"THANK YOU FOR CREATING THIS WORLD FOR ALL OF US": GLOBALITY AND THE RECEPTION OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* AFTER ITS TELEVISION ADAPTATION

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Abstract

This article explores the reception of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) after its adaptation into an award-winning television series produced by Hulu in 2017. The reception of the show is studied through a selection of English language articles published online, which are analysed in the light of Manfred B. Steger's theories on globality. The television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* has had a global impact thanks to its dissemination through the social media and internet news outlets and because of the random concurrence of certain social processes. The news items I analysed polarize themselves into those who argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* series holds up a mirror to Trump's America and those who reject this belief. In both categories, the commentators are co-opting a cultural product for ideological or political purposes.

Keywords: globality, Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, reception, television series, adaptation, Trump's America.

'GRACIAS POR CREAR ESTE MUNDO PARA TODOS NOSOTROS': LA GLOBLALIDAD Y LA RECEPCIÓN DE *THE HANDMAID'S TALE,* DE MARGARET ATWOOD, DESPUÉS DE SU ADAPTACIÓN TELEVISIVA

Resumen

Este artículo examina la recepción de la novela *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) de Margaret Atwood tras su adaptación en 2017 a una serie de televisión producida por Hulu que ha obtenido numerosos premios. La recepción de la serie se lleva a cabo a través de una selección de artículos en inglés publicados en línea (*online*) que se analizan bajo la perspectiva de las teorías de Manfred B. Steger sobre la globalidad. La adaptación televisiva de *The Handmaid's Tale* ha tenido un enorme impacto global debido a su diseminación a través de las redes sociales y de las noticias publicadas en internet, y también gracias a la concurrencia de ciertos procesos sociales. Los artículos periodísticos que he analizado se polarizan entre los que argumentan que *The Handmaid's Tale* refleja la América de Trump y los que rechazan esta opinión. Mi tesis es que en las dos categorías los articulistas están apropiándose de un producto cultural con intenciones ideológicas o políticas.

Palabras clave: globalidad, Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, recepción, serie de televisión, adaptación, América de Trump.

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How easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone at all. What an available temptation (*The Handmaid's Tale*)

1. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's preoccupation with globality started in the early 1980s before the term *globalization* experimented a meteoric rise since the middle of the decade. In *Bodily Harm* (1981), the political thriller she published before *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Atwood suggests that the military coup taking place in the small Caribbean island of St. Antoine is susceptible of affecting the entire planet. Recently, in her Introduction to the new Vintage edition of *The Handmaid's Tale* published with a cover from the Hulu TV adaptation, she has reaffirmed her belief in the global consequences of any political event: "*It can't happen here* could not be depended on: anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances" ("Introduction" n.p. Emphasis in original). In a world where political and economic changes taking place in one country can affect the entire planet, globalization has become the defining buzzword of our era in both the academy and public political life (Lemert *et al*. xxxi). Ashcroft *et al*. define it as the process whereby individual lives are affected by economic and cultural forces that operate worldwide (462). Just as the debate about globalization has produced a voluminous literature, the term has been used confusingly in the media and academic literature to describe a process, a condition, a system and an age. In order to avoid this confusion Manfred B. Steger suggests adopting three different but related terms in relation to globality: first, globality as a *social condition* characterized by tight global economic, political, cultural, and environmental interconnections that make borders irrelevant; secondly, the term *global imaginary* is used to refer to people's growing consciousness of thickening globality. Finally, we need to take into account that globality is a spatial concept signifying a set of *social processes* that transform our present social condition of conventional nationality into one of globality (11-12). In addition, as Paul Jay notes, globalization is linked to the development of electronic media, the rise of transnational corporations, and proliferating forms of entertainment that easily leap national boundaries (2).

