

## Research Article

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# From Episodic Novel to Serial TV: *The Handmaid's Tale*, Adaptation and Politics

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the changes in *The Handmaid's Tale*'s moral and political outlook as it tracks different forms of complexity in the novel, the film, and the TV series. While the sense of female empowerment increases with each adaptation of this tale of forced sexual servitude in fictional theocratic state of Gilead, the essay argues that Hulu's TV series (created by Bruce Miller, 2017–) develops an intriguing interaction between the interiority of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel and the exteriority emphasized in Volker Schlöndorff's 1990 film. In so doing, the TV series Escher-twists across related binaries between activity/passivity and personal/political actions as well. By expanding, displacing, and creatively intersecting storylines which the novel cut short, the series weaves an intricate perspectival web that invites the viewer to participate in its mind games.

**Keywords:** *The Handmaid's Tale*, adaptation, TV series, moral complexity, politics, feminism, Margaret Atwood, Volker Schlöndorff, Bruce Miller

## 1 Introduction: Female empowerment with a twist

When the US publishers Doubleday and Anchor Books acquired the rights to *The Testaments* (2019) – Margaret Atwood's sequel to her 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* – they announced that the latter had become “a symbol of the movement against” Donald Trump, “standing for female empowerment and resistance in the face of misogyny and the rolling back of women's rights around the world.”<sup>1</sup>

While Atwood's original writing of *The Handmaid's Tale* certainly foregrounds misogyny and the rolling back of women's rights, readers may well wonder to what extent the novel “stands for” female empowerment: it does, after all, appear to depict Offred as a socially isolated, de-individualized and disintegrating woman in sexual servitude who ends up giving herself over “to the hands of strangers.” The acquisition statement by the publishers certainly makes more sense when we not only take the Donald Trump presidency, but also the novel's adaptations into account.<sup>2</sup> Already in the 1990 film adaptation by celebrated auteur-filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff and veteran playwright and screenwriter Harold Pinter, the protagonist gains a sense of personal and political agency unimaginable from the perspective of the novel, especially when she ends up slaying her Commander and escaping her state of subjection. Hulu's TV adaptation (2017–), marked by an extended continuity afforded by its serial form, turns Offred/June into even more of a

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Evans, “Margaret Atwood's ‘Handmaid's Tale’ Book Sequel Set For 2019.”

<sup>2</sup> Atwood wrote *The Testaments* in part in response to the series (for which she worked as consulting producer), picking up on some of the storylines that showrunner Bruce Miller started adding to the original work, though she takes them in a different direction; the one about “Baby Nichole” being the most notable among them.

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heroic figure who not only singlehandedly overcomes her personal oppressors but additionally turns into a resistance leader all but overthrowing Gilead's vengeful regime. Across these versions, then, we indeed find a radical increase in the sense of female empowerment. Yet it would be just as caricatural to reduce the TV series to a binary opposition between an evil patriarchal state and a heroic fight for liberty as it would be to find but a simple tale of subjection in the novel. Each develops its own sense of complexity in line with the possibilities offered by its medium. I therefore propose to explore the shift of *The Handmaid's Tale's* ethico-political orientation from the perspective of adaptation studies.

Focusing on medium-specific differences between literature and cinema, foundational texts of adaptation studies (such as George Bluestone's classic *Novels into Film* from 1957) have often insisted that novels tend to favor interiority, whereas films take an exterior perspective. Literary narrators, the argument goes, have in principle unlimited access to any character's thoughts and feelings, whereas a camera by default remains outside of its subject. The use of a voice-over is typically dismissed by screenwriter handbooks and gurus as artificial; lengthy internal reflections and monologues are either dismissed or cut back and transcribed as dialogues.<sup>3</sup> While postmodern and post-structural approaches to adaptation have long moved beyond a modernist emphasis on medium specific limitations or possibilities (and the implied criterion of fidelity to the original), I think this distinction between interiority and exteriority is highly relevant and illuminating in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale* saga.

To the extent that the novel tells the tale of (and by) a traumatized Handmaid who is kept in the dark about the society she serves, it is aptly conveyed through its episodic form and its restricted first-person narration, with chapters whose spatiotemporal coordinates can be hard to pin down. Through this form, the likewise disorienting reading experience remains caught up to the point of claustrophobia in the limited perspective of the Handmaid. Such a perspective can hardly be expected to make for a convincing cinematic experience though. For their film adaptation, Schlöndorff and Pinter therefore decided to maximize the distance to the protagonist instead by turning the perspective inside out, thus pushing the classical distinction between the novel's emphasis on interiority and film's typical reliance on exteriority to the limit. Nonetheless, just as the novel ends up offering a twist of its radical internal perspective, the viewer of the film adaptation likewise encounters a glimpse of interiority at the limit. I will argue that the TV adaptation elevates these turns themselves into an aesthetic category. Indeed, it is this Escher twisting of perspectives, which occurs in conjunction with the creative multiplication and interweaving of plotlines characteristic of "complex TV," that ultimately challenges any reading of the TV series in terms of stable oppositions. While the show indeed enhances the sense of female empowerment and resistance referenced in the acquisition statement; it also, more pertinently perhaps, invites the audience to navigate the boundaries between interiority and exteriority, and, by extension, on those between passivity/activity, individuality/collectivity, and the personal/political, and to do so on a case-by-case basis. Before assessing this specific form of televisual complexity through an extensive analysis of the first season's final episode, I will discuss the 1985 novel and the 1990 film in more detail.

## 2 The novel: An I between we's

The opening chapters Atwood's 1985 novel immediately establish important connections between its form and the experience of an isolated, disoriented Handmaid. Significantly, the brief opening chapter, entitled "Night," is conveyed in the first-person plural without specifying who "we" are. Evidently, the narrator identifies herself primarily as a part of a collective or social group, but the identity of the group remains aloof. Indeed, the narration shifts all but imperceptibly from an imaginary past "we" – a group of mini-skirted girls that must once have been chewing gum on the balcony of a gymnasium – to a more recent,

<sup>3</sup> This criticism of the use of voice-over in film is epitomized by screenwriting guru Robert McKee – witness his fictional attack on Charlie Kaufman in Jonze's 2002 film "Adaptation."

actual “we,” identifiable only in retrospect as the Handmaids in training at the in the Red Center during the early days of the new Republic, for whom the gymnasium serves as dormitory. The chapter lacks a stable deictic center, that is: a specified “I here now” serving as a frame of reference for other variable denotations of person, time, and space. In the absence of such a center, grammatical shifters (including “we”) remain afloat.

This absence of a deictic center and of spatiotemporal markers continues in the second chapter, where the plural pronoun “we” is exchanged for the singular “I” and the past tense gives way to the present. Small incongruities in descriptions of the physical space further contribute to a disorienting, jolting reading experience. Not until later in the novel can the reader retrospectively infer that the narrator in the second chapter no longer describes the Red Center but “her” room in the house of Commander Fred and his wife Serena Joy. Or, better, she describes, “not *my* room, I refuse to say *my* [...]”<sup>4</sup> Another room, then, for another identity: One disowned by the narrator, the other unacknowledged by the State.

In the opening chapters, the narration not only shift from “we” to “I,” the I also immediately fractures, splitting into two identities. The first is of an isolated, de-individualized, replaceable Handmaid without past or future, who goes by the proper(ty) name of Offred. The other, pre-Gilead identity goes by an “old name” name the narrator refuses to disclose, shielding it even from the reader: “I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure. I’ll come back to dig it up, one day.”<sup>5</sup> The old name, then, serves to foster a connection between past and future, as a beacon of hope, even as her old identity is disintegrating: Offred suggests she has been subjected to psychochemical experiments causing amnesia.<sup>6</sup>

Taken together, the lack of a deictic center, the episodic chapters, and the first-person narration align the reader’s experience with Offred’s disorientation, “reduced circumstances,” and want of larger contexts. The absent or unstable deictic center bears further significance considering that being “I here now” is precisely what Offred often seeks to avoid as a Handmaid, especially during the one event that practically defines her: the Ceremony (an event I shall discuss later on).

The novel formally acknowledges this discrepancy between the narrator’s temporally extended (if disintegrating) sense of self and Offred’s repetitive cycles of daily routines and monthly Ceremonies by alternating its chapters.<sup>7</sup> Continuing the pattern set up in the opening chapters, Offred relates her fantasies and struggles to hold on to her recollections in short chapters, which, like the opening, are all (but one) entitled “Night.”<sup>8</sup> These take turns with significantly longer chapters describing Offred’s daily activities as a Handmaid. That the spatiotemporal coordinates of the opening chapters eventually fall in place as this

<sup>4</sup> Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>6</sup> In the important Chapter 7, Offred brings up a recollection of going to the park with her mother, who had told her they were going to “feed the ducks,” though they actually met up with her mother’s feminist friends there to burn books (pornographic magazines). Perhaps because book burnings are rather more associated with the Gilead regime than the feminist movement (though they did occur in the “Take Back the Night” protests of the 1970s and 1980s), Offred’s recollection suddenly blacks out. On the verge of rambling, she suggests (through another set of unanchored shifters like “they” and “there”) that she had been subject to chemical experiments causing amnesia. “But then what happens, but then what happens? I know I lost time. There must have been needles, pills, something like that. I couldn’t have lost that much time without help. You have had a shock, they said [...]” (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 39).

