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Reshaping the Dystopia through Seriality and the Sentimental Narrative in Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Introduction

After the critical and commercial success of television series such as Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017) and Channel 4/Netflix's *Black Mirror* (2011-2019), both of which scored top prizes at the 2017 Emmy Awards, several commentators in magazines, newspapers and Internet portals addressed the recent popularity of what they commonly referred to as "dystopian television"¹. These articles and lists engaged with a wide variety of television series and serials, with topics ranging from the more far-fetched extra-terrestrial wars, zombie apocalypses and android revolutions to the seemingly more reality-like takes on the rise of fascism in the twenty-first century and on extreme inequality in the distribution of wealth. Rarely did such writing problematize the meaning of the word "dystopia" and whether it was in fact adequately used when attached to those narratives. For scholars of dystopia, too, the word—a modification of Thomas More's sixteenth-century neologism "utopia"—poses a problem, and there is disagreement as to where to place its potential boundaries². In this article, we are interested, in particular, in the case of the Hulu serial *The Handmaid's Tale* and how it

¹ This trend in writing is exemplified by the following articles and lists, all published between 2017 and 2019: Hudson, 2017; Kindley, 2018; Maloney, 2018; Ariano, 2019; Adegoke, 2019; Sturges, 2019.

² As a brief illustration, in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, edited by Gregory Claeys, for example, Claeys's own contribution stresses the notion of "feasibility" as a central source for differentiation between dystopia and science fiction and, under his argument, a piece of writing such as H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) is a work of science fiction, rather than a dystopia. Yet his chapter is followed by the disagreeing Peter Fitting, who argues that the time machine in this story serves simply as a form of transportation: "The novel is not about the impact of technology, although it certainly could be called a dystopia – it is a vision of the future in which class division and conflict have led to a degraded society" (Fitting 139). Such dissent surrounding a single novel demonstrates that the problem of definition remains important to the study of dystopian writing and of what is or not to be understood as part of the field.

transforms the core characteristics that shape the homonymous 1985 novel by Margaret Atwood that it adapts (and, as an ongoing serial, continues to expand³), particularly when understood as an inheritor of the early and influential writings of Aldous Huxley, George Orwell and Yevgeny Zamyatin. Our main interest in this discussion lies in how longform serial storytelling, as the form that is preferred in American television, comes to affect the narrative.

Despite the alleged popularity that so-called dystopian television has achieved through a variety of productions in recent years, scholarly engagement with this notion remains sparse, and the entanglement of the forms and patterns of television storytelling with the characteristics of dystopia—even when they remain debatable—has only been briefly sketched in popular reception. For some critics, it is the success of the dystopia in a form that demands long-term commitment on the part of the viewer—the television series—that is most worthy of attention, for it has not escaped them that this union is not always an easy one. Evan Kindley argues, for instance, that while television seems to have become more hospitable than it had ever been to the dystopian genre, the latter “poses specific problems” for the former due to the difficulty involved in

finding a way to tell an ongoing serialized story set in a dystopian world that’s not unrelentingly depressing or, worse, didactic. Dystopias rarely have happy endings, but they do have endings: They’re a species of morality play, which means that sooner or later they need to deliver a moral. (Kindley)

Devon Maloney defends a similar point, arguing that “the genre’s most affecting stories have always been highly concentrated, discrete doses of horror”. According to Jason Mittell, however, American television is predicated on an “infinite model” of storytelling, meaning that serials tend to continue for as long as audiences are interested in watching (33)—this narrative form, thus, is in direct opposition to the notion of *concentrated doses*

³ As of 2022, Hulu has released four seasons, totalizing forty-six episodes so far, with a fifth season already confirmed but neither released nor completed.

of horror suggested by Maloney, since the horror in a successful serial, rather than being concentrated, would be extended through weeks and months with every new instalment, and throughout several years as it came back for more seasons.

