

FEMALE NEGOTIATIONS OF AFFECT IN DOMESTIC AND PUBLIC SPACE IN THE TELEVISION SERIES *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

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Abstract

The screen adaptation of the 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood, converges with the current global turn to the right. Across different geographies and variables, there have been attempts at reinforcing the control of women's reproductive capacity, crucial to the reproduction of capitalism, and resistance by networks of feminist movements. Such tensions bear resemblance with the concerns represented in the television show. Within the affective turn, in the present study, I examine the gaze as a gendered bodily practice of control over women as well as a practice of resistance under the guise of affect, friendship, and desire, in private and public space.

Keywords: Affective Turn; Gaze; Bodily Practice; Desire; Friendship

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Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) exposes the different forms that hetero-patriarchal authority may take and its limitations, as well as the potentiality of oppressed women for challenging it in order to decide over their own bodies. The possibility for women to constitute their subjectivity through discourse is also put forward in the novel. This is possible through the projection of tendencies present at the moment of publication onto a dystopian retro-future, a post-apocalyptic near future in which there is a regression to Puritan values¹ enabled by the theocracy that rules Gilead as an alleged solution to sterility and miscarriages produced by disease and pollution. Democratic institutions have been overthrown by religious-economic elites, and the state of Gilead, which replaces what once was The United States, regulates even the most intimate practices of the citizens through a network of intelligence and a rigid caste system.

In the 2017 transposition of the text into series format, several of the novel's interests remain, while others become updated in a new social and political context in a different medium and for a different audience. While the novel's concerns centered greatly around the possibilities and limits of language (Hooker 2006; Reesman 1991; Cavalcanti 2000), in the series format, the question about language to construct subjectivity is displaced to give centrality to the body. The eighties saw the conservative policies and economic liberalism of Ronald Reagan's and Margaret Thatcher's administrations, which had a global as well as a domestic impact in terms of reproductive policies (Latimer 2013), totalitarianisms, religious fundamentalism and the exposure of the illegal appropriation of children during Argentine military dictatorship (Atwood 2017). It is extremely significant that the tendencies present then, which inspired Atwood's dystopia, are reenacted in contemporary times to the show's release in slightly different ways (Somacarrera-Íñigo 2019; Armstrong 2018), in the context of the tendency widely known as the global turn to the right (cf. Borges and Chagas 2019). These authors discuss the dialog between the series and the context of its reception during Trump's and Bolsonaro's administrations in The United States and Brazil respectively).

Most importantly, in this new phase of global capitalism, across different geographies and variables, there have been attempts at reinforcing social and economic control of women's reproductive capacity, which is crucial to the reproduction of the capitalist system. This has been, to a great extent, resisted worldwide by networks of feminist movements in favor of women's right to decide over their own bodies. Hence, the release of the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* TV series in 2017 seems to participate in a dialog with collective and individual awareness of these issues, as well as with the backlash of reactionary groups.

My main purpose in this article is to study the first season of the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017) in order to expose how female affective practices and dissident realizations of affect are disciplined, and how women negotiate with oppressive agents to resist the subjection to hegemonic practices through the appropriation of the gaze². In order to carry out this analysis, I study the gaze as bodily practice of resistance to the disciplining of the body. In other words, the female gaze functions here as a vehicle for dissident affects—friendship and

desire—in the fictional world, in opposition to the gaze that the patriarchal state exerts and enforces as control and surveillance. My subsidiary objective is to illustrate the impact of the TV series on the visual regimes in public space, in the context of the demonstrations surrounding the debates over legal abortion in Argentina in 2018.