<sup>7</sup> As Offred prepares for her first Ceremony, she compares the Handmaid’s sense of self to composition, in the double sense of that word: “I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a thing made, not something born.” (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 66). Far from making an existentialist, anti-essentialist plea, his passage suggests that the “thing” that the Handmaid “must present” – at the upcoming Ceremony, presumably – is arranged. Although she herself “must now compose” herself, she is not the creative artist here: she is rather collecting herself as she “must” now fall into an arrangement that is not of her making. She must compose the speech, but she is not its subject of enunciation. This contrast with her telling her own story (a point to which I will return).

<sup>8</sup> The second “Night” section comments on the freely distended temporality of its telling: “The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will ... I lie, then, inside this room ... and step sideways out of my own time. Out of time. Though this is time, nor am I out of it” (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 37). The grammatical twist in this last sentence (a *nor* without *neither*) is perhaps indicative of the slippery shift between beings, between temporalities. Nonetheless, nighttime differs significantly from the Handmaid’s daytime, when she is struggling to cope with so much “time to spare” (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 69). “This,”

structure of alternating chapters becomes apparent does not diminish the significance of the initial reading experience. Indeed, the novel's structures remain unstable, just as the separation of realms remains as relative and as porous at its borders as Gilead itself (the latter point being brought home in *The Testaments*). Despite the general alternation of chapters, subtle switches between past and present recur within each, with grammatical shifters and ambiguous references further complicating their distinction.<sup>9</sup> Glitches between the Handmaid and her previous identity keep recurring, with her own expressions at times betraying her desire to keep them apart. "Was he in my room?" she wonders at one point about the Commander, who isn't allowed to go there. Then she checks herself: "I called it *mine*."<sup>10</sup>

Despite these challenges, the Handmaid gradually manages to piece together a more comprehensive picture of her new society, just as the reader becomes more at ease in the text as the novel progresses. Along the way, Offred discovers the significance of relations between language and power, narrative and identity. Feminist poststructuralist critics have highlighted the importance of this discovery as a source of Offred's agency and self-empowerment. Lucy Freibert, for example, argues that Offred transcends her conditioning through storytelling, while Linda Kauffman goes a step further by claiming that she "becomes a heroic savior for other oppressed and silenced women."<sup>11</sup> While this is not the occasion to elaborate on these views, it is important to note that Offred indeed grows increasingly sensitive to the importance of Gilead's phallogocentric discourse, and effectively produces a discursive practice of her own with the narrative we're reading.<sup>12</sup> It would go too far, however, to claim that, within the scope of Atwood's story, this effectively leads her to escape her subjugation or turns her into a savior for other women – Hulu will make the difference loom large.<sup>13</sup>

To some extent, storytelling does grant Offred power over the reader, whose existence (as reader) depends on her (the teller) and to whom she can relate the story on (and in) her own terms. To be sure, this extent has its limitations, as the fictional account of an academic conference that closes the novel suggests. Various critics have pointed out that the language of the keynote speaker at that conference, in his account of the "soi-disant manuscript" we have just read (including his transcription of Offred's story, which had been narrated on audiotapes), is too misogynistic and phallogocentric to trust him as the objective conveyor of information he claims to be.<sup>14</sup> We cannot know the exact extent to which Offred's story has been affected, refracted, filtered, misunderstood, or even altered or censored, but the sheer (fictional) fact that Offred's voice has been mediated is enough for many critics, myself included, to take "her" account with a healthy dose of skepticism. It is perhaps not without irony, then, that, toward the end of the novel, Offred increasingly addresses her imagined reader (or listener, strictly speaking) directly: "I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are."<sup>15</sup>

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she says, "is one of the things I wasn't prepared for – the amount of unfilled time, the long parentheses of nothing. Time as white sound" (ibid).

<sup>9</sup> Just as recollections occur during chapters describing the daily routines (see, for example, the memory of Hannah's abduction in the supermarket when Offred prepares for the Ceremony in Chapter 12), the last few Night sections (XIII and XIV) actually describe event in the present (the meeting with Nick as arranged by Serena's and her arrest, respectively).

<sup>10</sup> Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 50.

<sup>11</sup> Kauffman, "Special Delivery," 227.

<sup>12</sup> For a concise overview of the feminist criticism of Atwood's novel within a feminist paradigm of poststructuralism, see Hogsette's, "Margaret Atwood's Rhetorical Epilogue in *The Handmaid's Tale*": "[C]ontrary to some poststructuralist models that imply that the individual is always already overdetermined by existing discursive practices," Hogsette write, "feminist critics such as Weedon, Felski, and Linda Alcoff ... suggest that women can use language to create their own subjective meaning and thus challenge certain socially and politically oppressive institutional meanings" (263). Hogsette applies this view to *The Handmaid's Tale* through the already referenced texts by Freibert and Kauffman, as well as through Michelle LaCombe's reading of the novel as a "story of non/signification, of the breakdown between normal relations between signifier and signified" (LaCombe 9, quoted Hogsette, "Margaret Atwood's Rhetorical Epilogue in *The Handmaid's Tale*," 264).

<sup>13</sup> In this sense, I rather side with Gayle Greene's feminist account, for example, though her comparison of Offred to "a good German" seems a step too far for my comfort. She does elaborate though how Offred by her own account "lived by ignoring" in an attempt to survive, even while she highlights that ignoring is not the same as living in ignorance (Greene, "Choice of Evils," 14).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Kauffman, "Special Delivery;" and Hogsette, "Margaret Atwood's Rhetorical Epilogue."

<sup>15</sup> Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 268.

Despite the irony, we can see that the Offred primarily imagines a *you* (which she uses in the plural, imagining a “multitude”)<sup>16</sup> for therapeutic reasons when she adds: “So I will go on. So I will myself to go on. I’m coming to a part you will not like because in it I did not behave well.”<sup>17</sup> Offred wills a *you* into existence so that she can will herself to go on. Survival is her prime concern, as she confirms on several occasions (e.g., “I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely to the use of others”<sup>18</sup>). Indeed, the part Offred suspects “you will not like,” the part in which her resignation becomes apparent, is the one in which she refrains from participating in an actual rather than an imaginary multitude.

When Offred’s shopping partner and fellow Handmaid Ofglen turns out to be a member of the resistance group Mayday and suggests to Offred that “you can join us,” Offred responds: “There is an *us* then, there’s a *we*. I knew it.”<sup>19</sup> But as soon as she is called upon to participate by looking through her Commander’s desk at night, Offred scrambles for a reason to back out (“The door is locked,” “I’m too afraid,” “I’d be no good at that, I’d get caught”) until she admits, in shame, that she has resigned herself: “The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him ... Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations.”<sup>20</sup>

If the direct address and the final “Historical Notes” chapter already create a distance between the reader and the first-person narrator, Offred’s response to Ofglen’s fate toward the end of her story offers the reader a glimpse beyond Offred’s “own” account of the event. A first crack in that account occurs when Ofglen, having already given up on enlisting Offred, is suddenly replaced by another Handmaid. This new Ofglen “isn’t one of us,” Offred is quick to judge, apparently identifying with a collective she just declined to join. The meeting with the new Ofglen further marks Offred’s loss of control over the reader when she tells Offred that the old Ofglen hanged herself as soon as she saw the Eyes (secret agents) coming to get her, “after the Salvaging.”

This Salvaging – a ritualistic “trial” at which Handmaids are incited to collectively murder alleged perpetrators, mostly of sex offenses – Offred had fallen out with Ofglen for having barbarously attacked one of the rapists:

“Why did you do that? You! I thought you...”

“Don’t look at me,” she says. “They’re watching.”

“I don’t care,” I say, my voice rising, I can’t help it.

“Get control of yourself,” she says ... “Don’t be stupid. He wasn’t a rapist at all, he was political. He was one of ours. I knocked him out. Put him out of his misery. Don’t you know what they’re doing to him?”

One of ours, I think ... It seems impossible.<sup>21</sup>

That the Eyes were coming for Ofglen right after the event at which Offred drew unwanted attention to her by losing her self-control might implicate Offred in Ofglen’s death. Far from acknowledging this, however, Offred feels alleviated that Ofglen did not give *her* away: “She did it before they came. I feel a great relief. I feel thankful to her. She has died that I may live. I will mourn later.”<sup>22</sup> This symptomatic reading offers a perspective not recognized or acknowledged by the narrator/protagonist. As such, the reader’s escape from being locked up in Offred’s perspective, a moment of relative independence, coincides with Offred’s imaginary identification with an “us,” that is, with her own escape from being locked up inside herself.

<sup>16</sup> For the *you* intended in the plural, cf. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 39–40 “[I]f it is a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don’t tell a story only to yourself. There’s always someone else./Even when there is no one ... I will say *you*, *you*, like an old love song. *You* can always mean more than one./*You* can mean thousands.”

