

# **“From a Distance it Looks Like Peace”: Reading Beneath the Fascist Style of Gilead in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale**

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# “From a Distance it Looks Like Peace”: Reading Beneath the Fascist Style of Gilead in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*

ANGELA LAFLÉN

The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. — Walter Benjamin (243)

At most a leaflet or a poster can, by its brevity, count on getting a moment’s attention from someone who thinks differently. The picture in all its forms up to the film has greater possibilities. Here a man needs to use his brains even less; it suffices to look, or at most to read extremely brief texts, and thus many will more readily accept a *pictorial presentation* than *read an article of any length*. The picture brings them in a much briefer time, I might almost say at one stroke, the enlightenment which they obtain from written matter only after arduous reading. — Adolf Hitler (470)

IN A RECENT INTERVIEW, Margaret Atwood explains that, because the tools to which humans have access have grown very powerful, with unprecedented powers of destruction, the future of humanity depends on whether “we as a species have the emotional maturity and the wisdom to use our powerful tools well” (“Author”). Atwood sees a role for literature in helping readers to develop the critical awareness needed to more responsibly use these tools, which range from electricity to bombs, and her writing explores both the dangers and the possibilities associated with many of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ most powerful tools. Although she does not mention it specifically in the interview, visual culture is one of the powerful tools to which Atwood alludes and to which she returns frequently throughout her fiction and poetry.<sup>1</sup> Like the tools Atwood mentions by name, visual culture, in

and of itself, is inherently neither good nor bad, yet, throughout her work, and in *The Handmaid's Tale* particularly, Atwood reveals the danger of using visual culture to create a "glossy surface image" (Chow 24) that simplifies complex ideologies and social relationships, and she suggests that individuals can resist visual manipulation by learning to "read beneath" images (*Handmaid's* 105).

As part of her larger exploration of power, Atwood's emphasis on visual culture focuses on learning to see the ideology hidden within visual images. Visual culture carries ideology into the ordinary activities of everyday life through the packaging of consumer products and through entertainment such as television and film, helping people understand their relationship to governmental power, to their own identities, and to those defined as other. Moreover, visual culture aestheticizes ideology, dressing it up in visually seductive and stirring forms. This aestheticization of ideology is not innocuous, however, especially because of the role that visual culture plays in shaping social reality. As Stuart Hall explains, "How things are represented and the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role" (254).

The power of visual culture to shape reality is due in large part to the way the brain processes visual images. Studies of the brain suggest that visual images have something of a direct link to the brain, bypassing many of the brain's critical-thinking functions. In *Visual Intelligence*, Ann Barry explains that vision is a more persuasive medium of communication than language because the brain is prone to accept the messages of visual images. According to Barry, language is processed more slowly than images; images thus leave less time for critical reflection and force viewers to respond more quickly than text does. This feature of images led Spinoza to theorize that the brain will automatically accept the messages of visual images because of the way visual images are processed by the brain — an idea Hitler echoes in explaining the importance of symbols and visual cues to the National Socialist movement.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, a viewer's memory for pictures is more direct and immediate because pictures are processed by the mind along the same pathways as direct experience. Claire Pajaczowska notes that "Visual representation shares many registers of meaning with other aspects of the unconscious 'primary process.' An image can coexist in unconscious and conscious parts of the mind, and imagery is close to 'mood' and

affect, as is music, and is readily transformed into the synaesthesia of 'inspirational' experience" (20).<sup>3</sup>

Because of the way visual images are processed by the brain, visual and perceptual processes are especially vulnerable to manipulation by those who wish to sway opinion and influence the actions people will or will not take. Moreover, new visualization technologies developed throughout the twentieth century have facilitated the creation of viewing audiences of unprecedented size. Consequently, ideological warfare increasingly takes place within the realm of visual culture, as groups ranging widely in purpose employ a common method to sway viewers.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood questions why people so often cooperate with totalitarian regimes, and she draws on the history of the Third Reich to demonstrate that visual culture can help create a climate that suggests that resistance to the regime is futile. Indeed, it is impossible to account for the widespread acceptance of Hitler's Third Reich by the German masses without understanding the role that visual culture played in advancing the cause of fascism. Walter Benjamin's discussion of the aestheticization of politics in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is useful for understanding how visual culture might be used to serve the interests of fascism. In his Epilogue to this piece, Benjamin explains that "Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate" (243). As a result, "Fascism seeks to give [the masses] an expression while preserving property" (243). That the "expression" to which Benjamin refers is aesthetic production is clarified in his next sentence: "The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life" (243). Moreover, Benjamin directly links the aestheticization of politics to new technologies, especially new visualization technologies such as photography and film, that allow for the "mechanical reproduction" of art. He stresses, "Mass movements are usually discerned more clearly by a camera than by the naked eye. A bird's-eye view best captures gatherings of hundreds of thousands. And even though such a view may be accessible to the human eye as it is to the camera, the image received by the eye cannot be enlarged the way a negative is enlarged" (253).