I will focus on the protagonist, June, called Offred—of Fred—to indicate that she is the property now of Commander Fred Waterford. She has been posted in his household as a Handmaid for forced surrogacy (Season 1). We get to know about the Nation of Gilead and the later years of the United States mostly through her first-hand experience and memories. She is a direct witness and victim of the abuse and authoritarianism imposed on women with viable ovaries and wombs. These women would later become the Handmaids. Right before Gilead, June was married to Luke and they had a six-year-old daughter. By the time of the fall of the last democratic American institutions, they try to escape to Canada, but the family is apprehended and separated, and Luke is apparently shot. All through the season, June's motivation for staying alive and struggling is mostly to be reunited with her daughter and run away. Her experience is of foremost importance to the analysis as she embodies the passing from the relative democracy of the United States to the *coup d'état* that gives place to the theocracy of the Nation of Gilead. Through flashbacks, we can see the gradual process by which civil liberties are deteriorated and access to rights is lost. The importance of these memories resides, in my opinion, in the fact that the tendencies present in the fictional world can be extrapolated into a possible future in the world of the viewer.

The Economy of Affect

The present work is inserted within the affective turn, as a tendency and project, which proposes, like the linguistic turn did with language, an alternative outlook on emotions and affects. It also shares with the linguistic turn two main characteristics, the dismantling of binary thinking and hidden hierarchies, and the upholding of the instability of meaning. The affective turn gets beyond the extreme positions within post structuralism which lose sight of the material dimensions and favor a reification of language (Macón 2013, 3-4) and, instead, emphasizes the relevance of the body.

I understand affect, following Jon Beasley-Murray (2010), as the capacity which subjects have of affecting and being affected in the encounter of bodies (x-xi). Following leading figures in the research of emotion, such as Sarah Ahmed (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 2004), I contend that affect is to be understood critically, in its political dimension, as potentially emancipatory but also as a means of subjection. Affects are enacted in individual practices, but at the same time they have a strong social layer. They are structured by systems and conventions, one of which is language, and are therefore tightly knitted with the circulation of power. Affect is not merely an intimate and nontransferable psychic state, but the result of complex political networks. In Ahmed's words, "feelings

do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation” (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 8). As such, affect is not exempted from the norms that regulate bodily practices. It circulates through complex repertoires of possibility, which are signaled by power relationships, and involves an orientation from and towards the body.

In the series, we can detect the capacity of bodies to affect and to be affected by other bodies. On the one hand, the capacity to affect is most evident in the hegemony of the military and religious state of Gilead, embodied in certain individuals, Angels—males with the right to use fire arms—and Aunts—females with the right to use electric prods—who materially enforce and discipline the indocile bodies of the Handmaids, and the Commanders and Wives who own and use the Handmaids’ bodies for reproduction of the elite. On the other hand, and of specific interest to the present study, the series presents the Handmaids’ possibility of exercising some degree of resistance by means of affective practices enabled by the fissures of the apparently homogeneous discipline imposed by the state of Gilead. The authoritarian state discourages Handmaids from establishing empathetic relationships with one another and with individuals from other classes. The formal and implicit prohibition of bonding, on the one hand, prevents collective organization, and, on the other hand, precludes the Handmaids’ possibilities of constituting themselves as subjects with full agency and not merely as vessels.

That is to say, affects circulate, are exchanged and placed in hierarchies that value some affects and bodies over others, constituting an economy (Ahmed “Affective Economies” 2004). This, together with the strong bond between affect and corporeality, is exploited by the protagonist, Offred, as a strategy to occupy and force open the fissures in the overpowering hegemony of the state of Gilead. She is aware of the fact that her body is valuable because it is a scarce asset, especially when it is gestating. Her fertility makes her body an object of desire –the Commanders’, Wives’, Guardians’ and Martha’s desires. The Handmaids’ bodies, which stand out in the crowd due to their bright red outfit, trigger fantasies of possession and transcendence in powerful and not so powerful subjects. This makes their bodies a sort of capital with which to negotiate from small privileges to even their ontological status, again bringing up the notion of the economy of affects put forward by Ahmed. I want to acknowledge here that the negotiation with one’s body entails a conception of the body as an object one owns. However, as Handmaids are reduced to vessels and deprived of their agency, playing the game of the powerful requires a strategic appropriation of the body as capital.