And yet, as the examples cited above demonstrate, commentators everywhere would have us believe that dystopia has been thriving on television. It is debatable whether all the examples commonly listed as reflecting this trend are, indeed, dystopias⁴. It would perhaps be more accurate to consider that we have been witnessing a growing interest in television that explores negative visions for the future of humanity. Whether these are dystopian will depend on one's understanding of what dystopia means. Following the origin of the term as one of the many modifications to More's "Utopia", as well as its placement within the larger phenomenon of utopianism as defined by a shared notion of "social dreaming" that is defended by Lyman Tower Sargent (3), we argue for an understanding of the dystopia, *pace* the previously cited Kindley, as an inherently didactic form of warning in that it mirrors, in a distorted and exacerbated yet recognizable way, tendencies that the author of a dystopian text perceives in his or her own surroundings—it demands, then, a certain *feasibility*, as defended by Gregory Claeys (109). Scenarios focusing on apocalyptic futures of alien invasion or zombification might be understood as dystopian if we take them metaphorically, as does Gabriela Sanseverino in arguing that zombie narratives can lead to a reflection about economic recession and mass layoffs, for example (132). But this requires an initial interpretive leap that might or might not be taken, while the dystopia's intersection with what is perceived as the present that originated such a narrative is traditionally more directly clear—as exemplified by the many claims made, especially in 2017, that *The Handmaid's Tale* was

⁴ Along with *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Black Mirror*, *Battlestar Galactica* (Syfy, 2004-2009), *Fringe* (Fox, 2008-2013), *The Man in the High Castle* (Prime Video, 2015-2019), *3%* (Netflix, 2016-2020), *Colony* (USA, 2016-2018), *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-), *Electric Dreams* (Prime Video, 2017), *Altered Carbon* (Netflix, 2018-2020) and *Years and Years* (BBC/HBO, 2019) all appear more than once in the limited sample listed in note 1.

"Trump's America", or paralleled it too closely⁵. In order to examine how dystopia and television seriality interact, which this article will do by examining one of its most prominent examples, it will be useful to first clarify what we take "dystopia" to mean within a tradition that Atwood's novel followed and, in some ways, transformed.

Dystopia: The Literature of Warning

Although the term "utopia" was famously coined by Thomas More to name both his 1516 book and the fictional island that is described in it, scholars of utopianism (such as Vieira, Sargent, and Mohr) point out that *Utopia* can be understood as being inserted in a much older tradition of which Plato's *Republic* is an important early example. As conceived in More's writing, however, the utopia can be understood in the context of "a humanist logic, based on the discovery that the human being did not exist simply to accept his or her fate, but to use reason in order to build the future" (Vieira 4). With the navigations expanding boundaries, Europeans found fertile ground to imagine potentially very different (and better) forms of social organization. As this literary tradition developed, it also changed with the times; with the Enlightenment and new scientific discoveries, utopian writing took an euchronian turn, especially in France: rather than being imagined in distant, imaginary places, utopias were then imagined in the future, seeing history "as a process of infinite improvement" (Vieira 10). This was not the only transformation that the sixteenth-century utopia experienced; in Britain, a new anti-utopian tradition flourished, as satirical texts took as their target utopian thinking itself.

As a new development in this history of many ramifications, the term "dystopia" was first used by John Stuart Mill in 1868, but it is generally agreed that the dystopia as a

⁵ For a few examples of this trend in popular reception, see Bradley, 2017; Weigel, 2017; Moscatello, 2017. On the other hand, others have felt the need to argue that "Trump's America" was, in fact, *not* Gilead—not in order to defend Trump or the Republican party's politics, but due to the problematic aspects of the comparison itself—, already in 2017 and later as the serial continued (and Trump was unsuccessful in his attempt at re-election); see Crispin, 2017; Young, 2019; Colombo, 2021. Here, we are less interested in the arguments that are defended by either side than in the very existence of a debate held in those terms.

literary genre truly developed in the twentieth century (Vieira 17-18, Claeys 107-108, Fitting 139-40, Baccolini and Moylan 1, Mohr 21, 27-29, Ferns 105), particularly in the writings of Yevgeny Zamyatin (*We*, 1924), Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*, 1932), and George Orwell (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949). As a modification of the word “utopia”, the dystopia is inherently connected to it; they serve as opposites, however, in that the projections that they cast are radically different. Dunja Mohr argues that both forms of writing ultimately point to the present, but they do so through different strategies: the utopia seeks to create recognizable difference between present reality and the fictional world represented in the work, while the dystopia thrives when it manages to create a sense of shared similarities between our present and an imagined (and appalling) vision for the future. Mohr’s argument is that, with different strategies, they have similar objectives nonetheless: “sociopolitical change by means of the aesthetic representation of a paradigm change” (28). This is ultimately why Sargent, for example, considers dystopia to be fully situated within the realm of utopianism, a phenomenon that, in its different manifestations, has at its core the “dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live” (3). His point is that dystopias are meant as an effort on the writer’s part to warn readers; to warn someone of something implies that “choice, and therefore hope, are still possible” (26)—otherwise, there would be no point to the warning.