<sup>17</sup> Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 268.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

That Offred appears self-deceptive for not recognizing her implication in Ofglen's suicide is all the more remarkable considering the insight she displays into other aspects of the psychological complexity of her own situation during these final pages of her story. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in her assessment of her relation to Nick, the Commander's chauffeur whom Offred's secretly continues to frequent after Serena Joy had initiated a sexual encounter between them in the hope of bypassing her husband's sterility. This relationship simultaneously marks Offred's reclaiming of her desire and the limitation of the extent of her desire: it is as much a sign of resistance (her visits to Nick defy laws, norms, and hierarchies) as it is a sign of her resignation (sexual encounters with Nick are so many personal "compensations" that excuse her from participating in a politically organized resistance). Offred not only admits of her shame in having resigned herself, of preferring these compensations over rebellion or escape; she is aware too of being ashamed for the pride she feels in this very resignation: "There's pride in it, because it demonstrates how extreme and therefore justified it was, for me."<sup>23</sup>

With this statement, Offred anticipates the ambiguous arrest at the end of her story, an event at which she willingly gives herself over to the hands of strangers without knowing whether they are freedom fighters coming to her rescue or secret agents taking her to her punishment (an ambiguity that reflects Nick's position as a potential double agent). More importantly, perhaps, is that she holds up a mirror to what is likely to be her actual reader – not a post-Gilead patriarchal academic but an inhabitant of the democratic society Gilead overthrew. Indeed, the novel as a whole does not primarily serve to pass judgment on (future or past) theocratic regimes such as Gilead but issues a warning to post-feminism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Atwood's updated introduction to the novel carries this point across the turn of the millennium). Critics such as Sherryl Vint have pointed out how the "Night" chapters reveal the ways in which gender oppression was already latent in Offred's life before the US was overturned by the religious right, and how subtle parallels can be drawn across that political division. In her US days, Offred was perfectly willing to play the mistress to a married man, meeting him in anonymous hotel rooms, wanting to have his child. Back then she took hard-won women's rights and (still unequal) opportunities for granted, which made her feel embarrassed for her mother's hardline feminism, or she would side with her husband Luke when her lesbian friend Moira attacked him for his slight offhand paternalism. Accordingly, the novel seems less interested in judging either Gilead or a Handmaid than in warning post-feminists in a democratic society. And that seems Offred's point, too, when she finds pride in her resignation. After all, to the extent that the situation was less extreme before Gilead (i.e., now, for most readers), resignation to society now appears less justified, too.

### 3 Turning the tale inside-out: The Schlöndorff/Pinter adaptation

It is based on the novel's connection between Gilead and the democratic society it overthrew that Sherryl Vint dismisses Volker Schlöndorff and Harold Pinter's 1990 film adaptation of the novel. Given that any screenplay of a feature length film adaptation will need to cut a 300+ page novel roughly in half, Pinter decided to eliminate the recollections in the "Night" chapters, as well as the epilogue, to focus solely on Offred's life as a Handmaid, starting from her failed attempt to escape Gilead. While this decision could perhaps be justified given the economics of film adaptations, Vint argues that it undermines the very point of the novel:

Atwood deftly captures the debates shaping the feminist movement in the 1980s, when at times the younger generation of women took for granted the gains of second-wave feminism. The novel conveys the complexity of negotiating between sexual freedom of expression and sexist oppression, as these women find their way through a society that is still at its core

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 271.

patriarchal. The film simply suggests a clear binary between a dictatorial and patriarchal Gilead and the “free” society that came before.<sup>24</sup>

The binary opposition, Vint further argues, reduces the story to “a heroic tale of freedom loving rebels triumphing over a corrupt totalitarian order.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, despite maintaining fidelity on most counts, the film adds one plot point toward the end that turns the story inside out: now enlisted as a member of the resistance, Offred (Natasha Richardson), who mostly goes by her pre-Gilead name Kate, kills her Commander with the knife passed on to her by Ofglen. Nick’s ambiguous status as the novel comes to a close is also quickly resolved in the film: having arranged for Kate, fresh blood streaks on her cheeks, to be escorted away from the crime scene immediately after her assault, he enters the security van with her and releases her of her handcuffs and Handmaid’s dress, a gesture awarded with a passionate kiss. By having Kate kill the Commander and dispensing with ambiguity, Schlöndorff and Pinter endow Offred with significantly more agency than she could conceivably have had in the novel.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond the necessity of having to cut the story-time, Hans Bernhard Moeller and George L. Lellis argue that there is another reason for Schlöndorff/Pinter’s decision to leave out the Night chapters: the respective medium-specific affinities with interiority and exteriority.

In reading the book, which tells the story from Kate’s [sic] point of view, the reader admires Kate for her intelligence and ability to analyze her own situation. The movie, by contrast, presents Kate from a far more detached perspective. We are deprived of her reasoning and motivations and see her actions only from the outside.<sup>27</sup>

Unable to do justice to the novel’s first-person narration to account for the novel’s elaborate self-reflections, the director decided to radically flip the perspective and avoid identification with the protagonist altogether. “If you were to identify more with the main figure of Kate” Moeller and Lellis quote Schlöndorff as saying, “that would in my view become unbearable for the audience and border on kitsch.”<sup>28</sup> So as to avoid that risk, he decides to maximize the distance instead by stepping radically outside of Kate’s head. While this may account for Kate’s one-dimensionality, if not for the perceived failure of film generally, as Moeller and Lellis suggest, Schlöndorff’s decision does generate some fascinating scenes, especially when it comes to the point of view, as the following examples will show.

In the film, Kate does not wear the bonnet with white wings framing her face. The novel explains that this signature headwear, which Handmaids are mandated to wear in public, prevents them from seeing as much as it “protects” them against the predatory male gaze. Going out in public with a loosely fitting red headscarf instead (which, in the novel, Handmaid’s are only allowed to wear at home),<sup>29</sup> Offred is repeatedly seen staring at men (Figure 1).

None of these moments is explicitly addressed or reprimanded, nor do they bear direct significance in light of the story; nothing would have changed had Kate looked the other way, stared down, or worn a winged bonnet. But they do bear cinematic significance, especially in the context of feminist debates which the novel so “defly captures,” as Vint said. On the one hand, these apparently emotionless glances give Kate an air of defiance, perhaps even of agency, as she is looking the errand boys of patriarchy straight in the face. On the other hand, the viewer is explicitly denied reverse shots showing her point of view: We (viewers) do not see

<sup>24</sup> Vint, “The Handmaid’s Tale,” 149.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>26</sup> The accusation of the film’s one-dimensionality, and its flattening of complex characters, also applies to Nick (Aidan Quinn), who is a far less ambiguous a figure than the novel makes him out to be. In their book on Schlöndorff’s adaptations, Moeller and Lellis conclude from Nick’s unambiguous involvement in the film’s denouement that Kate is in turn rather more passive than active: “Kate is hardly the feminist role model of the independent, strong woman interacting mainly with other ‘sisters.’ She is passive: she is literally swept off her feet by Nick and, at the end of the film, instead of actively participating in the struggle against the neofascist Gilead regime, simply awaits his return from the conflict.” (Moeller and Lellis, *Volker Schlöndorff’s Cinema*, 252.)

<sup>27</sup> Moeller and Lellis, *Volker Schlöndorff’s Cinema*, 252.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 253. Quoted from “Weinen ist so Billig! Interview mit Schlöndorff.” Conducted by Jochen Schütze, 78–9.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 65.



**Figure 1:** Seeing Offred/Kate (Natasha Richardson) looking in Schlöndorff's *The Handmaid's Tale*.



**Figure 2:** Aunt Lydia (Victoria Tennant) introduces Offred/Kate (Natasha Richardson) to Serena Joy (Faye Dunnaway) in Schlöndorff's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

these faces through Kate's eyes. Indeed, Schlöndorff goes a step further in scenes that do seem to offer her perspective. Consider a rather unmarked scene in terms of the film's narrative, in which Aunt Lydia (Victoria Tennant) introduces Kate to Serena Joy (Faye Dunnaway), the Commander's wife (Figure 2).

Having briefly followed Kate walking through a hallway, the scene cuts to a shot of Aunt Lydia who is awaiting Kate in a doorway (left top). This over the shoulder shot has every appearance of a subjective point of view: the viewer identifies with Kate by looking at Aunt Lydia from her direction. Without any change in the shot or camera position, however, Kate walks up toward the door when Aunt Lydia invites her to enter the room (right top). In doing so, she walks away from the camera, "into" her own point of view, so to speak. Put differently: what seemed to be offered as a subjective shot turns out to be (or turns into) an objective one: the viewer is looking *at* Kate rather than *with* her.

Lest we missed the point, Schlöndorff immediately repeats this cinematic gesture. Once Kate enters through the door, the viewer sees Serena Joy in the background, again by way of an over the shoulder shot (bottom left). As before, Kate enters her own point of view when she walks up to the Commander's wife (bottom right).