The Gaze as Bodily Practice Orienting Affectivity

In her analysis of Atwood’s novel, Jeanne Reesman (1991) claims it presents “a profound feminist commitment through language” (6) and that the ocular metaphor for knowledge typical of modernity is replaced with a conversational metaphor. The series, in my belief, reclaims the ocular metaphor back, investing

women and feminized subjects both in the diegetic and extradiegetic worlds with the agency of looking, extending the metaphor beyond knowing, i.e. using the mind's capacities to incorporate the potency of the gendered bodies' affectivity.

Flesh is transformed into a body through bodily practices, which are a series of actions that materialize and embody the subjects (Muñoz 2014, 27, my translations henceforth). Bodily practices are iterative actions which a subject performs on herself and on others, and which constitute a system. "Through these practices subjects acquire a bodily shape and are transformed, that is to say, the materiality of the subject is constituted" (10) because they are relatively systematic and regular. However, due to their performative quality, the iteration of practices may entail (small) variations, which would allow some room for contesting normativity.

I understand the gaze as a privileged bodily practice, as in its performative capacity it acts on the subjectivity of the one who gazes as well as on the one who is gazed at. Due to this characteristic, it is also a proper vehicle for subjects to affect and be affected. Throughout the rest of this article, I will try to account for the functions, potentiality, and limitations of the gaze in relation to control and surveillance, and in relation to the affects that defy them.

Gazing and power are deeply related, as it has been pointed out by Michel Foucault (1980) when referring to the internalization of the gaze as a form of coercion, Donna Haraway (1988), who added the gender perspective when she pointed out that vision in scientific discourse is, in fact, not a neutral act, but an act performed by an interested white and male subject, or Gillian Rose (1993), in the field of geography, who denounces the masculine gaze of the geographer over feminized landscapes.

In Gilead, the state attempts at re-disciplining the bodies and re-educating the gaze by reversing to the morals of a religious Puritan past, although there is a lot of hypocrisy in this morality and piety. To look and be looked at triggers desire in women, mostly Handmaids, which is potentially harmful for the governing elites as it entails an affirmation of the self which is incompatible with the selflessness required of a Handmaid. That is why I consider that the female gaze in the series is counterhegemonic and implies a sort of visual empowerment.

The specific way of looking that surveillance entails is performed in the *Handmaid's Tale* by the Eyes, whose name certainly refers to the metonymical relationship established here between the organ and their function. They spy for the government, but they also function at a supra governmental level, spying on the same Commanders that give them the job in the first place. It is interesting to notice that the effectiveness of the Eyes' gaze rests not so much on their actual presence but on the citizens' internalization of their gaze³.

The material exertion of power over the body is evident also in the chromatically coded uniforms that individuals are made to wear according to the caste they belong to. Apart from the significance of red, in which the Handmaids have to dress, there is a forceful imposition in terms of the accessories they must wear to prevent them from being looked at as well as from looking at others.

They wear ample red cloaks that cover the whole body, and white bonnets and capes on their heads. These winged bonnets hide their hair, a mark of sensuality, cover their face and prevent them from looking in any other direction except downwards. The materiality of the bonnets disciplines their bodies through the iteration of the bodily practice which results from wearing them—looking downwards. The wings that frame the Handmaids' faces force the gesture which traditionally corresponds with patriarchal notions of modesty and how a woman is expected to behave in the public space. Any unrestrained look or gaze out of place produces a movement of the head that immediately exposes the Handmaid to the Eyes, other Handmaids, Marthas, or occasional bypassers.