Within the field of culture, Suman Gupta refers to the alignments between literary and global industries as one of the procedures bringing together literary studies and globalization (867). In fact, if literature and literary studies have become *transnational*, to borrow Paul Jay's term (1), it is largely due to the current dissemination of literary texts through feature films and television series. The effect of this kind of diffusion is the transformation of literary texts in global narratives that reach out to every corner of the world. As Shannon Wells-Lassagne points out, adaptation has always been central in the television landscape, but perhaps never more so than now; and what is novel and interesting about recent television adaptations is their reception (4). The new golden age of television, also known as the Peak TV era, is ravenous of content, given the multiplication of sources for television fiction, be it broadcast networks, cable channels, satellite television or non-broadcast sources

like Nettflix, Amazon, or web series on YouTube. This cultural industry generates a huge number of responses, in the social media or news items, be it print or online.

Within the realm of Canadian Literature, 2017 has seen the adaptation of two Margaret Atwood's best-selling novels –*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace* (1996)– into television series, linked by their common concern with the recuperation of women's narratives. However, due to scope constraints I will focus on the ways in which Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel –about the transformation of the US democratic system into a theocratic dictatorship in which women with viable ovaries are forced to become child-bearers for the elite– has become a global narrative after the release of the series because of its capacity to transform itself and tune in with current affairs.

In fact, one of the characteristics of *The Hamdmaid's Tale* is its susceptibility to adaptation which Margaret Atwood has commented on: "*The Handmaid's Tale* has taken many forms. It has been translated into 40 or more languages. It was made into a film in 1990. It has been an opera, and it has also been a ballet. It is being turned into a graphic novel" ("Introduction" n.p.). *The Handmaid's Tale* was the first novel of Atwood's to be produced as a full-length feature film in the United States, directed by Volker Schlöndorff with screenplay by Harold Pinter and starring Natasha Richardson, Faye Dunaway and Robert Duvall. The film received mixed critical reviews and was relatively unsuccessful at the box office (Stein 78-79, Kilkenny n.p.). On the other hand, The MGM/ Hulu series, launched in April 27, 2017 obtained a plethora of awards and raised Hulu subscriber signups by 98% (Kilkenny n.p.). The second effect of the series was the spectacular rise in the sales of the novel which became Amazon's most sold book in 2017 (Kilkenny n.p.). In Spain Atwood's book was featured in the lists of most sold books in the five weeks following the release of the series by HBO (Cultural Supplement of the Spanish national newspaper *El Mundo*), and returned to the list after being broadcast in open television by the channel Antena 3 in the summer of 2018. This rise in the sales of the novel should be related to what Steger calls the tight global economic interconnections brought forward by globality (11).

The global response to *The Handmaid's Tale* series has been described as "awe-inspiring" (Miller qtd. in Jasper n.p) and includes not only print and online outlets in media from all over the world but also responses in the social networks which the scope of this article does not allow me to discuss. Instead, I will explore the reception of the series in a selection of articles and reviews written in English and published online. The articles have been selected because their content has to do with the various social processes taking place during the production and airing of the series. The chosen material also sheds light on the global imaginary in the mind of the makers of the series. I will also follow the reception of Season One of the series during the months following the broadcasting of the series until February 2018. Before I delve into the analysis of the online material in the third section of the article, I will provide some preliminary information on how Atwood's 1985 novel was turned into an award-winning global television product in the next section.

2. *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

As I shall explain in the next section of this article, the reception of *The Handmaid's Tale* Hulu series was largely influenced by the new wave of global Anglo-American feminism which has emerged at the January 2017 Anti-Trump Women's March.[1] But the story of "How MGM birthed 'The Handmaid's Tale' for TV," (Littleton) already had a gender component. Steve Stark, President of MGM TV, started to think of adapting Atwood's novel in the autumn of 2011. Stark wanted a female writer for the script because he was convinced that "no male writer could do justice to the dystopian tale of a future America where women are subjugated in brutal conditions under a twisted theocratic regime." (qtd. in Littleton n.p.). During this process, he received a phone call from Bruce Miller, a veteran drama writer and devotee of Atwood's novel who desperately wanted to work on the series. Convinced that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a "female-centred, feminist book," (Bilton n.p.) he solved his dilemma by hiring Reed Morano as the director of the first three episodes of the series. The female component of the series was further strengthened by giving the protagonist role of Offred/June to the well-known Peak TV star Elizabeth Moss who acted as producer together with Margaret Atwood. The result of this combination of talent and the strategic promotion of the series was a sweeping success at the Emmy Awards. The series was nominated for eleven of the categories and took eight, including Lead Actress (to Elizabeth Moss), Supporting Actress (to Ann Dowd for her role as Aunt Lydia) and Outstanding Writing for a drama series for Bruce Miller, the showrunner.