Moments like these turn the novel's perspective inside out. The choice to explicitly deny viewer identification through subjective shots reduces her to an object of the (male) gaze. This effect is nowhere as palpable as in the Ceremony scene.<sup>30</sup> In the novel, the reader is left no choice but to stay with Offred as she

<sup>30</sup> I thank Christina B. Brassell for the drawing my attention to this scene.

submits to this form of institutionalized rape. To be sure, Offred denies it to be rape, insisting that she had a choice. This is disturbingly ironic, no doubt, seeing that the only alternative to bearing children for Gilead's elite is to clean toxic waste in the "colonies." Yet there is an important sense in which it makes a difference to Offred: within the parameters of her life as a Handmaid – which, as such, is none of her choice – she chooses the way most likely to help her survive.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, as she "consents," she seeks to emotionally detach herself from the scene, effectively directing the reader's imaginary eye by describing in minute detail what she could have seen had her eyes been open while the Commander was "fucking the lower part of my body":

What I could see, if I were to open my eyes, would be the large white canopy of Serena Joy's outsized colonial-style four poster bed, suspended like a sagging cloud above us, a cloud sprigged with tiny drops of silver rain, which, if you looked at them closely, would turn out to be four-petaled flowers. I would not see the carpet, which is white, or the sprigged curtains and skirted dressing table with its silver-backed brush and mirror set; only the canopy, which manages to suggest at one and the same time, by the gauziness of its fabric and its heavy downward curve, both ethereality and matter./Or the sail of a ship. Big bellied sails, they used to say, in poems. Bellying. Propelled forward by a swollen belly.<sup>32</sup>

Offred effectively inserts multiple layers of detachment: She closes her eyes and describes the details of the room in her mind. These descriptions are as impersonal and objective as possible. Indeed, although the passage is related in the first person, Offred comments that the descriptions aren't quite hers. "One detaches oneself. One describes."<sup>33</sup> One also reflects on the scope of the imagined field of vision, discerning what it would include and what it would not. The description includes details of the objects that would not be visible, with carefully picked words conveying their color and texture ("sprigged curtains"; a "silver-backed brush and mirror set"). Offred includes extreme "close-ups," even, seeing not only drops of rain woven in the canopy's fabric, but also a four petaled flower in each drop. Despite these elaborate detachments from being a deictic center ("I-here-now"), Offred nevertheless remains metonymically tied to the bed: her existence, like the canopy above her, is like the sail of ship, "propelled forward by a swollen belly." Offred *has* to get pregnant. "He comes at last [...]."<sup>34</sup>

In the film, this final action, though not uttered as such, is shown in what finally appears a subjective shot from Kate's point of view: The Commander (Robert Duvall), following protocol, stands fully clothed (unzipped, of course) at the foot end of the bed, framed by Offred's lower body. His upper body is bent over hers; a pronounced artery runs down his forehead, marking the moment (Figure 3, left). When he then stands up and (audibly) zips up, the camera tilts up with him, keeping him center frame in medium shot. He looks down at Offred once more (Figure 3, right) before he walks out of frame (and out of the room).

Tilting up in this way, the camera breaks away from what had seemed to be Offred's perspective. The Commander's downward glance makes it redundantly clear that the camera's position is no longer to be identified with Kate's, asserting his dominance instead. The tilt thus doubles down on the gesture described previously by subverting identification with Kate at the moment when sympathy is most called upon – indeed, it takes her subjectivity away from her.

If it could still be argued that the dissociation of the upward tilt does not cancel out the preceding association, the scene in its entirety makes clear that Schlöndorff is turning the perspective of the novel inside out. Of course, any attempt at conveying a sense of awareness of what could not have been seen anyways had a character's eyes been open would surely be futile when it comes to a film. But if pure fidelity is impossible here, the adapted scene could conceivably have stayed closer to Offred's experience, if not by showing it primarily from her perspective, using of a voice-over to describe the objects around her – this is what the TV series goes for – then at least by showing her elsewhere-minded facial expression or detached

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 94: "Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot choice but there was some, and this is what I chose." The idea of choice in matters where none seem apparent will be critical in my analysis of the TV series final episode of season 1.

<sup>32</sup> Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 93.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 3:** The Commander (Robert Duvall) at the Ceremony in Schlöndorff's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

body language.<sup>35</sup> Instead, Schlöndorff depicts Offred as suffering, writhing her body in vain resistance while she moans and gasps for breath. Serena Joy, meanwhile, hushes her and commands her to “stop it,” forcefully keeping Offred’s arms overhead while her husband does his job. The artifice of Offred’s suffering (conveyed through Natasha Richardson’s “mechanic” acting and the obviously dubbed gasps) is no doubt to achieve a Brechtian distanciation effect. All the same, if the novel suggests that Offred and the Commander (and his wife) stick to the playbook, with Offred offering her body while keeping control over her mind (directing the reader in the process), Schlöndorff ends up offering up a rape fantasy to a male gaze.

I am not, to be sure, making the case for fidelity as the main criterion for a successful adaptation.<sup>36</sup> The point is rather that Schlöndorff’s specific way of creatively responding to the challenges the novel poses in general, and the Ceremony scene in particular – namely to literally and radically turn the novel’s perspective inside out – has ethical and political ramifications, and in Schlöndorff’s case, these work to reinforce patriarchal structures. Despite the fact that the film adaptation endows Offred with a defiant look, the persistence of the objective point of view increases the Handmaid’s objectification, keeping her tied to what Laura Mulvey would have called her “to-be-looked-at-ness.”<sup>37</sup> In that context, providing her with a murder weapon to slash the Commander, patriarch-in-chief, comes across as an overcompensation “bordering on kitsch” – in Schlöndorff’s turn of phrase. It turns a struggle for survival of an assaulted, isolated self into a fight for political freedom.

<sup>35</sup> In the TV series, the Ceremony scene opens the second episode of season 1. It shows close ups of Offred, rocking up and down in slow motion without revealing the Waterfords framing her. These are intercut with point of view shots of a chandelier and details of a painted ceiling. They do not include objects she cannot see (as the scene in the novel does), but it invents an equivalent by adding sounds these objects would make if they were real (we hear chirping when we see a painted bird) or could be touched (the chandelier’s glass trinkets). These shot-reverse shots are slowly rotating in opposite directions to create a visual lullaby. Offred’s voice-over connects what she sees to her old life: “Blue. I let it take me. Blue Moon. Rhapsody in Blue. Tangled up in Blue. Blue Oyster Cult. Blue Monday. Our car was that color [...]” When the chain of associations takes her to Hannah, the soundtrack cuts to actual surround sound, the image cuts to a shot from the ceiling down, now revealing the Ceremony in full action, no longer in slow motion or rotation. Offred’s voice over is no longer dissociated from the scene either: “I wish he’d hurry the fuck up.” What makes this scene particularly remarkable is less the sudden revelation as the choice to do so from a reverse shot, as it were, of her point of view. This is too deliberate to be objective: it is rather as though an imaginary Hannah looks back, which makes Offred want to stop the dissociation from the present. The scene ends with a back-to-“normal” intercutting of subjective shots and medium shots of the three of them wrapping it up.

<sup>36</sup> The idea that fidelity to the source text forms the main criterion for the success of any (film) adaptation has long been criticized, not only because it fails to account for creatively reworking the “original” (beyond overcoming “automatic differences” inherent to the specific media) but also because its alleged stable relation between source and target texts fails to consider how any text presupposes a more complex web of intertextual relations and circulations. Stam’s landmark essay “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation” is one of the best expressions of this criticism. Nevertheless, the debate has recently sparked new interest, especially with the publication of the 2011 volume *True to the Spirit: Film Adaptation and the Question of Fidelity*, edited by MacCabe et al.

<sup>37</sup> Mulvey discusses Hollywood’s subjection of women to the male gaze (she speaks of their “to-be-looked-at-ness”) in the landmark feminist essay on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

Still, the murder scene finally does hint at Kate's interiority by making the viewer guess at her reasons and intentions. Indeed, the scene finally does include reverse shots showing the Commander from Offred's point of view (and *vice versa*). (To wit, in making the ordinary so extraordinary, Schlöndorff reverses Aunt Lydia's famous dictum "Ordinary is what you're used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary."<sup>38</sup>) The guess at Kate's motivations is provoked by the fact that she enters the Commander's room to ask for his help, which suggests she may not necessarily have made up her mind as to whether to kill him even as she is hiding the knife behind her back, especially since the request is not, as previously, one for a small favor like hand lotion. Rather, seeing that Serena Joy has found out about the "adulterous" relationship and has the power to have her killed or sent to the Colonies for it, Offred asks the Commander to protect her against his wife.<sup>39</sup> It is not until he claims to be unable to do so, dropping her like a plaything instead ("caring for me, fixing my drink, being by my side: really, it kept me going, and I thank you for that, and I'll never forget") that a shiver runs visibly through Offred's body and a knife slashes his throat. In that light, Kate's assault appears less a determinate act by a resistance fighter than a provoked response of woman in need of a patriarch's protection but desperate enough to take revenge when he avoids responsibility for having put her life at risk. Where knife meets flesh, personal drives join political motivations to the point of indetermination, if not mutual reinforcement. In that sense, the scene effectively announces a major theme in Hulu's TV adaptation.

## 4 Extended lifelines in a complex tale: Hulu's TV adaptation

The TV series also features an assault with a knife. This time it is not Offred (whose "old" name is now June, played by Elisabeth Moss) who kills the Commander; it is Ofglen (old name Emily, played by Alexis Bledel) who stabs Aunt Lydia.<sup>40</sup> The event does not occur until the final episode of season 2, a season which, in its entirety, exceeds the novel's plot. Thus, the TV series not only undoes the film's bizarre plot twist, it also rewrites the novel's abrupt ending of Ofglen's participation in the plot, allegedly by suicide. That the TV series continues a storyline which the novel cuts short falls within a larger pattern. It is evident (though not for that reason any less significant) that a TV series, in its choice to adapt a novel, is to face the opposite challenge a film needs to tackle; that is, it will need to expand rather than to cut back the length of the original story. More pertinently, along with this expansion comes a formal change afforded by the new medium, which impacts the ethical-political outlook of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Despite omitting the film's murder scene, the TV show makes even more of a political heroine out of the Handmaid, and yet I will argue that Hulu develops a complexity of its own, thereby avoiding the binarism of Schlöndorff's adaptation. Let us look more closely at this formal change before turning to the ethical-political implications.