Of course, the regimes of seeing also encode not looking. I have already referred to the rules of gazing in public space, where looking downwards traditionally symbolizes modesty and even submission, and any misdirected glance is detected and sanctioned. In the domestic realm, gazing is strictly regulated too, mostly during the ritualized rape called "Ceremony". The exchange of looks between the Commander and the Handmaid, as well as other physical contact apart from vagina-penis, is forbidden. The act of not looking or looking away is again associated with the modesty expected from the Handmaid, who is merely a vehicle for the satisfaction of the Commanders and Wives' desires of transcendence⁴ and social standing, which will be achieved through "their" offspring. The act is reduced to a biological action, reinforcing the pervading and long-standing maxim that biology determines women, and it is also legitimized through a Biblical reference. The fragment read before the Ceremony, and in the Red Center, where the Handmaids are trained, comes from Genesis 30:1-3 : "And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her" (Cf. Tonn 2018, 416). The prohibition of the gaze presents the Ceremony as deprived of sentimentality, though not of affect in the sense discussed here, and as a mechanical bodily function which does away with the interpersonal dimension, as the Commander is allegedly fulfilling a higher goal and responding to a divine order. All of this seeks to conceal the fact that he is ultimately raping a woman. June, however, lets Commander Fred Waterford steal looks at parts of her body in other non-regulated contexts, such as the clandestine Scrabble nights they have, establishing a negotiation in which the capital which she has is her own erotically invested body. She obtains small benefits through this, such as the possibility of having access to language and reading, as well as other more vital benefits such as being let off the punishment of not going out imposed on her by the Wife. Exerting her agency in the act of being looked at results in her, albeit restricted, empowerment.

As I have already stated, improper gazing toward spaces, objects and subjects constitutes an act of subversion which is proscribed. However, Offred manages to consolidate a bond of trust with her shopping partner⁵, Ofglen, really called

Emily, by looking at each other's reflection on a shop window. Being able to see and read empathy and concern in Ofglen's facial expressions, and getting a look back from her, allows Offred to lower her guard and trust, and thus establish a bond with Ofglen. It is through her friendship with Ofglen that Offred finds out about the existence of the underground resistance movement called Mayday.

June is a young woman who craves, not only for a friendly relationship with other women, but also for the physical contact of consensual sexual intercourse. Being subjected to ritualized rapes every month during her fertile period, in the Ceremony, she needs to fulfill her erotic desire, which is illegal and incompatible with the regime, as pointed out earlier. In her stolen looks at Nick, the Waterfords' driver, she discovers that he also illicitly looks at her. As in the case with Emily, the reciprocity of the gaze can, and does, bring about the possibility of a relationship, of an erotic nature in this case. In such a society, where every move and gesture of intimate life are regulated and surveilled, this exchange of looks constitutes an act of defiance and resistance to the disciplining of bodily practices, which takes us back to the concept of the economy of affects, since June's desired and desiring body gives her capital with which to negotiate certain freedoms, in a way similar to how she does it with the Commander during the games of Scrabble.

Overall, the Handmaid's disobedient look allows for dissident affects. The desire triggered in her by the erotically loaded exchange of looks with Nick, which presents possibilities for sexual pleasure, the desire for some control over her practices, which she can negotiate through the lustful looks exchanged with Commander Waterford, and the friendship established with Emily once they can look at each other in the eye, all defy the hegemonic regulations of affectivity.

Going back to the gaze in public space, the experience of shopping is for the Handmaids the only possibility of being outside the domestic space in a way less ritualized and codified than in other events in which they take part. It is true, however, that their conversations are greatly made up of set formulas, and the topics are also restricted to those which 19th century conduct books suggested. Going shopping becomes a sort of female *flânerie*, which offers an interesting counterpoint to the *flânerie* of the Modern man, who wandered around the city and was one with, yet different from, the crowd, who observed the progress of modernity, and who enjoyed a strong individuality and independence. The female *flânerie* is an opportunity to stay out of the house a little longer, to hear interesting gossip about other households, and to potentially establish some sort of relationship among the Handmaids, even though this is, to a great extent, marked by suspicion. This coming out to the public space cannot, because of the religious morality and work ethics that governs Gilead, be characterized by unnecessary wandering, but has as an aim running an errand for the Commander. Because the shopping has to be done on foot, it also serves the function of keeping the abdominal muscles healthy for pregnancy and delivery. It is interesting to note that none of the goods that the Handmaids buy is theirs, but doing the shopping is the legitimate opportunity to socialize with other Handmaids, though it must always be done with restraint and moderation. In opposite fashion to the Modern

