The Handmaid's Tale (Visually) Retold

Oana-Celia GHEORGHIU*
Michaela PRAISLER**

Abstract
Owing largely to the political situation in the United States, which seems to head, dangerously so, towards a dystopian Gilead, Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale *gets, at the end of the 2010s, to be re-told by many voices: that of her original creator – by her writing a sequel,* The Testaments *(2019) –, but also those assumed in successful transmedial adaptations – the homonymous graphic novel authored by Renee Nault (2019) and the TV series that has taken Offred beyond her final step "into the darkness within, or else the light" (Atwood 2010: 307) into the second, third and fourth seasons. Aside from Season 1, which follows closely the convoluted structure of Offred's monological testimony, the TV series seems, at a glance, less a multimodal adaptation and more an appropriation of a late 20th-century novel that has become a political and cultural phenomenon. Part of a project concerned with the many re-tellings of* The Handmaid's Tale*, this paper aims to analyse the TV series' fabric beyond the plot departures from its hypotext, as well as the latter's 'translations', with a view to proving its unquestionable indebtedness to the 'mistressmind' of contemporary speculative fiction.*

Keywords: *Atwood, fact v fiction, dystopia, novel, filmic adaptation*

Marketed as light or popular, but carefully crafted as serious or elitist, recent world-renowned literary works are at once versatile and manipulative. Intermediality (consisting in medial transposition, media combination and/or intermedial referencing) (Rajewsky 2005) renders them challenging and attractive, while metatextuality and paratextuality (Genette 1987) orient consumers along pre-determined paths. In essence, however, contemporary cultural products remain open for (re)interpretation, rewriting and recycling, undergoing a continuous process of transubstantiation. Old books and ideas are 'intertexted' in newer ones, which in turn have the potential to resurface in future texts. The ever-deepening palimpsest each writing is inscribed on covers wide territories, adopts numerous avatars and assumes multiple voices. Endings are processed into new beginnings, which supports and supplies both 'tradition and the individual talent' (Eliot

* "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, Romania; oana.gheorghiu@ugal.ro
** "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, Romania; michaela.praisler@ugal.ro

1919). A relevant case in point is that of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and its successive sequels/adaptations/re-tellings – novels, audiobook, feature film and TV series, radio and theatre plays, ballet and operas [1].

The ensuing work-in-progress reveals the initial blueprint, which it subsequently modifies or updates, excluding definitive layouts. In so doing, it engages consumers in a race towards meaningful reconfigurations of the reality of fiction, while also blurring all possible finish lines. The endless exercise, as life itself, translates into the film of representation, on the one hand, and of interpretation, on the other.

A good example of this mechanism and of its 'end results', so to say, has been provided by David Lodge, in his *The Art of Fiction* (1992). The last chapter of the volume, entitled *Ending*, approaches, unsurprisingly, the ending of that *Gestalt* which, in the novelist-critic's view, is *the* all-encompassing term for *novel*, and, after a short incursion into Austen's and Golding's closing sections, focuses on the epilogue of the author's own *Changing Places*, also entitled… *Ending*. After having travelled through present-tense and past-tense narrative, the epistolary mode, newspaper clippings, and all kinds of Joycean experiments with the narrative form, in the last chapter, Lodge settles for a film script to forward his "refusal to resolve the story" (1992: 228).

> As you're reading, you're aware that there's only a page or two left in the book, and you get ready to close it. But with a film, there's no way of telling, especially nowadays, when films are much more loosely structured, much more ambivalent than they used to be. There's no way of telling which frame is going to be the last. The film is going along, just as life goes along, people are behaving, doing things, drinking, talking, and we're watching them, and, at any point the director chooses, without warning, without anything being resolved, or explained, or wound up, it can just… end" (1992: 226).

Philip Swallow's final observation, which points to the reader/viewer's expecting the unexpected to occur at any point in a film, but not in a book, while somehow annuls the surprise effect of an ending, simultaneously gives grounds to justify its being carried further, provided that it is 'too open' and inconclusive.