Schlöndorff's film maintains the novel's episodic form, presenting the events in the Handmaid's life in a series of relatively independent vignettes or tableaux. But because it leaves out the backstory of her old life, the script "opts for simplicity rather than complexity of structure," Moeller and Lellis argue. This simplicity of form culminates in the film's final scene in which a pregnant Kate, living among the rebels in a snowy mountain region, is waiting for Nick to take her across the border. This scene, accompanied by Kate's voice-over, not only casts the entire film as a recollection; it also provides it with a cyclical structure by mirroring

<sup>38</sup> Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 33.

<sup>39</sup> In the novel, Offred does not ask the Commander for protection when Serena Joy having found out about their trip to Jezebel's, threatens her. She contemplates killing Serena Joy, as one possible response among others, which also includes throwing herself at the Commander's feet ("I visualize his shoes, black, well shined, impenetrable, keeping their own counsel"; Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 292) and suicide. None of these materialize though: when the black van arrives to take her away, she realizes how she's wasted her time.

<sup>40</sup> June will eventually kill a Commander, though not her own, in the course of season 3, and will eventually have her revenge on Fred Waterford too, as I will discuss toward the end of this essay.

the opening scene in which she got similarly stranded in a snowy mountain region in an attempt to escape Gilead.

Rather than completing an arc by circling back, contemporary TV series tend to branch out in an open-ended structure. They thus opt for complexity rather than simplicity, as Jason Mittell convincingly argues in *Complex TV* (2015). At its basic level, Mittell writes, television's "*narrative complexity redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration*" (italics in the original).<sup>41</sup> In the conventional episodic form (perhaps best exemplified by the sitcom), each episode resets back to a "steady-state equilibrium"<sup>42</sup> regardless of previous plot developments and introduces a variable element to generate a new instantiation of the show, requiring a strong sense of plot closure all its own.<sup>43</sup> Series, by contrast, typically present a "cumulative narrative that builds over time"<sup>44</sup> – a time that may well go on forever without reaching a sense of closure or final resolution (as in soap operas). With the claim that complex narrative "redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration," I take Mittell to mean that TV series over the past two decades proceed by way of episodes, each with its own sense of consistency, which nevertheless accumulate over time. Some isolated events can be critical in the way they hold an episode together, just as some plot developments mark a specific season, while others carry across.

Although characteristic of it, this criterion of "episodic seriality" does not yet sufficiently explain complex TV narrative, Mittell warns. What makes narrative complex, rather, is its simultaneous development of multiple plotlines that diverge and intersect across variable spans of time. "In conventional television," Mittell writes,

episodes feature two or more plotlines that complement each other: a main A plot that dominates screen time and secondary B plots that may offer thematic parallels or provide counterpoint to the A plot but rarely interacts with it at the level of action. Complexity ... works against these norms by altering the relationship between multiple plotlines, creating interweaving stories that often collide and coincide.<sup>45</sup>

A basic example of his concept of narrative complexity, then, is the relatively marginal event that serves as a backstory or a counterpoint to a more dominant plotline in one episode that returns later on to become a more dominant plotline when it intersects with a different development. Alternately, a major plotline (say "Who Killed Laura Palmer") may break down into a multitude of minor developments vying for dominance and reorienting the major plot drive at each new intersection or twist (as in the notorious case of *Twin Peaks*). Narrative complexity can thus take on various forms in contemporary TV. Mittell distinguishes, for example, between centrifugal and centripetal variations. The former tends to push the narrative outward, away from a narrative center or main character toward a complex web of interconnectivity (*The Wire* being a prime example). Centripetal shows (such as *Breaking Bad*), by contrast, fold inward by delving into a central character's psychological complexity.

Given Offred's centrality in Atwood's tale, it would make sense for Hulu's show to tend toward the centripetal kind, which it certainly does in comparison to shows such as *Twin Peaks* or *The Wire*. After all, the show not only focalizes through Offred/June; it even breaks convention by endowing her with a voice-over, thus allowing the viewer direct access to her mind. At the same time, compared to the string of pearls type narrative characteristic of both the novel and the film, which, given the concepts under discussion, we can think of in terms of episodic seriality (rather than in those of the episodic in the strict sense), the TV series redefines the episodic form under the influence of the serial by reorganizing, developing, and adding

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<sup>41</sup> Mittell, *Complex TV*, 18.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Three decades before the publication of Mittell's book, Cavell conceptualized this in terms of "formulas." "Each instance," he writes in his 1982 essay "The Fact of Television," "is a perfect exemplification of the format, as each solution of an equation, or each step in a mathematical series, is a perfect instance of the formula that generates it" (Cavell, "The Fact of Television," 68). Cavell's essay in fact differentiates the *serial* (associated with film) from the *series* (TV), finding the episodic form tied to the former (which he also calls "generation").

<sup>44</sup> Mittell, *Complex TV*.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 42.

storylines whose collisions and coincidences create a complex web. From the perspective of adaptation, then, the TV show appears rather more centrifugal than centripetal. Hulu's rendition of Offred does not stand out for adding psychological complexity to her character in comparison to the novel; indeed, the series will probably disappoint viewers who judge it from that perspective. Instead, because of its expansion of various storylines both in durational scope and in a centrifugal direction away from the central character, I argue that the TV series opens up a different dimension of complexity, which is of an epistemological rather than psychological kind.

More concretely, Hulu adapts the novel's entire narrative in the first season, and then exceeds its scope in subsequent seasons by continuing plotlines beyond the point where the novel left off. Thus, whereas the novel, film, and first season center on Offred becoming a Handmaid to Commander Fred and Serena Joy (identified as the Waterfords in the series),<sup>46</sup> second season proceeds by focusing on her pregnancy and the delivery of her child. The third season foregrounds Offred's (now Of Joseph's) plan to rescue and deliver her older child Hannah (renamed Agnes) to the free world (Canada), though she ends up rescuing fifty other Handmaids' children in her stead. With the help of Moira, Offred finally finds her own way to Canada in the fourth (and, at the time of this writing, latest) season.<sup>47</sup>

Yet it is not only in the additional seasons that the series exceeds the novel's scope. Already in the ten hour-long episodes that make up the first season – the adaptation proper, on which I will center my argument – the TV version of *The Handmaid's Tale* has roughly twice as much story time to fill than the novel provides for.<sup>48</sup> This is resolved by developing storylines of characters surrounding Offred, lines which the novel opens up but then drops or cuts short. These developments impact the way both Offred and the viewer encounter Gilead's repressive power in ways that require elaboration. They also generate what Mittell calls "narrative special effects,"<sup>49</sup> that is: unexpected collisions of seemingly separate narrative developments. In *The Handmaid's Tale* these effects are all the more "special" because, as an adaptation, surprise is not only generated within the parameters of its own diegetic world, but also through comparisons with the novel (and, occasionally, the earlier film adaptation as well), thus adding to the overall complexity.

Among the expanded storylines in the first season, Ofglen/Emily's is the one that gets most extensively developed beyond the parameters of the novel. While most of her backstory as a lesbian mother and university teacher, as well as her eventual role in helping June get Nichole across the border will not develop until later seasons, the first season has to rewrite the novel to open up these possibilities. That is, it will have to reckon with the alleged suicide and the events leading up to it. This is accounted for by displacing Emily's death by hanging. June still has the shocking experience of finding another Handmaid suddenly replacing Emily as the new Ofglen (this encounter, which takes place toward the end of the novel, already occurs in the second episode of season 1), but she is left in the dark about the old Ofglen's whereabouts. Meanwhile the viewer is shown how Ofglen's lover, Martha, is being hung as a death penalty, not now for being involvement in Mayday, but for "gender treachery." Emily herself, made to witness this

<sup>46</sup> As mentioned, Offred does not reveal her own name in the novel. She doesn't mention her daughter by name either, nor does she refer to the Commander and Serena Joy by their family name. In the epilogue, the fictional keynote speaker does speculate on two Commander's called Fred, finding one of them – Waterford – the more plausible candidate for being Offred's owner. The series decided on the name June because it was the only one in a list of names mentioned at the end of chapter 1 that was not accounted for throughout the novel. The film's decision to call her Kate may be a reference to Schlöndorff's earlier film (codirected with Margarethe von Trotta) *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*, a film adaptation of Heinrich Böll's novel featuring a (namesake) woman suffering in a patriarchal society.

<sup>47</sup> The fourth season aired between the first and second draft of this manuscript after having been put on hold due to COVID-19. Plans for a fifth season have been announced.

<sup>48</sup> Indeed, many of the plot points are already covered in the first three episodes and the adaptation proper could conceivably have been wrapped up in the fourth. The estimated length of the story time is based on the page per minute rule of thumb that film script and teleplays abide by, meaning that one page in the written version amounts to a minute of screen time. Hence ten hour-long episodes amount to a teleplay of 600 pages, twice the length of the novel.