flâneur, these women are sexual slaves who do not enjoy a full citizenship. Their gaze over dead bodies hanging and destroyed churches (Episodes 2 and 4) or intimidating armed Guards represents quite the opposite from the gaze over the march of progress, and determines urban landscapes of fear. The corpses of the executed are left hanging for everybody to see, by the river along the path that the Handmaids take, so that they can look at them. The Handmaids are in fact allowed to stop there and remain to observe, as these exhibitions fulfill the pedagogical function of disciplining through example the people who may think of rising against the government, just as centuries ago the corpses of rebels were exhibited in the public squares. It is also interesting that these exhibitions are not performed in such a place because, apparently, there is not one in Gilead, since such a space would allow for an undesirable and potentially destabilizing gathering of subjects. The sight of the corpses upsets but does not scare or desensitize June. Quite on the contrary, it fuels her rage against the regime more. The celebration of urban progress found in the Modern *flânerie* is replaced here with repulsion and anger.

Also, in relation to the orientation of affect through the gaze towards space, the normalization to which subjects, but mostly female subjects, are exposed is directly related to the territory of Gilead. What is apprehended and experienced every day, regardless of its cruelty, is the new normal. The strategy for the government to perpetuate itself seems to be the spreading of the idea that complying with the norm means being, and beyond the limits of Gilead one no longer is. In other words, what one cannot see, does not exist, and in fact, the women who are said to inhabit the colonies—the abject space of forced exile, pollution and disease—are called the unwomen. The conceptual metaphor of sight as knowledge is exploited to highlight the fact that not much is known beyond the confines of Gilead, only rumors, words with little or no ontological status, just like the women that inhabit that space⁶. To sum up, the hegemonic power does not only see, but also showcases some scenes to be observed—and certainly hides others from sight as well—which clearly illustrates that the gaze, as well as other bodily practices, circulate within a regime, with specific political aims.

Dissident Gazing in Extratextual Public Space

Henceforth, I would like to refer to my secondary objective, which was to illustrate the impact of the TV series on the visual regimes in public space. In this space, the orientation of the series audience's gaze converges with the points made here. In other words, the gaze of the audience also somehow constructs heteronomy or resistance⁷. The result of this heteronomic way of seeing, as appropriated by some feminist organizations, has produced paratexts that challenge patriarchy at different levels, as mentioned in the introduction.

Previously, I briefly reviewed the context of reception and production of the audiovisual text, in comparison to the context of production of the novel, pointing out that in the current times of a global turn to the right, women's bodies

become the arena of power struggles for the control of territory and capitalist (re) production. The TV series release in the United States was almost synchronous with Donald Trump's inauguration, and his conservative politics with regards to women's rights was met with demonstrations, several of which, in and outside of the United States, were carried out by women dressed as Handmaids (Bell 2018). The visual potency of the TV series could be said to be enhanced by the political context, just as the meaning of the novel was in the eighties.