In what we might now call, following theorists such as Tom Moylan, Raffaella Baccolini and Dunja Mohr, a “classical dystopia” (of which Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell are representative), such hope lies in an extratextual level—in the act of communication established between author and reader. Baccolini and Moylan argue that classical dystopias have definitive closures, ending with the subjugation of the individual. In their category of the “critical dystopia”, however, the argument is that these new fictional

writings maintain utopian hope within the boundaries of the work itself through “ambiguous, open endings” (Baccolini and Moylan 7). Positioning Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* within this category is not fully agreed upon by Baccolini and Moylan, who argue in the introduction to the essay collection *Dark Horizons*, that this novel “directly drew on the classical dystopian narrative even as it interrogated its limits and suggested new directions” (3); in their individual works, however, they take their approaches in separate, if related, lines. Baccolini, for instance, suggests that Atwood’s novel outrightly rejects “the subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel” (520), while Moylan’s assessment, considers its ultimate ambiguity central in that it represents both a continuation and a challenge to the classical dystopia that it follows in both structural terms and tone (see Moylan 103-108). He argues that it presents a “counternarrative” (103) in the many forms of transgression committed by the Handmaids, in the direct action of a resistance group and in the suggestion of the existence of an “outside” world (104), and it also presents a more fractured surface for the dystopian state than that found in the previous classical dystopias. This state is never defeated, but the epilogue of the novel, an academic conference taking place in a post-Gilead world, suggests that it *did* come to an end; but even this ending reinforces ambiguity, Moylan argues, in that the tone of the academics reinforces certain misogynistic ideas. Ultimately, we would suggest, the hope in Atwood’s novel remains firmly connected to the act of communication between writer and reader—the difference is that the potentiality of such an act of communication is mirrored within the storyworld itself, where the Handmaid’s act of narration survives into the future and continues to exist, in 2195, as counternarrative (now to the misogyny of the very researchers who unearthed the tapes in which her oral narration was recorded, and are introducing the transcript to a larger audience).

The epilogue can be read as didactic in yet another sense in that it can teach readers, who have witnessed Offred's suffering and her transformed consciousness throughout the novel, how *not* to read her tale, as argued by David Hogsette. Offred's act of narration should not be disregarded as something minor—but it remains true, nonetheless, that Gilead is still firmly in place by the time her narration is finished, and misogyny seems to stand just as firmly in place by the time the transcript of her recorded tapes becomes public in the twenty-second century. The gap between Offred's experiences in Gilead — which end with her stepping into a van that is to take her to an unknown future, her oral narration of them that is registered in the tapes, and the year 2195 — is left unexplored in the text. The Hulu serial concludes its first season with the same imagery of the protagonist stepping into a van, thus repeating Offred's words from the novel with few modifications; the adaptation in a strict sense, then, is mostly concluded by the end of season one — from season two onwards, the writing of the show is primarily inventive, not adaptive, and it could be said to be exploring the gap left open by Atwood (at least before she published the sequel *The Testaments* in 2019). However, considerable modifications have been imposed on Atwood's narrative beginning with season one — which adds, subtracts, and reinterprets events originally found in that text, as exemplified by the depiction of the "Salvaging" and "Particution" ceremonies that are included in episodes one and ten and in part XV of the novel (see Menegotto, "You Don't Own Me" 251-2 for a discussion of this aspect).

Atwood's novel interrogates the form that she inherited from Huxley and especially Orwell (see Atwood, "George Orwell") in a series of narrative choices beyond the obvious emphasis on gender: she treats rebellion on the collective front (Mayday) and the sexual (the Handmaid's affair with the household driver) as separate from one another; she never inserts her protagonist fully into the realm of organized resistance; she makes sure that the contrary voice that is represented in Offred's narration survives well into the

(post-Gilead) future; we are never allowed to be certain whether the protagonist survived, escaped or was captured—only that the tapes she recorded made it to 2195. These are important transformations in the classical dystopian form. Yet, as even Dunja Mohr, for whom *The Handmaid's Tale* is to be placed outside the classification of classical exactly because of Offred's act of narrating, "the novel lacks any suggestion of where—beyond survival—this poetic discourse leads" the protagonist (260).