<sup>49</sup> Mittell, *Complex TV*, 43.

execution but too valuable as a fertile woman to share her fate, is reassigned to another household, though not without undergoing female genital mutilation as additional punishment.<sup>50</sup>

Ofglen/Emily is not the only Handmaid to receive an extended lifeline in the first season. The series also expands the story of Ofwarren/Janine (Madeline Brewer). In the novel, Offred is more explicitly dismissive of this mentally unstable character than she is in the series (she calls “sucky Janine” a “whiny bitch,” for example<sup>51</sup>). It seems safe to assume that this is in part due to the fact that, in the early days in the Red Center, Janine agreed to snitch for Aunt Lydia (Ann Dowd) after having been subjected to a humiliating ritual in which the Handmaids-in-training were pressured to slut-shame her for having been raped. Janine’s supercilious attitude for being the first among the Handmaids to become pregnant does not help her win Offred’s sympathy either. So while the birthing ritual receives due attention in the novel, her story is quite unceremoniously dropped once baby Angela is born. Indeed, when Ofglen and Offred run into her later on, Offred makes the point of dropping the story quite explicitly. Ofglen drily tells Offred that baby Angela turned out to be a “shredder after all,” and that Janine had already had an eighth-month miscarriage previously, “didn’t you know?”<sup>52</sup> “That’s terrible,” Offred replies, though she tells herself (and the reader) that it is so “like Janine though, to take it upon herself, to decide that the baby’s flaws were due to her alone.” It is like Janine, Offred adds, to prefer that over admitting that her life doesn’t have any meaning. “No use, that is. No plot.” After that, Offred (hence the reader) gets to have only one more glimpse of Janine. Having just lost her self-control at the Salvaging by yelling at Ofglen, Offred sees Janine walking around in withdrawal: a smile on her face, a smear of blood across her cheek, and a clump of blonde hair in her hand. “Easy out, is what I think. I don’t even feel sorry for her, although I should. I feel angry,” Offred comments, though not without admitting her shame for her own feelings.<sup>53</sup>

The TV show, which keeps the shaming of Janine at the Red Center but omits her snitching, still portrays her as a psychologically vulnerable woman, but Offred’s attitude toward her is more concerned than dismissive. It also offers Janine two additional occasions for an “easy out,” with Offred coming to the rescue on both occasions. First, Janine prepares for a suicidal jump off a bridge with her child in her arms instead (the baby is not now a shredder). With several Commander’s families witnessing the event (Serena Joy included), Janine accuses her Commander for having broken his promise to leave his wife and run away with the baby and her. Offred is being called upon to talk to Janine and rescue the baby (with or without Janine) – which she accomplishes. Janine survives her suicidal jump, only to be sentenced to death by stoning at the hands of the other Handmaids for having endangered a (not “her”) child’s life. At that occasion, Offred – knowing herself protected by her own pregnancy at this point – defectively drops her stone in an act of civil disobedience; an example to be followed by the other Handmaids. Janine survives again – not against her will this time – and is sent to the Colonies instead, where she will meet up with Emily in season 2. Her continued presence makes important contributions to other stories, one of which I will discuss shortly.

The first season adds many other continuous storylines, often opened up by similarly adjusted plot points. Take Moira, for a final example, June’s lesbian activist friend who managed to escape from the Red Center. In the novel, Offred encounters her later at Jezebel’s. Having been caught after her escape and forced into prostitution, Moira’s rebellious character now appears broken. Offred is disillusioned by Moira’s resignation and aghast at the extent of Gilead’s power to subdue. She says how she’d like to tell a heroic tale about Moira’s escape from Jezebel’s, or about her blowing up the place, killing fifty Commanders in the blast. It would befit her. “But as far as I know that didn’t happen. I don’t know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again,” Offred says to seal off that storyline.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> The series thus abides by the novel’s rule of thumb that no events take place in the story that has not effectively occurred in the actual world, at the same time as it updates these events: while the prevalence of female circumcision has in fact declined over the past three decades, global attention to the phenomenon has increased significantly since the novel’s publication, as has its recognition as a moral problem. Cf. Unicef’s 2016 report *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Global Concern*.

<sup>51</sup> Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 115.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

The TV series precisely tells the story Offred just said she wished she could have told, thus pushing the Tale in the direction of fantasy. Offred persuades her Commander return to Jezebel's together, where she manages to revive Moira's fighting spirit and inspire her to participate in a transaction for Mayday. With the transaction, Moira in turn launches June's own involvement in the resistance and ultimately triggers a series of events that will eventually lead to the Waterfords' arrest in Canada. Long before that happens, Moira kills a client (as the scene implies), using his clothes and car to escape Jezebel's and reach Canada, where she joins June's husband Luke in the resistance.

In each of the three cases, then, the TV series picks up on storylines whose continuation seemed all but foreclosed in the novel. Emily's suicide, Janine's withdrawal, and Moira's broken will are turned around by creatively displacing or reconfiguring elements of the novel. More often than not, June's role in these turnarounds is more proactive and decisive than it could conceivably have been in the novel. In that sense it could be argued that Hulu's rendition doubles down on Schlöndorff's decision to turn the tale from a reflection on the fragility of human agency and women's rights into a more heroic story, if not indeed a fantasy, of resistance against a totalitarian regime. No doubt, Hulu's series does paint a much more empowering portrait of the Handmaids than the novel does.<sup>55</sup> But if Kate's killing of the Commander in the film adaptation seems to function primarily as a rather bizarre overcompensation for the formal deprivation of her subjectivity and as an "easy out" of the novel's intricate and ambiguous ending, the TV series moves in the opposite direction: over and against the film's simplification of the plot, the show's complex intersection of old, new, and rewritten storylines produces a narrative special effect in the final episode of season 1. (Entitled "Night," the episode is written by showrunner Bruce Miller and directed by Kari Skogland.) This effect, all the more intriguing when we take the novel and the preceding film adaptation into consideration, takes the perspectival twists at the novel and the film's close to a next dimension by turning Offred's psychological complexity – the layers and limits of her self-awareness – into an epistemological mind game. I will analyze this denouement of season 1 at some length to support this claim.

## 5 To plot an arrest: A mind game in a narrative special effect

In and of itself, the first season's final scene is perfectly faithful to the novel's ending. To the dismay of her Commander and his wife, who demand to know what she has done, Offred/June is escorted out of their home by guards. As in the novel, Nick whispers to her that it is okay that she should trust him and go with them. June gives the Waterfords a defiant look before she steps into the van. Meanwhile, her voice-over speaks the novel's last lines: "Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over to the hands of strangers. I have no choice; it can't be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light."<sup>56</sup> Despite this remarkably faithful rendering of the novel's final pages, its significance has changed dramatically. It requires some contextualization to see just how far some of these changes may extend.

The first intersection of storylines relevant to this context connects Ofwarren/Janine's suicide attempt to Offred/June's pregnancy and culminates in an epic scene of powerplay orchestrated by Serena Joy. Having already witnessed how she saved Ofwarren's baby, Serena confronts June about the secret trips to Jezebel's, implying that her husband had done the same with Offred's predecessor, who ended up hanging herself. Serena speaks the line left somewhat lingering in the novel: "Behind my back. You could have left me with something."<sup>57</sup> The episode then takes the scene beyond the novel, in which neither Offred

<sup>55</sup> Hulu offers "Reframe" stamps for its original shows to ensure gender balance, putting women in key production roles. Although the show was created by Bruce Miller, many of *The Handmaid's Tale's* writers, directors, and producers are women, often with explicit feminist agendas.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 295.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 287.

nor Serena (nor the reader) ever find out whether Offred is effectively pregnant. In the episode, Serena explicates that by “left me something” she meant “a child”: she forces June to take a pregnancy test (forbidden in theocratic Gilead), which turns out positive. These two plot points of Janine’s suicide and June’s pregnancy – both inventions of Bruce Miller rather than Atwood – inspire Serena to use Hannah as collateral. That is, Serena takes Offred to her “old” daughter’s new home, forcing the Handmaid to watch from behind closed car doors how she herself walks up to briefly meet the child. When they leave without Hannah having been aware of her (old) mother’s presence, Serena drily responds to Offred’s tormented pleas: “As long as my baby is safe, so is yours.”

Back home, without invitation, Offred goes to see Commander Waterford (Joseph Fiennes) to ask him for protection against Serena, not now for herself, as in the film, but for Hannah. (She does not ask for any help at this point in the novel and indeed does not revisit the Commander after the trip to Jezebel’s, so the episode is now adapting the film rather than the novel.) The Commander murmurs something to the extent that she has nothing to worry about (to which she responds that he doesn’t know his wife) and switches the topic. In a previous scene, the viewer already witnessed how Serena had confronted him with her knowledge of the trip to Jezebel’s, telling him in revenge that Offred is pregnant and that “it isn’t yours.” Telling June now that he has heard congratulations are in order, he asks whether “it” is his. Not without a sense of intimacy, which June responds “of course.” “You do that so well,” Waterford counters, as though she is doing him a sexual favor. In the film this would be the moment she slashes his throat; here the scene quite simply ends with her returning his admiring look.

I will revisit this power play between Offred and Waterford shortly, but for context, one more scene needs to be added to this intersection of Janine’s suicide and June’s pregnancy: the scene of the Salvaging – the aforementioned stoning of Janine – with Offred defying what Aunt Lydia’s claims to be a divine command (“Girls, you are to do your duty!”) and the other Handmaid’s following her example. Aunt Lydia warns that “there will be consequences” as the Handmaids walk away from the scene, marching the streets of Boston to the soundtrack of Nina Simone’s “Feeling Good.” But once home alone again, June expects the van to come and take her away. “I am in disgrace,” we hear her mind say through a voice-over, “which is the opposite of grace. I ought to feel worse about it.”