Open-endings are not an innovation of late twentieth-century postmodernism, not even one of early twentieth-century modernism, which has, nonetheless, the merit of having imposed them in fiction

almost as a rule. T. S. Eliot was right, in *Little Gidding*, when he said that "to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from" (1942/2006: 2318), and the immense box-office hit that is the TV series adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is illustrative in this respect. Contrary to the physical evidence mentioned by Lodge's British academic character, that of the reader's noticing the remaining pages becoming fewer and fewer with the advancement through the story, the viewer is very much taken by surprise by the open ending of Atwood's dystopia, which seems to be intertextually alluding to Eliot's line: "whether this my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers because it can't be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light." (2010: 307). The construction of the last part of the novel (not including the paratextual/metafictional addendum *Historical Notes*, but only considering the body of the novel proper, or Offred's narrative), and its rising tension, climaxing in the main character's getting in the black van (literally in the last paragraph) frustrates the reader, leaving the sensation that, just like Lodge – for different reasons, though – Margaret Atwood 'refused to resolve the story'. Interestingly enough, the reference in the comic book of the same title appears on two blank pages, with the memorable image of the red skirt and the sole of the handmaid's foot in the air – while getting in the van – occupying just the upper-right corner of the second page (Atwood, Nault 2019), as if it were saying "page left intentionally blank", and as if it were inviting the reader to take arms in this war of words, and imagine what would have followed, had the novel continued for a few more 'nights'.

Some readers turned writers oblige, and so, the political core of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel is reloaded, some thirty-five years later, in a series of rewritings for which the projected future has already happened and has left indelible traces in the world we now inhabit. In daring a continuation of Offred's story beyond Season 1, which follows the convoluted structure of her monological testimony, the TV series is less a multimodal adaptation and more an appropriation of a late 20th-century novel that has become a political and cultural overarching statement. Part of a continuum of recurrent border crossings, *The Handmaid's Tale* phenomenon (admittedly rooted in the Orwellian experiment [2], whence it gathers intelligence) is symptomatic of the fiction/reality trench warfare, in which destabilizing one benefits the other, and capturing the overlap serves interrogation purposes. On the

one hand, fiction frequently raids reality for events which might enrich it, though what this particular tactic achieves is confusing and exhausting the unsuspecting reader, ransacking territories and abusing the spoils of deeply ingrained expectations. On the other hand, reality strikes back with a vengeance every now and then, either taking on the apparel of fiction for protection against enemy forces or going under cover for surprise attacks on the status quo.

> [S]elf-serving falsehoods are regularly presented as facts, while more reliable information is denigrated as "fake news." However, the defenders of the real, attempting to dam the torrent of disinformation flooding over us all, often make the mistake of yearning for a golden age when truth was uncontested and universally accepted, and of arguing that what we need is to return to that blissful consensus. (Rushdie 2018)

However, the golden age of universally accepted truths (traditionally imposed from governing centres of power) is long gone. Today, not only is it almost impossible to attain consensus on any topic (given the plurality of previously marginalised voices making themselves heard), but the very notion of reality has undergone mutations. Carrying political weight, it is constantly revised and interrogated, with fiction playing an important role in the whole process, setting up new conventions for encoding and decoding the real, as well as for interacting with what gets advertised as such.

> [T]he breakdown in the old agreements about reality is now the most significant reality, and […] the world can perhaps best be explained in terms of conflicting and often incompatible narratives. In Kashmir and in the Middle East, and in the battle between progressive America and Trumpistan, we see examples of such incompatibilities. […] The consequences of this new, argumentative, even polemical attitude to the real has profound implications for literature. (Rushdie 2018)

In the particular instance of contemporary historiographic metafiction, the system is in place, the strategy operative. Conflict and incompatibility are highlighted in view of engaging readers in the combat, while the argumentative and polemical attitudes adopted support its explicit goal: not to "deny that reality is (or *was*)", but simply to "question how we *know* that and how it is (or was)." (Hutcheon 1988: 146). As for conquering truth, no side can ever claim the victory. This

mode of writing contests the ability of fiction to mirror or reproduce reality, advancing the idea that fiction remains a possible discourse "by which we construct our version of reality" (1988: 40), mostly focusing on one that lies ahead, though indisputably resting on one which has already happened.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to be based on a truce, (re)constructing in fiction worlds which pertain to the past and the future, but which carry significance for the reader's present. Her ustopia, "made up by combining utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite" advances food for thought and future scrutiny under the form of (menacing) academic research. In Atwood's words, again, "that's what happens to ustopian societies when they die: they don't go to Heaven, they become thesis topics" (Atwood 2011).