While Atwood presents a dystopia that provides the reader with more potential openings, she nonetheless remains much closer to the classical form, in which hope is primarily to be found in the act of communication between writer and reader, than to the critical dystopia that presents a more direct utopian project, or alternative, within its pages. With the epilogue, we are not presented any alternative, only the notion of a wake-up call to be perceived in the Handmaid's narration. In 2195, her voice *could* certainly effect change, but it remains unknown what kind of impact the publication of the "Handmaid's tale" would go on to have, or not have; just like ourselves, the people of Nunavit would first have to listen and then act. With Offred leaving the stage, and perhaps leaving Gilead behind as well, as uninvolved in any organized movements of resistance or utopian projects as she was when the narrative began, the novel's epilogue forces readers to turn their attention back to themselves, and to their own time.

Television Storytelling: Episodes, Seasons, and the Melodramatic Mode

In *Descriptive Adaptation Studies*, Patrick Cattrysse argues for a research program on adaptation that is target-oriented in two ways: because the investigation departs from "the adaptation as and end product" and because "it postulates that the adaptation process is teleological, i.e. that it is determined by both source (con)text and target (con)text conditioners, and that in terms of final decision-making, the latter may be more

important than the former" (12). It was following this research program that we sought to explore whether understanding the serial format of contemporary American television could help explain some of the choices that were made in the Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Our focus was on how the dystopian genre that the serial subscribes to by virtue of it being an adaptation of Atwood's novel pertaining to that genre interacts with the rhythms and characteristics of American serial television.

An initial issue in that sense involved referring to a serial produced for a streaming platform as "television". Amanda Lotz, who has been chronicling shifts in industrial practices in U.S. television for many years, describes the *transformation* of the medium with the appearance and spread of original programming on cable channels and follows it up with the notion of a *revolution* caused by internet-distributed content (Lotz, *We Now Disrupt...*). For the scholar, original content released by streaming services is still understood as television mainly due to the format of episodes that are distributed across seasons—thus, it is television when the content is serialized. Even so, streaming significantly alters the patterns of distribution when compared to traditional television, as the researcher herself argues elsewhere (Lotz, *Portals*) highlighting that on traditional television the practice of scheduling is central, while internet distribution usually allows a user to purchase access to an entire library of content at once.

Even if the practice of scheduling is ultimately disrupted by streaming platforms, however, different services have been testing diverse approaches to the distribution of their original content. Netflix, the pioneer, has transformed it significantly as it suggested that complete first seasons, released all at once, should be understood as the "pilot" of a series (Castellano and Meimaridis 201). Milly Buonanno argues that this strategy effectively "undermines defining features of narrative seriality, as historically conceptualised, enacted and experienced"—meaning, as a narrative that unfolds over time with enforced interruptions that look the same for every viewer or reader (194). But

the strategy adopted by Hulu with the release of *The Handmaid's Tale* in some ways still resembles the patterns of traditional seriality, as the platform releases new episodes weekly—the “airing” of this serial is not as disruptive as that championed by Netflix. Evidently, alternative modes of viewing would be made possible by Hulu’s adoption of the “library” model, but older options, like DVD boxsets or the DVR, would equally allow it.

We adopt here, then, a rationale that remains primarily tied to more traditional television, since our previous investigation has suggested that although there *are* differences between the rhythms of *The Handmaid's Tale* and of those serials produced for broadcast channels that Michael Newman analyzes, such as the duration of individual scenes—which tend to be longer in the Hulu serial (cf. Menegotto, “From Offred” 158), the differences seem less significant than the similarities. The resemblances are represented by the designing of intra-episodic storylines or the distribution of screen time between different characters in each episode, following the traditional A/B/C plot structure of American television (Newman 18, Thompson 31), especially from season two onwards, as our attention is requested by ancillary developments that centralize experiences beyond those of the titular Handmaid⁶. Newman argues that television writers are “under an obligation constantly to arouse and rearouse our interest” (20), and, further, that the writing of television is thought out with “a strong rhetorical force, giving us reasons to care about characters and to want to know more” (20), for seriality requires that our interest is peaked enough for us to come back for the next instalment—Sean O’Sullivan refers to this as serials building “momentum” (“Six Elements” 55).