It is as though the voice-over were quoting these lines from the novel.<sup>58</sup> For while the seeming tautology is uttered at the same time and in the same place as in the original story, the preceding events place it into a very different context. Grace is still the name for the serenity Offred feels while she waits for what is coming. In the novel, however, where Offred has no way of knowing just what she’s waiting for, the passage follows immediately on Serena Joy’s discovery of the outing to the brothel, which made her call Offred a “slut.” By Gilead’s standards, that counts as disgrace.

By the same token she should still be a slut in the TV episode, though Serena never utters the word on screen. However, Serena had already absolved Offred from the disgrace of adultery when the pregnancy test showed she had left her with “something” after all (“Praised be His Mercy”). Being in disgrace now refers to Aunt Lydia’s judgment of her action at the Salvaging instead. “I don’t know what I’m waiting for” June’s voice-over claims, only to continue: “My punishment I suppose. We said no, we refused to do our duty. For that sin we will be punished. I am in disgrace [etc.].”<sup>59</sup>

June’s own supposition – her expectation of getting arrested – opens the possibility that, to an uncertain extent, June plotted this arrest herself, perhaps to retaliate against Serena’s barely veiled threat to Hannah’s safety. Having plead for Hannah’s safety by visiting Commander Waterford, where she seizes the opportunity of granting him the claim of fatherhood he seeks, she then defects at the stoning of Janine, which, even if it were inspired by her care for her fellow Handmaid, also marks the opportunity of getting herself arrested, knowing that the revelation of her pregnancy will protect her against Aunt Lydia’s

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>59</sup> The first episode in the next season indeed confirms that she had been arrested because of the defection at the Salvaging, though this confirmation is not necessary for my point here.

punishment. In short, June may be willing to take the risk of being disgraced by Aunt Lydia if it leaves Serena without the child she so desperately wishes for, all the while making it look like it is none of her doing.

This is, of course, only a possibility – one among many. Nonetheless, that the show plots June's arrest in such a way that it remains an open question as to whether she plotted it herself is significant. In one sense, it restores the ambiguity of the novel's ending, but in another sense, everything has changed. That is, the show still focalizes events primarily through Offred and "restores" access to her interiority (of which the film had deprived us) through the use of a voice-over and by endowing her with countless subjective shots. If June plotted her arrest, however, the viewer's knowledge of events is not so much restricted *to* hers as it is restricted *by* her. The novel's ending is ambiguous because Offred has no way of knowing what she is waiting for until the van arrives; or, when it does, who called on it (at any rate it was not her doing); or whether she should trust Nick, as he asks her to.<sup>60</sup> The show's ending, by contrast, owes its ambiguity to the fact that, as viewers, we have no way of knowing whether June had left *us* in the dark, whether or to what extent our access to her mind has its limitations. If she played the Waterfords, she played *us* just the same.

This is where the Commander's words – "You do that so well" – carry significant weight. What she does well is not lying, exactly, but playing mind games. Like Serena, she cannot know who the father is at this point; she cannot know that it is *not* his. What unfolds next is a game even better than Scrabble.

When Offred asks for the Commander's protection and he brushes her fears aside to change the topic (which for Offred is not a change at all – the connection Serena fostered between Hannah and her current pregnancy is the very reason she comes to his office in the first place), he clearly signals his unwillingness to honor her request. But by asking the question of fatherhood, he betrays (or hints) that his commitment to Serena may be open for negotiation. After all, he should have no doubt that "it" is his unless Serena has given him reasons for it (as we know she did, but Offred does not). Thus, his question gives Offred the power to grant what Serena was too eager to deny him: not forgiveness (as in the novel) but the reassurance of his manhood, of his power to procreate.

Moreover, the Commander understands that his question of fatherhood, asked just then and there, is not a matter of knowing but of acknowledging. Her "Of course" not only ascribes him virility, it also means what, in the novel, Offred told Nick: that she *wants* to believe it is his.<sup>61</sup> In the scene under consideration, we likewise know that Offred does not know whether Nick or Waterford is the father, but of course she cannot explicitly admit her affair or leave room for doubt about the question of fatherhood. At the same time, she likely understands from the implication in Waterford's question that he must have learned about Nick. In that context, her "of course" becomes an expression of her desire that the child be his; a way of saying she wants to believe he be the father. She needs *him* to believe that this is what she *wants*. And she understands this is what he asks her to do: to make him believe she wants him to be the father. But both of them also understand that she has little choice in the matter. She can hardly be expected to tell him what she must know him to know anyways: that there are other potential fathers in the game. This means that they both understand she is forced to pretend. Perhaps that explains his admiration: he knows she not only pretends to want; she pretends not to be forced to do so. So when he complements her on how well she "does it," he acknowledges that he knows he forces her to pretend she wants him (to be the father). It is as before, when he had asked her to kiss him: "Not like that ... As if you mean it."<sup>62</sup> He does not care whether she means what she says or does: he cares whether she pretends well enough – not to convince him she means it, but to convince him she is a worthy player of his (and Gilead's) mind games. By contrast, she needs him to really mean it when she asks for Hannah's protection. And playing along is her best bet to gain the upper

<sup>60</sup> Having just ranked Nick among the dirty people ("Nick, the private Eye. Dirty work is done by dirty people," Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 293), Offred tells the reader that the trust he asks for "has never been a talisman, carries no guarantee." But she's eager to take Nick at his word: "I snatch at it, this offer. It's all I'm left with" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 294).

<sup>61</sup> In the novel, as said, she doesn't in fact know she's pregnant, much less who the father is. "A couple of weeks and I'll be certain/This I know is wishful thinking/He'll love you to death, he [Nick] says. So will she./But it's yours, I say. It will be yours, really. I want it to be." (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 271).

<sup>62</sup> Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 140.

hand over Serena: it is a necessary move in a game of her own. But that must mean she believes there may be an occasion for Serena to retaliate, follow through with her threat.

Two related points can be taken away from this scene. First, as a replacement for the oft-rebuked murder scene in Schlöndorff's film adaptation, it may seem to wrest Offred's active agency out of her hands again. Instead of slashing his throat, she submits to, and reaffirms, his patriarchal rule. But she does so only by incorporating it into part of a more complex plot that rethinks oppositions between interiority and exteriority and related oppositions such as those between activity and passivity, subjectivity and objectivity, the personal and the political. Secondly, the scene showcases (and Waterford admires) just how well Offred "does it" – how well she plays this game of pretending, veils her mind and bends the complex situation. It is a game, to get back to the point, that June may be playing with the viewer as well.

In so doing, this episode showcases an important feature of complex TV more generally. As Jason Mittell argues, "differentials in narrative knowledge" play a critical role in contemporary television stories, which he calls "systems of information management."<sup>63</sup>

[An] important variable concerns how viewers reconcile their own narrative knowledge with the information that characters seem to possess ... These variables often connect with specific characters, charting how many characters we share information with, how much access we have to character's interiority and backstory, and how much characters seem to be withholding from viewers [...]<sup>64</sup>

While such mind games pervade contemporary TV shows more generally, they are not, to be sure, exclusive, or specific to the medium. Indeed, in his recent, posthumously published book *The Mind-Game Film: Distributed Agency, Time Travel, and Productive Pathology* (2021), Thomas Elsaesser discusses the phenomenon in the context of contemporary cinema.<sup>65</sup> He makes the critical observation that viewers indeed like to be "played with," and are, as such, less troubled by establishing objective criteria for knowledge or for distinguishing reality from fantasy than that they are entertaining the task of figuring out the rules of the game. In works from directors such as Michael Haneke, David Lynch, or Kim-Ki-duk, or films like *The Matrix*, *Donnie Darko*, or *Fight Club*, among many others, "the question becomes: do the films 'lie,' or is it the very opposition of truth and lie, between the actual and the virtual, the subjective and objective, that is at stake?"<sup>66</sup> Oppositions are equally at stake in contemporary TV, where mind games, here in the form of differentials of narrative knowledge, line up with the multiple storylines that make up its complex form of storytelling.

Let us see how this plays out in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and in this final episode of the opening season in particular. At the same time as our access to June's mind appears to have limitations – she withholds her plot from us – our (lack of) knowledge of the world of Gilead, and of other minds in it, is no longer strictly tied to hers, as it was in the novel. Unlike June, for example, we actually know (have heard and seen) what Serena told her husband about June's pregnancy. This is an occasion, then, at which two bodies of knowledge – ours and hers – differentiate. They frequently do overlap still, as when Serena takes both the viewer and June by surprise with the visit to Hannah. But at other times, storylines develop quite independently of Offred's experience of events. June does not know about Moira's escape from Jezebel's and her subsequent reunion with Luke, for example. By intercutting this latter scene with June's march home from the Salvaging, the show conveys what neither June nor Moira could have told us in and of themselves: that their "shared" moment of "Feelin' Good" (a song celebrating the feeling of freedom) serves to reveal the irony of June's situation. That is, while Moira walks toward an embrace in freedom as a reward for murder, June walks toward solitude and arrest for having refused to kill. It is entirely possible that June feels good, if only momentarily, because she does not care about the possible consequences of her action; because her

<sup>63</sup> Mittell, *Complex TV*, 179, 166.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>65</sup> I discuss Elsaesser's take on mind games in cinema, along with my reservations of his interpretation of the philosophical stakes, in more detail in Gerrits, *Cinematic Skepticism* (cf. esp. ch 5).