In *A Theory of Adaptation* Linda Hutcheon suggests that the element of change is paramount to adaption (52). Along this strand of thought, a few lines about how the Hulu series differs from Margaret Atwood's novel are in order because, as Glenn Willmott points out, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a story about power whose message is clearly grounded both in the presentational power of its media and in the representational power of its narrative events (170). As Laura M. Browning observes, *The Handmaid's Tale*'s disquieting world remains largely unchanged from page to small screen. The show has been described as being more "chilling" than the series (Browning *et al.* np.) to the extent that some viewers have reported to find it too horrifying to watch, whereas they did not feel that way when they read the novel.[2]

According to Hutcheon, external cultural contexts govern how the adapter will present the work to an audience (25). Hence, Hulu's adaptation of Atwood's

[1] I have deliberately left out the discussion of the #MeToo movement in relation to *The Handmaid's Tale* series because its connection to the show, although it has been pointed out by D'Ancona, is clearly less obvious than that of the January 2017 Women's March. In addition, the controversy it has generated, including a response by Margaret Atwood (see "Am I a Bad Feminist?"), is outside the scope of this article.

[2] These are the impressions of a relative in her sixties without a background in literary studies, and a student in her early twenties enrolled in my Postcolonial Literatures course during the academic year 2017-18.

novel into a TV series purports to be more inclusive of LGTB and African-American audiences, by assigning a lesbian gender identity to a character that did not have it in the novel (Ofglen, played by Alexis Bledel), and featuring black actors in the roles of Moira and Luke, June's husband.[3] Apart from these contextual details, I have selected three main differences between the novel and the Hulu TV series which have the potential to inform the reception of the latter. The first difference is that the real name of the protagonist Handmaid is given away as the first episode ends –"My name is June". Atwood, however, clarifies that it was her intention to keep the name of the narrator a secret:

> Why do we never learn the real name of the central character, I have often been asked. Because, I reply, so many people throughout history have had their names changed, or have simply disappeared from view. Some have deduced that Offred's real name is June, since, of all the names whispered among the Handmaids in the gymnasium/dormitory, "June" is the only one that never appears again. That was not my original thought but it fits, so readers are welcome to it if they wish. ("Introduction" n.p.)

By changing this detail about the narrator's name, Bruce Miller achieves the effect of making the viewer "identify with the protagonist and make her feel like a real person" (qtd. in Bilton n.p.). The second difference between the novel and the show is that in Atwood's novel Gilead is clearly a regime of the past with respect to the future of Gilead or to a "second projected future," as Arnold E. Davidson refers to it (113). The Historical Notes, as Atwood reminds us, are "the account of a symposium held several hundred years in the future, in which the repressive government described in the novel is now merely a subject of academic analysis" (*Moving* 336). However, in Bruce Miller's show, "Gilead takes place in the present, it's today" (qtd. in Bilton n.p.), a fact which inevitably imparts a contemporary relevance to the series. The third aspect I have highlighted as different in the textual and televisual narratives is that in the novel the suspension of the Constitution following the assassination of the President and the shootings in Congress was "blamed on Islamic fanatics, at the time" (*THT* 162).[4] In this point, Atwood seems prescient about the restriction of civil liberties undertaken in the US after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In the series, however, the account of the suspension of democracy provided in Episode 3 is just attributed to unlabelled "terrorists". This decision echoes the complete absence of allusion to Islamic countries on the part of the production team when they talk about the series.

[3] About these changes, Emily Nussbaum observes that "well-meaning [but] muddy the message" and that "The result is an odd trade-off: we get brown faces, but the society is unconvincingly color-blind" (n.p).