Other approaches, such as Kathryn VanArendonk’s, have focused on the ability that television episodes must have to stand on their own, and she argues that “an episode’s constituent pieces have the power to speak more meaningfully to each other than they do to continuing plotlines in subsequent weeks” (“Theorizing” 67)—by nature,

⁶ For a more detailed examination, see Menegotto, “From Offred” 159-69.

episodes are always one out of many, but she argues that they never disappear as part of a whole. This differs slightly from the argument made by O'Sullivan, for whom the short television season, aired uninterruptedly over the course of several weeks, is itself a unit of meaning, which he compares to the structure of a poem that, with verses and stanzas, is "broken on purpose". In that sense, he argues that these shows operate "from season to season—runs of episodes marked off by significant gaps" ("Broken on Purpose" 60). We argue that this pattern can be perceived, thematically, in the seasons of *The Handmaid's Tale*, but that the episodic storytelling VanArendonk refers to is equally apparent. She makes a strong argument about serials usually resting on an unknown future, and thus

it's important to provide access to some form of satisfaction, be it thematic, narrative, or aesthetic, on a week-by-week basis. [...] Series that do not reward audiences early are rarely given the chance to exist long enough to reward them later. (*The Episode* 54)

We should also notice that serial television requires that "we care about the drama", for it demands a long engagement on the part of the viewer (Mittell 244). Mittell suggests that one of the ways in which serial television seeks our continued engagement is through "serial melodrama"; drawing from Linda Williams, here melodrama is not understood as a film genre, but as a mode: "an approach to emotion, storytelling, and morality that cuts across numerous genres and media forms" (Mittell 233). For Williams, as for other television scholars (besides Mittell himself, 233-60, see Casey et al 170), melodrama is the predominant mode in American television. She does not think of melodrama in terms of necessary stylistic "excess", as do some of its most important theorists such as Peter Brooks and Thomas Elsaesser (see Gledhill and Williams 6), but rather as a combination of affect and moral legibility that seeks to create a shared sense of "felt good" with the viewer ("Mega-Melodrama!" 529). We are asked to share in this *felt good* (meaning the "need to locate the goodness that deserves to live in a home 'space of innocence'" even if upon a closer look the flaws of this alleged space of innocence become evident (525). E.

Deidre Pribram argues that in melodrama “immediate emotional engagement” has prevalence over solely cognitive or rational terms (39), and she examines television seriality and its narrative movement as based on jumping from emotion to emotion, purposefully varied in their nature.

The notions of affect and contrasting emotions are also central to Robyn Warhol’s discussion of what she refers to as the “good cry” of sentimental narratives, also adopted by Mittell in his discussion of the serial melodrama. Warhol is interested in describing what she refers to as “technologies of affect” and argues that reading and watching are processes that create physical reactions in the body and that “certain genres invoke these physical responses in predictable, formulaic patterns” (7), as exemplified by her discussion of sentimentalism. While such narratives—and the physical reactions they induce—are, in American culture, ascribed to “femininity”, she prefers the term “effeminate” to indicate that anyone can perform these physical reactions that are not culturally understood as “masculine”. Mittell connects Williams’s and Warhol’s discussions in order to suggest that “the melodramatic pathos that suffuses most television serials can work to evoke effeminate feelings, even outside the traditionally female soap operas” (248), offering *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010) as an example of seriality that invites a traditionally “masculine” mode of engagement with its emphasis on “forensic fandom” (247) while also prominently adopting throughout its storytelling the seven techniques that Warhol describes in her “narratology of the good cry” (see Warhol 41-50). For Warhol, the good cry arises through the application of a variety of tools: the use of “poetic devices” to heighten emotion (41); the appeal to the idea that certain emotions cannot be fully expressed in language and are more powerfully left unnarrated; the adoption of the point of view of either “victims” or “triumphant figures who have formerly been represented as oppressed” (45); the direct addressing of the narratee (the one technique Warhol does not believe to have moved from sentimental literature to

sentimental film); the use of “close calls and last-minute reversals” and “emotional jolts” (47); characters that come to act against type established either by the text itself or culture at large; the counterbalancing of “grief and suffering” and “joy and triumph, albeit bittersweet” (49).

Gledhill and Williams seek to surpass the obsession of critics of melodrama with its “suffering side” (1), with Gledhill also pointing out the “optimism, individual striving, and ‘can-do’ orientation to the future” (xix) that is characteristic of Hollywood melodrama, while Warhol argues that sentimentality is crucially intertwined both with “tears of defeat” and, just as importantly, with “tears of triumph” (40). We argue that both these characteristics are central to Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in which the “good-cry techniques” are constantly used, and especially to its structuring of season-long meaningful units composed of individual episodes, in a way that serves to continually reassert an idea of “can-do” Americanness. In this way, the dystopian genre, in its classical expression, which Atwood’s ambiguousness slightly alters without fully subverting, as previously argued following Moylan’s reading, is significantly transformed, or perhaps de-characterized, in the serial.