<sup>66</sup> Elsaesser, *The Mind-Game Film*, 94.



**Figure 4:** June (Elisabeth Moss) returning the viewer's look from the darkness without in *The Handmaid's Tale* S1Ep10 ("Night").

intention of saving Janine was good in and of itself. Call that a state of deontological bliss. It is equally possible, according to the line of thought I have been pursuing, that she feels good precisely *because* she knows that "there will be consequences." She may not know the exact nature of these consequences, but she could be taking a calculated risk, which to her justifies the fact that she didn't do what Aunt Lydia had called her duty. In that case she is in a state of consequentialist euphoria, for which the deontological reasoning was perhaps but a pretense. Can she experience both at once?

The undoing of binaries culminates when Offred finally steps into the security van. The suspicion that she may have been plotting her arrest and is playing a mind game with the viewer in the process is underscored by the already quoted words uttered by her inner voice: "I have given myself over to the hands of strangers. I have no choice; it can't be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light." Let us note that these are literally the final words Offred speaks in the novel as well, with the exception that the phrase "I have no choice" does not occur there. Does this addition make a difference? One would think not, or not substantially, since the subsequent phrase ("it can't be helped") does occur in the original and basically already says as much. Indeed, "I have no choice" is not only redundant; it is a truism: Offred is under arrest, what choice could she have in the matter? But the very redundancy of the phrase is revelatory in what it seeks to conceal. Why would she even mention that she has no choice unless she is stacking the odds against any suspicion that she did indeed force her own arrest?

A second and final observation further underscores that very suspicion. "And so I step up," June's voice-over continues while she steps into the van, "into the darkness within [...]" The final image, however, shows not the darkness within her, but her in the darkness – the darkness within the van. This darkness deepens even further at the sound of slamming doors, and we barely detect her downcast eyes as we hear Tom Petty sing his lines from "American Girl" on the soundtrack: "She couldn't help thinkin' that there/ Was a little more to life somewhere else/ After all, it was a great big world/ With lots of places to run to/ And if she had to die tryin'/ She had one little promise she was gonna keep." Before the credits start running, June, barely visible any longer, lifts her downcast eyes to look straight into the camera, returning the viewer's look (Figure 4).

This final shot, then, folds the multiple tracks of audio-visual media and the multiple storylines of complex televisual storytelling into an intricate conclusion. June tells the viewer of a darkness (or else the light) within, while she steps into a darkness without, returning our look as she withdraws from visibility, marking her evanescence, her impenetrability. An active bearer of the gaze, she passively gives herself over, but her inner voice speaks words ("I have no choice") that conflict with those of the song on the soundtrack ("lots of places to run to").

In so doing, the scene captures the ambiguity which simultaneously closes an adapted novel and opens onto an unknown number of entirely new seasons. It exemplifies, moreover, how the show invites viewers to reflect on the dis/continuities between interiority and exteriority, which effectively posit the larger question about contemporary TV-shows' own dis/continuities within the world of art, seeing that the distinction between interiority and exteriority not only marks a major difference between Atwood's work and Schlöndorff's adaptation of it; it is typically seen as a factor differentiating novels from the fiction films generally. The dis/continuity between internal and external perspectives extends, moreover, into other in/distinctions. June's dropping of the stone, for example, appears all the more empowering, not just because this active passion/passive action undermines yet another binary, but because it inspires the other Handmaids to follow her example, which turns her personal care about Janine into a political act of collective defection. That her activism often takes its recourse in the form of passivity – submitting to the patriarch's powerplay, dropping a stone, giving herself over to the hands of strangers – does not mean that she has no choice in the matter, or that she is merely in survival mode. She has her personal revenge on Serena in the end, which is of the greatest political significance, as subsequent seasons elaborate.

## 6 Conclusion: Escher-twisting across divisions

Indeed, in these subsequent seasons, June's relationship with Serena Joy and Fred Waterford continues to form loops in which the personal contains the germs of, extends into, or ends up becoming political, and *vice versa*. These twists are like the loops in the popular etchings of the Dutch graphic artist M. C. Escher, in which continuous lines fold the inside into the outside and back, reconnect downstairs to upstairs, link ends to beginnings, occasionally creating impossible perspectives or endless fantastic stairs. Thus, in the tale's second season, June is returned to her Commander's household, though not after having had her passive revenge on Serena (who is tormented by being separated from her future child) and having received a passive punishment from Aunt Lydia (by being made to witness and accept responsibility for the torture the other defecting Handmaids receive in her stead). This season subsequently centers on June's efforts to convince Serena that Gilead is no place for "her" baby girl to grow up. This ultimately results in Serena's complicity in baby Nichole's deliverance to Canada, which is another act of passivity (she doesn't prevent the escape when she could have) and of personal revenge, this time on part of Serena against her husband's (and ultimately Gilead's) subjection of her. It takes yet another season (the third) for baby Nichole to become a symbol of Gilead's political power (obviously without need for the baby to act in any way) and for her mother to become a symbol of the resistance against it. Season 3 also reinforces the connection between personal inclinations and political motivations when June's new Commander Lawrence accuses her of being "useless" for preferring to play mother to a child who already has a mother (he refers to June's decision to turn around at the border to reunite with Hannah) over doing "something meaningful in the world" (he refers to Emily, who took June's baby Nichole across the border). When, shortly after, a doctor tells June that he is trying to honor a Handmaid who is in coma by saving her (unborn) child, June puts one and one together: she makes herself "useful" by organizing a scheme to honor Gilead's Handmaids and save not just her own, but all of their children (or at least fifty of them) by delivering them to freedom (Canada). The loop folds back when, in season 4, Fred Waterford ultimately escapes conviction by the International Criminal Court (season 4) only to be delivered over to June and her fellow Handmaids, who indulge in their vengeance by slaughtering the Commander and hanging him on a wall (season 4). Here, then, the political brutally loops back into the personal. With this long-deferred killing of the Commander, moreover, the TV show as a whole also loops back to Schlöndorff's film adaptation, a gesture given visual significance by showing June appearing before her lover (Luke instead of Nick in this case) with blood smears on her face.

It should nevertheless be clear that the TV series does not, at this point in the story, need the killing as an "easy out." That is: unlike in the case of the film adaptation, it is not now a replacement of the novel's ambiguous ending, with the latter effect being dependent on our confinement to a character/narrator's

interiority. As I have argued, the film turned the novel's reliance on interiority inside out by pushing the perspective to the opposite extreme, formally depriving Offred of any subjectivity. Yet I further argued that both novel and film finally offered a twist in perspective, with the former providing the reader a glimpse beyond Offred's personal account of Ofglen's fate, while the latter made us guess at Kate's motivation for the killing of her Commander. The film's turn of perspective also constructed an ambiguity of its own by conflating the personal and the political, and as such it pointed toward a major driving force of the TV show. As my interpretation of the first season's final episode showed, Hulu's rendition of the novel's ambiguous closing turned this twisting of perspectives into an aesthetic category in its own right. By playing out the differentials in narrative knowledge and by having internal and external perspectives bounce off of one another, the episode lined up with a broader trend in contemporary TV to organize their complex narratives around mind games, as I illustrated through the possibility that June kept even the viewer in the dark about the (never confirmed) plotting of her own arrest.

None of this is to say, however, that complex narration or mind games as such are exclusive to TV, let alone that I would argue that the TV-version of *The Handmaid's Tale* turned a simplistic novel based on binary oppositions into a complex narrative that makes a point of their undoing. I did agree with critics who found that the film adaptation by Schlöndorff and Pinter undermined the novel's complexity by eliminating Offred's recollections, a decision that no longer afforded the viewer to see the subtle connections between Gilead and the more implicit forms of patriarchy in post-feminist democratic societies. I also argued that the formal/structural division of the novel into alternating chapters remains unstable throughout, which contributes to the novel's own forms of complexity. And in addition to the twist in perspective at the film's end, I further attributed a level of nuance to Schlöndorff's adaptation by showing that it does not simply avoid the use of subjective shots but effectively takes them away from her, thus *depriving* Kate of her interiority.

I will conclude by saying that contemporary TV shows nevertheless develop a form of complexity in their own right, which is of an epistemological rather than psychological kind, and that it remains up to each show – and each critic – to give it significance. Specifically, the emphasis on open-ended seriality and complex storytelling allows contemporary TV dramas to generate a differential fabric of partially overlapping perspectives and bodies of knowledge. This kaleidoscopic effect does not preclude a single protagonist from occupying the center of the drama, as is indeed the case in many contemporary shows, including the one under consideration. But these protagonists are as often subject to torturous manipulation as they are perversely cunning characters themselves, deceiving not only other characters, but the viewer first and foremost. (One could think of Frank Underwood from *House of Cards* as June's antipode, and of his asides as his equivalent to June's voice-over.) Taken together, the interaction between the story's overall focalization through an unreliable central narrator/protagonist, the kaleidoscopic overlapping of perspectives emerging from a multiplicity of extended and complexly intersecting storylines, and the active engagement of a viewer who does not mind being played with, set contemporary TV series apart from literary and cinematic narratives and challenge the classical distinction between interiority and exteriority. In Hulu's rendition of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Escher-twisting across that distinction takes on particular significance as it extends to other oppositions, with activity/passivity and especially the personal/political looping from one into the other to the point of becoming indiscernible.

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