[4] Quotations from a 1988 print edition of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Seal Books will be integrated in the main text with the abbreviation *THT.*

3. IS *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* SERIES ABOUT TRUMP'S AMERICA?

When Atwood began writing *The Handmaid's Tale* in England in 1984, and wondered whether she "would be able to persuade the readers that the United States of America had suffered a coup that transformed an erstwhile liberal democracy into a literal-minded theocratic dictatorship" ("Introduction" n.p.), she could hardly imagine that her fictional world would migrate, in Matthew D'Ancona's words "from the creative construct to the realm of the thinkable" (n.p.).

Before tackling how internet media have turned *The Handmaid's Tale* into a global narrative which has been appropriated by ongoing globality-related social processes, I would like to argue that Atwood's novel depicts a society already experimenting globalization processes. First of all, it is the global control of IT technologies that allows the Gilead regime to dismiss women from their jobs and block their bank accounts as described in Chapter Twenty-eight of the novel (*THT* 161-171) and faithfully rendered in Episode Three of the Hulu series. D'Ancona associates this use of technology to subordinate women overnight to the power of digital manipulation and cyberwarfare to distort the democratic process in Trump's America. Incidentally, the use of fake news is already present in Atwood's novel (*THT* 19, 78).

The internet articles about *The Handmaid's Tale* series I have selected polarize into two groups: the first one affirms that Hulu's show is an "unexpectedly timely" adaptation of Atwood's novel which is relevant for Trump's America, and the second category rejects this view. Daniel Fienberg's review of the series for *The Hollywood Reporter* is representative of the first trend of opinion as it states that "the 30-plus-year-old work has become a story for the very time and place we're living in" (n.p.). In his review published in *The Washington Post*, Hank Stuever not only describes the adaptation as timely but also as "essential viewing for our fractured culture" adding that "lying about terrorist attacks and threatening the Constitution are just the beginning of the numerous, much-discussed parallels to our 2017 political nightmare" (n.p.). This kind of opinions are to be expected from media like *The Hollywood Reporter* and *The Washington Post* which support political views (those of the Democratic Party) antagonistic to those of Trump just as a large sector of the US entertainment industry does.

The view that the novel –and hence, the series, in which Margaret Atwood has participated in various ways, including a cameo, cast as one of the Aunts– has immediate relevance for Trump's America has been largely encouraged by Atwood herself. During the months before the launching of the TV series, she gave interviews and wrote articles for the global media, speaking about the novel in every public event she took part in. On March 3, 2017 she dedicated a large section of her acceptance speech for the Honorary Doctorate she received at the Universdad Autónoma de Madrid to discuss *The Handmaid's Tale*, even venturing to speak about "a president who seems prepared not only to flout the rules of his own country but to remain steadfastly ignorant of what those rules even are" ("Honorary" 42). A few days after delivering this speech, *The New York Times* published the text which would become the introduction to the new edition of her novel under the title "Margaret Atwood on What 'The Handmaid's Tale' Means in the Age of Trump".

In it Atwood issues a warning that, "[i]n the wake of the recent American election, fears and anxieties proliferate. Basic civil liberties are seen as endangered, along with many of the rights for women won over the past decades, and indeed the past centuries" ("Introduction" n.p.). Interviewed by Pat Morrison for *Los Angeles Times*, Atwood remarked that although the shooting of the series had started before the American election, "then the election happened, and the cast woke up in the morning and thought, we're no longer making fiction –we're making a documentary" (n.p.). Therefore, Atwood voluntarily or involuntarily participated in a very ingenious promotion strategy devised by the makers of the series. This strategy is based on what Steger calls the social conditions of globality which makes borders irrelevant (11). Given the impressive diffusion of her views through conventional press media and the social networks, Atwood issued this new reading of her 1988 novel as a mirror held up to the America of Trump with a global imaginary in mind.[5]