***The Handmaid’s Tale* as American Television Narrative**

As the title of Atwood’s novel indicates, *The Handmaid’s Tale* tells the life of one woman, a Handmaid known as Offred, and is dominated by her thoughts, feelings, memories, and perceptions of both Gilead and the “time before” that led to it, which reinforces the limited scope of her life in the dystopia. Longform television, however, does not usually rely solely on the experiences of a single character “for both practical and production reasons (as it is too inefficient to require an actor to be present for every scene)” (Mittell 129). Although the Hulu serial remains primarily the Handmaid’s tale, as only June Osborne’s voice is employed in voiceover, perspective is gradually expanded as we leave June behind to

follow other characters. As of season two, the episodic structure often has one or more characters sharing the spotlight with June, in an example of what Mittell refers to as “centrifugal complexity”, in which “the ongoing narrative pushes outward, spreading characters across an expanding storyworld” (222). Although June has more freedom to act than the Offred in the novel, as a Handmaid she faces many limitations, especially early in the serial; for that reason, to elicit the “tears of triumph” and the “can-do” orientation that Warhol and Gledhill highlight, the narrative often relies on other characters to perform this function.

If we think of O’Sullivan’s notion of the short television season working as a meaningful unit, a pattern emerges throughout the seasons of *The Handmaid’s Tale* that is in close connection with the argument that moments of “grief and suffering” and “joy and triumph” necessarily take turns in the sentimental narrative (Warhol 49). The second season of the serial was much criticized for its brutality and the excess of torture it depicted. But even that season ends triumphantly (albeit, as also put by Warhol, with a “bittersweet” tone), with several women selflessly risking themselves to get June and her newborn baby to Canada. If there is immense suffering in the serial, it is never relentless: instead, it serves to make victories more triumphant and risks more significant.

Taking a closer look at the structure of season one, we can perceive how the sentimental narrative arises. The season can be divided in three distinct moments, characterized by loss and despair (episodes 1-3), growing hope (4-6) and courage and action (8-10), with episode 7, which focuses exclusively on June’s husband’s plot of survival and escape, representing a “jarring interruption” (O’Sullivan, “Broken on Purpose” 71) in the flow of the narrative that nevertheless serves as a transition between “growing hope” and “taking action”. Although most of the episodes do adopt the multiplot strategy that is common to serial television (see Newman 18, Thompson 31), focusing on other characters besides June, sometimes even without her presence, this season is still

centered on June's transformation from someone who only wants to find her daughter and survive into a rebel who realizes she must try to make the world a better place. Episodes two and three end, respectively, with June learning about her shopping partner Ofglen's disappearance right after discovering the existence of a resistance and with June being violently punished for something beyond her control, which is paralleled by Ofglen discovering, to her horror, that Gilead mutilated her because of her sexuality. The tone changes in the following three episodes, ending in (bittersweet) moments of joy: June is freed from imprisonment, chooses to defy Gilead's belief system by initiating an illicit affair, and learns that her husband, Luke, is alive in Canada. Episode seven provides her *and* the viewer with a story of survival and escape that segues into the final, and hopeful, "tercet" of the season, in which June decides to no longer accept her entrapment, she and Moira pair up to carry out a Mayday mission, and the Handmaids collectively refuse to stone a woman to death, leading June to reflect that mere survival is not enough.

The pattern of serial television is followed as the show relies on several narrative branches and has more self-contained storylines within individual episodes, functioning as their own entities. We can take a closer look at the "Mayday plot" in episodes nine and ten of the first season, as well as in the ninth of the second, to explore how *The Handmaid's Tale* interacts with seriality, episodic storytelling, "good cry techniques" and melodrama. In season one, episode nine, June is given her first mission as a member of the resistance but is unable to complete it. She asks for her friend Moira's help, but learns that, like her counterpart in the novel, this Moira is now resigned and has abandoned her former rebellious ways. June's approach to her friend's resignation is different from Offred's, as she urges Moira to react, but to no avail. As June leaves, the show makes use of the same piece of non-diegetic orchestral music that was played when the two friends were first separated in Gilead in a flashback from episode four; here the camera goes in for an extreme close-up of June's face as she breaks down into a full-body cry. June is