In the end, "the future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, presented as a sort of monstrosity" (Derrida 1976: 5). Offred-from-the-novel's monstruous future is Offred-from-the-TV-series/June's and *our* monstruous present. This becomes more and more obvious with the advancement of the three seasons which complete the story from where Atwood left it back in the 1980s. The novel's ending is visually and kinaesthetically re-presented in the season 1 finale. However, "light" is shed on the unresolved strands of the narrative, turning into central subject matters in the succeeding episodes, which make up seasons 2, 3 and 4. The viewers find out quickly, from the first episode of the second season, that Nick's 'trust me' was not a lie, as June (the name chosen from a list in the novel to be that of the protagonist), who is pregnant, is taken into hiding, in an unsuccessful attempt to help her cross the border to Canada. It is now that she records the tapes with the confessions that professor Pieixoto will study two centuries later (in the *Historical Notes*). Although it departs from the situation portrayed in the novel, that of mere sexual relief sought by two people, and becomes a love story amidst the monstrosity of a religious dictatorship which tramples over women's rights in every possible way, the relationship between the escapee handmaid and the secret agent (Eye) in Commander Waterford's house (once more, the question as to who Fred was is quickly resolved by scriptwriters through giving the character one of the two names vehiculated by the Gileadean scholar mentioned above as possible owners of Offred) will evolve throughout the series to almost

nauseating extents, culminating in the fourth and last season (to date), with June choosing him in favour of her estranged husband, Luke, with whom she had been reunited in the 'land of the free' that, in Atwoodian fiction, is Canada. Captured, brought back, having given birth to Nichole at the feared Red Center, June/Offred is, for a while, separated from her other daughter, Hannah, whom the readers will meet again, aged fifteen, in Atwood's sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, the 2019 novel *The Testaments*. It is clear, then, that intertextuality works both ways, even though the Canadian mistressmind of speculative fiction did not (of course) what was expected from her, that is to continue Offred's story, focusing on the story of her two lost daughters instead.

The whole TV series is constructed as a chain of endings which turn out to be beginnings. In season 3, sent over by the Waterfords to a new 'posting', June becomes Offjoseph, gets help from her new commander, who was, in fact, one of the architects of the Sons of Jacob, whom he now sees as having taken the wrong path, manages to have her baby, Nichole, sent to Canada with another handmaid, while she stays on, in an attempt to find her elder daughter. She joins the freedom fighters, the underground resistance, Mayday, mentioned in the novel, and manages to save 80 children and fly them to Canada, which she herself reaches eventually, after an improbable re-encounter with her old friend, Moira. Despite the excellent acting of Elizabeth Moss, the June character devolves, and so does the part of the script that focuses on her journey, which, along the way, becomes less a search for her child and more a desperate search for revenge at all costs. Her interior monologues in the novel, so beautifully rendered in the first season, disappear almost completely, along with the frequent flashbacks, while desperation is gradually replaced by fury. It is this fury that manages to save a faulty season 4 in the last episode, which features a bacchantic unleashing of women killing Waterford, who pays for the sins of the entire Gilead in a frenzy which evokes the Particicutions in the novel. It would have been a good moment to end the show, even with this turning of the character into an avenger, but there is going to be a fifth season beginning, which, at this point, seems justifiable just by monetary reasons. Finding her daughter Hannah, which was the main motive for the main character's constant flight of the last two seasons, could have been easily resolved in season 4, just like the love story – which the viewers seem to appreciate, judging by the thousands of

comments made via the social media, on the pages dedicated to the show.

If June/Offred's tale seems to have lost its direction, falling prey to commercialism and, at times, to cloying sentimentality, quite at odds with the fury that rages inside of her, the additional plotlines, whether they have been tangentially tackled in the novel or are constructed 'from scratch' by the scriptwriters, with the approval of the very much alive and opinionated author, are, in many cases, fortunate complements, much more in keeping with the serious environmental concerns frequently formulated by Margaret Atwood via various media. At the risk of spoiling the pleasure of the readers of this article who might not have watched this visual narrative yet, a few additional elements will be further summarised, with a view to pointing to their integration not into an adaptation but into a different form of postmodernist, intertextual art, which theorists labelled "allographic sequel" back in the 1990s. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the debate on intertextuality, in whose theoretical footsteps this study attempts to fit, moved beyond Kristeva's coinage of the term in the 1960s on a structuralist foundation informed, to some extent, by certain psychoanalytical impulses related to an inescapable filiation of a text to an infinite number of fore*father* texts. An interesting case in point is Wolfgang Müller's idea of interfigurality, i.e., the "re-emergence of one or more figures from the pre-text" (1991: 110) in sequels, sometimes with minor characters brought to the fore (exemplified in his study by Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildernstern are Dead*, Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* or John Gardner's *Grendel* – all, reworkings of some major pillars of the Western Canon: *Hamlet, Jane Eyre* and *Beowulf*, respectively). The scriptwriters of *The Handmaid's Tale* TV series do not attempt to replace the novel's main character in their 'sequel' seasons by giving prominence to another, but they re-use several background figures, sooner creating than recreating them. Müller's observation, that "ontologically and aesthetically, it is impossible to have entirely identical characters in literary* works [3] by different authors" (107) acquires greater validity when such 'borrowings' were just mentioned in passing in the hypotext and become fully-fledged characters, with 'a will and a way' in the derivative work.