It was not only Margaret Atwood who tried to persuade the potential readers of her novel and spectators of the series that *The Handmaid's Tale* can be linked to contemporary events in Trump's America. According to Rich Lowry, the view was also pushed by everyone involved in the show production and is partly responsible for the eight Emmys won by the series (n.p.). The persuasiveness of this reading was incremented thanks to the coincidence of the production of the series with the airing of the notorious Access Hollywood tape in which Trump uttered the misogynist line "Grab them by the pussy," leading to a global feminist reaction in the January 2017 anti-Trump's Women March. At that march, when the series had not even been broadcast yet, protesters held signs that read, "Make Margaret Atwood fiction again" in response to Trump's famous "Make America Great Again" and other slogans inspired by the novel ("*The Handmaid's Tale* is not an instruction manual"). Bruce Miller capitalized on this kind of connections and the global dimension of this march to publicize the series. He explicitly compared the anti-Trump Women's March with some of the visuals in the show: "You are seeing exactly the same signs, exactly the same images and you're also seeing Capitol police with guns, not firing them, thank God, but it's the same thing" (qtd. in Lowry, n.p.). If this was not enough, 2017 was the year of the "Handmaid's protests" where, as Christine Hauser recounts it, women's rights activists have been wearing red robes and white bonnets based on Margaret Atwood's novel and created by Ane Crabtree for the series, to fight back the cutback of reproductive rights across the United States. That the Handmaid's costumes have become global icons has not escaped Miller, who has noted that "the visual connotes a whole political point of view, which is really fascinating" (qtd. in Jasper).

The internet articles stating that *The Handmaid's Tale* is not about Trump's America are as numerous as those that affirm that it is. A number of the news items

[5] A slightly abridged version of Atwood's *New York Times* article with a different title appeared in the Spanish newspaper *El País*: "*Maldita Profecía*" (1 May 2017). This title, which can be translated as "Damned Prophecy", also encourages reading *The Handmaid's Tale* as a prediction.

I consulted focus on the way in which *The Handmaid's Tale* series has become a comforting fiction against some of the new challenges for women in our society. Most of these articles focus on the political context of the first publication of the novel to argue that the show's rendition of the plot offers an outdated idea of what the fight for women's rights should look like today. From the channel Globalization and Politics of the US news web *piqd*, Erika Wilk contends that the conflicts faced by women today are related to "Neoliberalism", rather than "Traditionalism" (n.p.). Along the same line of thought, Angela Nagle contends that in contemporary America women are not being forced to have children for an authoritarian traditionalist state but, instead, "they're being compelled not to by far more insidious forces" (n.p.). These forces, Nagle argues, include "a total hegemonic fusion of the corporate and the countercultural, of progressivism, modernity, and the market," complex social processes brought about by globality.

According to Ross Douthat, *The Handmaid's Tale* (novel) should be read as "an alternate history" rather than "an exercise in futurism" (n.p.). This "alternate reality" was inspired by the Reagan-era and its feminist thinkers who merged with Christian conservatives in their critique of pornography and fears about rape and male predation. This interpretation coincides with that of feminist critics of the novel, such as J. Brooks Bouson who observes that *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects on the antifeminist messages given to women by the fundamentalist New Right of the 1980s (135). Reading the novel in this kind of context, it is easy to understand why Gilead did not see itself as misogynist but, rather, as aiming to protect women and liberating them, using the words of Commander Waterford, from the "meat market" of "the singles bars, the indignity of high-school blind dates" (*THT* 205). As Emily Nussbaum points out, Offred's mother's second wave feminism was ironically transformed in the world of the novel into "Biblical fascism sold with faux-feminist icing" (n.p.). But as the authors of the articles who do accept the view that *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects contemporary US suggest, Trump's America is substantially different from Reagan's as far as the situation of women is concerned.