crushed, the tears are of defeat. The aesthetics of the scene relies heavily on “rendering emotion as something overtly visible” (Warhol 42), “emotionally excessive music cues” and on the perspective of an “emotionally vulnerable” character (Mittell 249). But the episode also makes use of the “last-minute reversals”, as well as of the counterbalancing of “grief and suffering” with “joy and triumph”, that Warhol (49) attributes to sentimental narratives. It ends with two wide smiles, June’s and Moira’s: in its very last sequence, we learn that Moira got the Mayday package for June, who receives it through another ally. We also learn that Moira has returned to her defiant self, stealing a car for another attempt at escaping. Episodically speaking, then, we have a complete storyline: the mission was taken care of, June’s desperate pleas to her friend worked and reawakened her former rebel.

As a testament to the serial aspect of the narrative, however, this package will continue to reverberate not only in the following episode but also throughout season two. Part of the inspiration for June’s rebellion in episode ten comes from getting in contact with the Mayday package containing dozens of letters by fellow enslaved Gilead women. These letters will reappear here and there in season two before accomplishing their goal: a traumatized June attempts to burn them, Nick, the man with whom she is having an affair, salvages them and takes them to Canada during a business trip in season two, episode nine. The unlikely scenario of Nick meeting with Luke once in Canada is fully motivated within the episode, and Luke receives the package, which he and Moira (now also in Canada) subsequently release to the press. The letters are responsible for closing the door to a potential business channel between Canada and Gilead being opened (a central episodic storyline), a hard blow to the Commander’s plans.

As the refugees of “Little America” in Toronto celebrate Gilead’s defeat, they spontaneously break into song, singing together “America the Beautiful”, a patriotic hymn for the country they lost, and that no longer exists. It might have been this same

"America" that gave rise to Gilead, but in instances such as this the serial establishes the dystopian scenario as no more than a detour in America's righteous path that must be recuperated, the "space of innocence" that melodrama demands. In Williams' discussion of *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), she states that

we recognize the good that could be because, throughout the series, we have learned to recognize the good that has presumably been lost. This is the good home that Baltimore may never really have been but that melodrama must posit as its lost good. Ultimately, not to believe in this space of innocence, is not to love Baltimore, the love of which, in this series, is an unquestioned good—the good that melodrama invests in its victims. ("Mega-Melodrama!" 538)

If we exchange "Baltimore" for "the United States", this excerpt easily applies to Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is possible to argue that the very dystopian scenario that serves as the basis for the novel allows for the recognition of victimhood and villainy that is essential to melodrama. Yet although Atwood does not erase these notions, she blurs them by taking pains to humanize the Commander, who serves as one of the primary faces of Gilead for Offred, by emphasizing Offred's own complicit role in Gilead's system, which includes her ignoring her mother's and Moira's activism in the "time before", and by connecting through language all of the male characters, including the ones we might take as the "good ones" (see Miner); these patterns of connection, however, are either completely removed or ultimately deemphasized in the serial. Furthermore, Atwood's epilogue forces the reader to wonder whether recuperating the previous state of affairs would be enough, or if restoring this lost country would just lead to another version of Gilead. Atwood thus deeply complicates the shared notion of a felt good posited by melodrama. Offred's recognition of her role, and that of fellow American citizens, in Gilead's coming into existence is part of her growing consciousness about herself and the situation around her. In the serial, although June does state that people had been asleep facing the slowly transforming world they lived in, her personal interrogation of herself does not take place, and neither is it demanded, because she, unlike Offred, tried

to fight it, and we are given no information that suggests that her husband was against it—quite the contrary. In this way, the shared notion of a “felt good” does arise much more smoothly in the show.

The same June that fights before the authoritarian project of Gilead is materialized reawakens her inner fighter *in* Gilead, but she does not do it alone: Mayday, the fellow Handmaids, the Martha network, the frequent protests of the refugee community—these are all examples of resistance to Gilead in many fronts. The classical dystopia is not about the defeat of a fictional system, since these imagined systems serve primarily as a warning of where certain nations, or maybe humanity at large, could be leading to without change: they are meant as didactic extrapolations of current circumstances, not as predictions. These didactic warnings that classical dystopias ultimately are should ideally make readers aware of their surroundings before it is too late. Atwood argues that, by finishing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with the appendix entitled “Principles of Newspeak”, Orwell shows more faith in the human spirit than is usually recognized, and she chose to close off her own novel in a similar way (Atwood, “George Orwell”). Significantly, however, neither author engages with ways of defeating the systems in place, and the ironic tone of Atwood’s epilogue makes her *Handmaid’s Tale* insolvably ambiguous.