Along these lines, special attention should be granted to Ofglen, Offred's shopping partner, who introduces the latter to Mayday, and who seems subversive in her apparent piousness. She disappears

suddenly, and is replaced by a new handmaid, who simply assumes her assigned identity: when asked whether Ofglen has been transferred, the handmaid replies 'I am Ofglen' (2010: 295), basically 'writing off' the former character. Although she eventually whispers that the previous one committed suicide ("'She hanged herself,' she says. 'After the Salvaging. She saw the van coming for her. It was better.'" (297)), and although no mention of any background is provided for the first Ofglen by the literary text, she is given a past, a future and a name in the TV series. An academic, microbiology doctor, in a lesbian relationship, when her name was Emily, Ofglen becomes one the most important characters of the show. Arrested under the accusation of having had sexual relations with a Martha, she is not sentenced to death, like her lover, because she is young and still fertile, but is cruelly punished by genital mutilation, having her clitoris surgically removed. Another episode which should have brought her the death penalty but miraculously does not is her moment of hysteria, when, jumping in a car nearby, Ofglen runs over a guardian and kills him. It is now that she is sent to the dreaded Colonies, which are mentioned in the novel only in Moira's reminiscence of a video footage used to instill fear while being trained to become good, submissive handmaids. Benefiting from the advantage of the visual – as the old saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words, let alone an ensemble of motion pictures – the show features an entire episode (*Unwomen*, S II, ep. 2) in this setting, which disturbingly reminds of the Nazi concentration camps in a Cernobyl-like environment, and evokes the image T. S. Eliot might have pictured in his mind's eye when describing the expanse of deadly drought, "dead trees", "roots that clutch" and "hooded hordes swarming over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth" in *The Waste Land* (2006: 2306). There, aside from cleaning toxic wastes during the day, at night, Emily assists a woman to find her peace in death – her act is presented as a merciful termination of life, a euthanasia, not as a murder –, and helps another handmaid, Janine, who ended up there after a violent episode in which she tried to kill herself together with her newborn taken away from her. Reinstated as a handmaid after a plot development which seems to have been inspired by the many suicidal terrorist attacks that followed the notorious 9/11, the Red Center Bombing, Emily is 'recast' by the scriptwriters in the formalist role of the Helper (see Propp, 1927/1968) preserved in the subsequent seasons to date, and consequently 'reconfigured' as a "literary revenant", a character that is

"more than a mere duplicate [and that is] marked by a characteristic tension between similarity and dissimilarity with its model from the pre-text" (Müller 1991: 109).

Among other elements that match the spirit of the novel, the death-by-drowning punishment of the adulterine (Nick's young wife) and of her lover, the treatment of the religious minorities (in the episode when June finds shelter in the house of an economan, Omar, who takes his wife and son to church, but hides a Qur'an in his house), the violent treatment of the LGBT minority, the above-mentioned bombing attack of a desperate handmaid, which kills a large part of the ruling elite of Gilead and many handmaids, and some added aspects of women's generalised mistreating (like Selena's losing a finger just for suggesting that the daughters of Gilead should be allowed to read the Bible at least) are worth mentioning.