Another current of opinion emerging from the articles that do not accept the comparison between the world of *The Handmaid's Tale* and Trump's America is that the place depicted in the novel and in the series is not the US but an Islamic country. Breaking with the strand of opinion favored by the makers of the show, Reed Morano asserts that the show is about how women are treated in "other countries" (qtd. in Lowry, n.p.) but she does not mention which ones. Some commentators (Lowry, Nagle) venture a possible comparison with Saudi Arabia. From outside the United States Seth Frantzman is more candid about the hypocrisy of Western governments and Western feminists who go out on "Handmaid" protests while condoning the regime –Iran– which most resembles the situation depicted by Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale*, because of economic and colonialist interests. Whereas pictures of women protesting about their reproductive rights in the US dressed as Handmaids have been disseminated around the world, "nothing happens," remarks Frantzmann, "when women are arrested in Iran for exercising such a basic human right as showing their hair". Franztman further asserts: "With women's bodies politicized and controlled by men; secret police watching everything and running clandestine

brothels for the elites, while women wander about in their red burkas, Iran is a real-life version of the television series *The Handmaid's Tale*". Rebbeca Hawkes writing for *The Telegraph* also delineates the similarities between the clothing habits of *The Handmaid's Tale* and those of Iran: "Iran's Islamic Republic, which has been in power since the country's 1979 revolution, compels women to wear the veil [...] but is also guilty of many other human rights abuses towards women and men" (n.p). In the Historical Notes of *The Handmaid's Tale* a parallelism between Iran and Gilead is put forward in one of Professor Pieixoto's publications titled "Iran and Gilead: Two Late-Twentieth Century Monotheocracies, as Seen Through Diaries" (*THT* 282). Although Atwood acknowledges that many different strands feed into the novel ("Introduction," n.p,), she fails to mention that one of them is Iran.

CONCLUSIONS

When Bruce Miller accepted the Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing for a Drama series for *The Handmaid's Tale* on September 17, 2017, he thanked Margaret Atwood "for creating this world for all of us" (Television Academy n.p.). Although Miller was probably referring to the fictional universe of the novel he recreated in the series, the word "world" inevitably evokes the global dimension of the series, which I have approached in this article through its reception in internet media. In addition, through the phrase "all of us," Miller was not only referring to himself and the cast and production team present with him on the stage, but also to global viewers of the streaming network. *The Handmaid's Tale* series is thus a product of globality, having been created by the television division of one mainstream American entertainment corporation –MGM– in competition with larger studio competitors to be broadcast throughout the world. As a television streaming network, Hulu partakes in what David Held calls the transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power which is characteristic of globality (qtd. in Steger 15). Furthermore, having been produced in the US, the show contributes to the dissemination of American culture which is one of the mandates of US Neo-imperialism.

The Handmaid's Tale has been adapted into a variety of cultural products but clearly none has had the global impact of the Hulu TV series. The explanation for this worldwide success lies, on the one hand, on its skillful dissemination in the hands of two agents working intentionally and, on the other, on a confluence of random circumstances. The first agent is Margaret Atwood who forcefully promoted her novel before the release of the series through speeches and publications. The second agent is what Lemert *et al*. call the "global communicational conglomerate" (xiii) of social media –Atwood is active on Twitter– and internet news outlets which have marketed and continue to market the series with global economic consequences. The third factor, which D'Ancona calls "luck" (n.p.) is the concurrence of certain social processes before and after the series was aired. These processes are the revelation of the Access Hollywood Tape in October 2016 containing Trump's notorious

misogynist comment which provoked the January 2017 Women's March, and the coincidence with the President's war against the public funding of contraception measures which prompted women dressed as Handmaids to protest all over the US.

The news items I analyzed in this article polarize themselves into those which argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* series holds up a mirror to Trump's America and those that reject this belief. The articles defending the first view are ideologically close to the Democratic Party, supported by much of the US show business industry. Those that disagree with the identification between the novel and contemporary America invoke the different contexts in which the novel and the series were published. *The Handmaid's Tale* (novel) was published during the Reagan era during a backlash on women's rights due to a rise of religious conservatism but, as Douthat and Nagle contend, in the "Post-Protestant secularized" times of Trump's America (n. p), where women face different challenges, the tenets put forward by the series do not hold. The controversy is endless and one cannot help wondering whether the ongoing debate is not another way of merchandising the series. In whatever case, one thing is sure, we will never read the novel again without connecting it to the series.

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