Yuriko Yamanaka and a chapter co-written by Ramona Jelinek-Menke and Maike Sieler. An interview with Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, the director of – among other important collections – the State Ethnographical Collections of Saxony and a scholar with broad experience in museum practices and museology, concludes the section (and the book), focusing on the role of museums in forming and transforming approaches and perceptions of religion in contemporary society.

The anthology provides fascinating insights into this research field and opens up reflection on materiality on different levels. The book is rooted in a shared debate, and by means of varied case studies it elucidates the key terms of a common research project. Theory and phenomenology are put in enriching relationship. In exploring thing and museum, the project highlights the inherent transformations and, accordingly, complexities of religious communication in a particular context, and thus under specific circumstances. Things can be understood as materialisations of relationships and communication processes that carry meaning whenever a scholar, curator, museum visitor, believer or indeed anyone at all relates with an object with which they are confronted. The book stimulates thinking about the arrangements of objects and their agency and impact, as well as considering the places and regimes in which they are preserved and displayed. It suggests that academic treatment of museal objects that describes and contextualises them in terms of scholarly method should also embrace sensorial, emotional and aesthetic perceptions as fundamental dimensions of materiality. Things are always at work; they travel and testify to the complexity of religion as a social and cultural practice that resists scholarly attempts to tame it.

JRFM 2025, 11/2
CALL FOR PAPERS

Exploring the Diversity of Representations of Islam in Film and TV Series

This issue of JRFM examines the diversity of media representations of the rich and varied world of Islamic traditions and practices. We recognize that Islam and film interact on many levels, in particular as this medium provides a space for exploring contentious themes, for challenging stereotypes, and for experimenting with imagination. A fresh and unjudgmental approach to this topic is all the more necessary because of the one-sided depiction of Islam and Muslims evident in many film productions – we think here in particular of the stereotypical portrayal of Muslims in relation to national or international security and even terrorism following the events of 9/11. This one-sided representation has had a profoundly negative impact on the perception of Islamic traditions and practices in the West. This issue of JRFM will counter this propensity by specifically exploring the breadth and depth of the relationship between varied practices and traditions of Islam and audiovisual media, particularly films and TV series.

Contributions might include, but are not limited to, topics such as:

- the representation of the diverse and multifaceted traditions and practices of Islam in films and TV series;
- how religious patterns associated with Islamic traditions determine film characters and plots;
- how critical debates on Islam shape and are shaped by media production;
- the tension between modernity and tradition, particularly in filmic representations of migration, gender relations, expectations for women, and intergenerational interactions;
- the analysis of elements of Islamic traditions that so far have found little attention in media representations, such as Sufi mysticism or minority traditions.

We invite contributions from scholars from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, including – but not limited to – religious studies, Islamic studies, diverse theologies, media studies, sociology, digital anthropology, film studies and cultural studies.

The issue also includes an open section for articles on other topics related to the profile of the JRFM. The deadline for all submissions is 15 February 2025. Contributions should be between 5,000 and 6,000 words (including notes and references) in length. They are to be submitted for double-blind peer-review through the journal homepage, www.jrfm.eu. We ask authors to register and follow the instructions for submitting contributions, including taking note of the style guide (https://jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs_jrfm/style). Publication of this issue is scheduled for 15 November 2025. For any questions about the issue or possible contributions, please contact the issue editors: Prof. DDr. Franz Winter (franz.winter@uni-graz.at) and Prof. Dr. Martina Bär (martina.baer@uni-graz.at).

Corrigenda and Retractions

Retraction Notice

JRFM 2023, 9/2, "Here be Dragons", eds. Christian Wessely / Franz Winter / Yukihiko Yoshida:

On January 29, 2024, the article by Jing Li: "The Representation of Rural Christianity in the Films of Gan Xiao'er", published in JRFM, 2023, 9/2, 101–125, doi: 10.25364/05.9:2023.2.6, has been retracted at the request of the author. According to COPE guidelines, the article is still available at https://jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs_jrfm/issue/view/18, marked as "Retracted by author".