I would like to illustrate the cultural appropriation of the Handmaids' symbology to protest against regressive politics in sexual and reproductive health by reflecting on the demonstrations in Argentina which accompanied the Congress debates on the right for abortion in 2018 ("Argentina Holds Historic Abortion Vote" 2018; Hagelstrom 2018). Around the world, this process, as well as the different actions performed by feminist collectives, received worldwide attention and support, for example from Amnesty International (Belski 2018). In this context, Margaret Atwood published an essay in an Argentinean newspaper, addressed to the then Vice-president Gabriela Michetti, pointing out, among other aspects, that a state that forces women to bear children they do not want promotes slavery ("Margaret Atwood le responde a Michetti" 2018). The debates in Congress were, in fact, the pinnacle of a long process carried out by many different organizations united in the collective National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion, whose symbol is a green kerchief. The first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* series was then available through streaming and had gained popularity in Argentina, which was relatively well timed with the debates on abortion. By way of an example of the relevance of the spectators' gaze, I refer here to the intervention of a collective of feminist journalists at the time, when the Senate was about to vote on the right to abortion⁸ ("Periodistas a favor del aborto" 2018). This intervention was carried out by a large number of women wearing red cloaks and white bonnets and walking down the street by the House of Senate looking downwards, as Handmaids in the series do. They stopped in front of the building, and, after reading out a document, which included parts of the introduction to the new Spanish edition of the novel, the "Handmaids" spread out their green kerchiefs, an action which is called "pañuelazo" ("Argentina Holds Historic Abortion Vote" 2018). The decontextualization of these uniformed women walking in silence, marching with their heads turned downwards, caused a lot of staring from bypassers. Modesty certainly was not the activists' aim. Quite on the contrary, they recontextualized the Handmaids' practice of walking in the public space and oriented the gaze of bypassers. These Handmaids are to be stared at; these are empowered, desiring women who produce a disruption in the urban landscape and break normalcy to make a statement. The series spectators and Atwood's readers do recognize them. In fact, the meaning of the intervention is completed when the intertext is recognized, which enhances the effectiveness of the demonstration. That is to say, the eye of the bypassers, who may also be viewers of the television show, and the performance converge to constitute a counterhegemonic gaze which disrupts traditional seeing practices.

All this shows to a great extent that the gaze, now deprived of the allegedly neutral aura proclaimed by modern man, can be understood as a privileged bodily practice marked by gender, and that this gaze has a crucial role in determining spaces and subjectivities and in enabling affective negotiations, both in the diegetic and in the extradiegetic worlds. Briefly put, the gaze, thus understood, and the affects it orients are powerful tools for political contestation.

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Notes

1. By Puritan values I mean here the ideals upheld by a society whose political life is based on biblical teachings, a system of punishment for those who do not abide by those rules, and on the sacrifice of the self for what is presented as the common good, as well as material wealth and high social status as marks of holiness.
2. In the series, a normalization is imposed on all bodies, but mostly on fertile women's, in order to make them incubators that will bear the elite's babies; the highly ritualized practice by which those babies are to be conceived —called "Ceremony"—denies Handmaids any possibility of desire or pleasure in sexual intercourse. The exchange of looks between the Handmaid and the Commander is forbidden, while the Wife's duty is to control that this is respected.
3. I will not refer to fear and its function as an emotion here, as it exceeds the scope of this paper, but it remains to be analyzed in future research, as I believe it can shed some more light on the mechanisms of resistance and oppression in the series.
4. More precisely, though, I understand the need for transcendence here in a psychological sense, as a human need to act and create meaning in an apparently chaotic world. This creative capacity is understood here as reproductive. Probably, because of the rigid sexual division of labor in Gilead, the Wives' maternal desire is rendered differently from the Commanders' desire for transcendence through reproduction. A Handmaid's pregnancy invests the Commander with social capital as he is the one to have--allegedly--impregnated her, thus securing his lineage.
5. The Handmaids are to go out in pairs in order to watch and tell on each other.
6. What happens to the women who are sent to the colonies is taken up in the second season of the series, which is out of the scope of this article.
7. I do not explore here the impact of the show in terms of marketing and reviews, as it would exceed the scope of this paper. However, according to the sources consulted, the reception in Argentina has been mostly positive.
8. Even though the Argentine Chamber of Deputies had voted in favor of the right for abortion, the Chamber of Senators, which is traditionally much more conservative, rejected the bill to legalize abortion in August 2018.

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