All in all, although Lodge's character might not be completely right when asserting the greater lack of predictability of film as a medium, and although the TV show could and should have already ended by all standards of stretching a storyline beyond reasonable limits, it is still true that *The Handmaid's Tale* was given a new beginning with the success of this televised production. Ultimately a novel about human rights lost at the hands of a group of fanatics, Margaret Atwood's famous opus could not have returned to the spotlights by itself to warn us that its future is now, and it is monstruous. Granted, women are not stripped of their rights, they are not forced to carry other families' children following wife-assisted rape; they can read, work, live outside wedlock, etc., but other, more insidious dangers lie ahead (or are already here). Reality awaits retribution, and if a TV show departing from its source text, with a touch of twenty-first-century superficiality, sensationalism and sentimentalism, can avenge and deliver its audience from real perils, then this one should be positively regarded as a new beginning.

Notes

[1] (a) novels

2019: *The Testaments* (by Margaret Atwood)

2019: *The Handmaid's Tale. The Graphic Novel* (by Margaret Atwood and Renee Nault)

(b) 4 TV series (Hulu)

2017-2021: *The Handmaid's Tale* (created by Bruce Miller)

(c) audiobook
2013: *The Handmaid's Tale* (read by Claire Danes)
(d) ballet adaptation
2013: *The Handmaid's Tale* (choreographer: Lila York; producer: Royal Winnipeg Ballet)
(e) opera adaptation
2019: *The Handmaid's Tale* (Boston Lyric Opera)
2000, 2003: *The Handmaid's Tale* (English National Opera)
(f) dramatic adaptation for radio
2000: *The Handmaid's Tale* (produced by John Dryden for BBC Radio 4)
(g) stage adaptation
2002: *The Handmaid's Tale* (written and directed by Brendon Burns – Haymarket Theatre, Basingstoke)
1989: *The Handmaid's Tale* (written and directed by Bruce Shapiro – Tufts University, Massachusetts)
(h) feature film
1990: *The Handmaid's Tale* (director: Volker Schlondorff; screenplay: Harold Pinter)

[2] Orwell's novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is one of the models Margaret Atwood confesses to have used in writing *The Handmaid's Tale*: "Orwell became a direct model for me […] in the real 1984, the year in which I began writing a somewhat different dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*. By that time, I was 44, and I'd learned enough about real despotisms that I didn't need to rely on Orwell alone. The majority of dystopias – Orwell's included – have been written by men and the point of view has been male. When women have appeared in them, they have been either sexless automatons or rebels who've defied the sex rules of the regime. I wanted to try a dystopia from the female point of view – the world according to Julia, as it were." (Atwood 2013)

[3] The script is regarded here, by extension, and for argumentation purposes, as 'literary'.

References

Atwood, M. (2010) *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Vintage.
Atwood, M. (2011) 'The Road to Ustopia', in *The Guardian*, 14 October Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/14/margaret-atwood-road-to-ustopia
Atwood, M. (2013) 'My Hero: George Orwell', in *The Guardian*, 18 January Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jan/18/my-hero-george-orwell-atwood
Atwood, M., R. Nault. (2019) *The Handmaid's Tale. The Graphic Novel*. New York: Doubleday.

Derrida, J. (1975) *Of Grammatology*. Transl. By G. C. Spivak. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Eliot, T. S. (1942/2006) 'Little Gidding' in *The Norton Anthology of Modern English Literature*, 8th Edition, Vol. 2, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co. Ltd., 2313-2319.

Eliot, T. S. (1919/2006) 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Norton Anthology of Modern English Literature*, 8th Edition, Vol. 2, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co. Ltd., 2319-2325

Eliot, T. S. (1922/2006) 'The Waste Land', in *The Norton Anthology of Modern English Literature*, 8th Edition, Vol. 2, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co. Ltd., 2295-2308

Genette, G. (1987) *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Translated by J. E. Lewin, 2001 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hutcheon, L. (1988) *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*, London: Routledge.

Lodge, D. (1992) *The Art of Fiction*, London: Penguin Books.

Miller, B. (2017--) *The Handmaid's Tale*. Hulu Network.

Müller, W. (1991) 'Interfigurality. A Study on the Interdependence of Literary Figures'. in H. Plett (ed.) *Intertextuality*. Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 101-121.

Orwell, G. (1949/2000) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, London: Penguin Books.

Propp, V. (1927/1968) *Morphology of the Folktale*, second edition, trans. by L. Scott. Austin TX: University of Texas Press.

Rajewsky, I. (2005) 'Intermediality, Intertextuality and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality', in Intermédialités, No. 6, Automne, 2005

Rushdie, S. (2018) 'Truth, Lies, and Literature', in *The New Yorker*, 31 May Available at https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/truth-lies-and-literature [Last accessed 14.06.2021]