The Hulu serial, on the other hand, does engage that idea, and organized resistance becomes a primary plot drive, especially with the third season—the overall story it tells increasingly becomes one of collective action, of its costs, its lows as well as its victories and possibilities. This exploration of collective action in the series, of which June becomes not only an integral part but often a leader, is one of the strategies that open the way for a sentimental narrative that is especially interested both in exploring “the subject-position of the oppressed, in the diegetic good times and the bad” (Warhol 45) and in working within an “emotional structuration” that thrives with the many “fluctuations” in emotions that are depicted (Pribram 42). We do not intend to suggest

that such fluctuations arise because the serial chooses to explore collective action, but rather that in this narrative the framework of a resistance movement proves useful to that end, and, in the end, for making successful longform television.

Scholars of utopianism such as Vieira and Sargent insistently argue that dystopian writing is bound to utopianism in that dystopias too involve the notion of hope. The major difference between the dystopian tradition of Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell (and Atwood) and the Hulu serial is the locus of such hope: in the classical dystopia, it lies in the act of communication between writer and reader, outside the text, in the possibility of warning fellow humans to improve and prevent such a terrible future. The show, on the other hand, is dedicated to the exploration of the potentiality of collective action within the fictional world. Exploring this potentiality leads to an important transformation of the warning that the classical dystopia sounds to the reader, for these works seek to awaken readers when such a horrible scenario is only a possibility by casting “a shadow over our futures”, to quote Atwood herself (“Introduction” vii). After they came into being, these texts insist, these horrible visions for the future would be particularly difficult to defeat—so much so that even Atwood, whose novel sketches a post-Gilead world, does not attempt to describe the process of defeating it⁷.

Longform seriality, however, due to the very fact that *it is* longform, would demand this message to be reinforced repeatedly to exhaustion. Returning to Kindley, who attempts to provide an answer as to why dystopian narratives had never been as successful on television when compared to literature and film, we argue that becoming “didactic”, as he puts it, is not at the heart of the issue, since dystopias *are* inherently didactic. The difficulty in bringing dystopia to television is better explored through his following statement: that “after a while, you get the point already.” In that sense, the Hulu

⁷ We should point out, however, that Atwood does attempt to tackle that question in the 2019 sequel *The Testaments*, released in between season three and four of the serial, and taking place fifteen years after the events that are narrated by Offred.

serial finds more fertile ground for its ongoing storytelling in the combination of melodrama and sentimentalism that informs its episodic and seasonal narrative organization, with an approach that continuously alternates between sadness/defeat and joy/victory, and that, furthermore, insists on a quest for the recuperation of the “beautiful” America that once was through its righteous citizens (like June and her family and friends). Here, too, however, there is no suggestion of what “better” might look like beyond the reunion of the family; no utopian project or alternative is offered, only palliatives (meeting with one’s family or friends again, being conceded refugee status) that are nonetheless, and understandably, fully sentimentalized. Even so, we do not believe that this melodramatic appeal necessarily rules out the warning aspect of the dystopia, and the fact that the serial continues to be linked in its reception to discussions about reproductive rights or girls and women’s access to education and full citizenship demonstrates this.⁸ But the warning sounded by the show is inevitably toned down in order for it to become more palatable to the serial engagement on the viewer’s part. This makes the serial television dystopia ultimately much more hopeful than its classic literary form was envisioned to be.

8 For a very limited sample exemplifying the uses of *The Handmaid’s Tale* in this context, we can discuss the red uniform worn by Handmaids in the Hulu serial being adopted by protestors not only across the United States in order to defend the right to legal and safe abortion, but also abroad, in countries such as Brazil, Argentina and Northern Ireland, for example. See: Hauser, 2017; Marques, 2018; Carmo, 2018; Beaumont and Holpuch, 2018. *The Handmaid’s Tale* was also alluded to during both the 2017 and the 2018 Women’s Marches following Donald Trump’s inauguration as president of the U.S.—both before and after the serial premiered, that is—, or at the 2018 Golden Globes, following the widespread use of the hashtag #MeToo to discuss sexual harassment and assault in the workplace, and the #TimesUp initiative championed primarily by Hollywood actresses. See: Levine, 2017; Mayday, 2018; Perez, 2018.

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