It seems possible to extrapolate from Benjamin's discussion that, by aestheticizing politics, fascism strips away the substance of ideol-

ogy, leaving only the style. And as a result, even war, which Benjamin concludes is the natural end of "all efforts to render politics aesthetic," can be regarded as beautiful, particularly because it organizes the masses and mobilizes technology toward one goal (243). Certainly, scholars writing more recently about fascism stress the importance of aesthetics in making ideology palatable, especially as they consider the "productive" nature of fascism, the way in which fascism draws people in through its commitment to high ideals with which they willingly identify. Although fascism remains a difficult term to define, requiring one to, in Paul Gilroy's words, "distinguish between fascism as a historical development, a political and social movement, a rare pattern of government, and a recognizable ideological and cultural formation" (145), contemporary studies stress aesthetics as a crucial component of fascism. Alice Kaplan writes that "When fascism took power, it took charge of the imaginary" (34), and Rey Chow includes aesthetics in her definition of fascism as "a term that indicates the production and consumption of a glossy surface image, a crude style, for purposes of social identification even among intellectuals" (24). Chow takes a broad view of fascism, and her definition suggests that fascism extends beyond specifically fascist regimes, such as the Third Reich, to include types of aesthetic practices. She is concerned with the fascistic use of style, the "glossy surface image," which promotes social identification at the cost of difference and complexity. Visual culture necessarily plays an important role in facilitating the creation and distribution of this "glossy surface image," and, in fact, Chow contends that "the scale of illusion/transparency promised by fascism is possible only in the age of film" (37-38).

The films that Leni Riefenstahl created for Hitler demonstrate particularly clearly the way that visual culture was used to portray fascist ideology in an appealing guise. Riefenstahl is best known for *Triumph of the Will* (1934) and the two-part *Olympia* (1936; 1938), films commissioned by Hitler. While Riefenstahl's films are acknowledged to be stunning visual achievements, their cinematic success is overshadowed by their link to Nazi ideology, and the films, as well as Riefenstahl herself, continue to generate controversy. The controversy centres on whether Riefenstahl was, in Susan Sontag's words, "a horrid propagandist" or only "a beauty freak" (85). Riefenstahl was not a member of the Nazi party, but she was a friend to Hitler;

she was commissioned by him for both films, and she has never publicly apologized for her affiliation with Hitler. Sontag suggests that it is precisely Riefenstahl's technical refinement and use of beauty in her films that continue to appeal to "the fascist longings in our midst" (97). Indeed, because Riefenstahl's work is so infused with Nazi ideology, spectators cannot assume that they can separate the visual triumph of her work from its ideological basis. Stills from the film *Olympia* (Figures 1 and 2) exemplify Riefenstahl's use of imagery that emphasizes physical strength, athleticism, and antiquity — qualities that the Third Reich equated with beauty and used to claim a lineage to "eternal" values. *Olympia*, and other aesthetic works produced by the Third Reich, played an important role in steering the consciousness of the German people toward accepting the horrendous policies and atrocities of the Nazi period. Beautiful visual images presented central tenets of the Third Reich in an attractive guise and stood as ideals with which the German people could identify. Additionally, these images helped create a standard that was used to judge other peoples as inferior and to justify the Nazis' pursuit of ethnic purity and their campaign of extermination.



Figure 1. Screen shot from Leni Riefenstahl's 1936 *Olympia, Part 1*.



Figure 2. Screen shot from Leni Riefenstahl's 1936 *Olympia, Part 1*.

### Fascist Style in Gilead

Atwood shares Chow's concern with what we might refer to as "fascist style." In *The Handmaid's Tale*, fascist style is associated with editing and crafting visual scenes for the purpose of manipulating people and offering only a surface view of reality. Fascist style characterizes Atwood's Gilead, a totalitarian regime that has evolved from contemporary American culture. In the Republic of Gilead, a crisis in sterility has prompted a small but well-organized group to install a monotheocratic government. In the resulting society, women are strictly controlled. They are unable to have jobs or money and are assigned to various classes: among them, the chaste, childless Wives; the housekeeping Marthas; and the Handmaids, who are capable of reproducing but considered morally unfit. The purpose of this structure is to combat falling population rates and to ensure that people who raise children are morally fit to do so. Thus, Handmaids are impregnated by their Commanders, and when they give birth, their children are taken away and raised by Wives. *The Handmaid's Tale* is told in the first person by Offred, a Handmaid who recalls the past and tells how the chilling society came to be. Atwood's use of a first-person narrator serves an important role in advancing her readers toward critical spectatorship. As Offred moves from the position of accepting Gilead's visual manipulations to a position from which she is capable of "reading beneath" Gilead's imagery, readers who identify with Offred's perspective can similarly gain critical

purchase on the ways in which visual culture can be manipulated to achieve specific ideological aims.

Like the Third Reich, Atwood's Gilead relies on carefully crafted visual scenes to advance the regime's ideological agenda and coerce individuals to work on behalf of the regime. Gilead's leaders use their background in market research to create an appearance of peace and order that functions to convince those within and outside of Gilead not only that everything is under control in Gilead but also that there is no use resisting. This appearance of control and stability is ultimately designed to disguise the fact that the ruling body of men, the Commanders, are sterile. It is illegal to say that a Commander is sterile, and the visual evidence suggests that, as a group, they are not. In reality, of course, the visual evidence is not reliable. Children stolen from "inappropriate" parents are raised by Commanders and their Wives as their own, and Handmaids routinely have sex with men other than their Commanders, especially their doctors, in an attempt to become pregnant and avoid punishment for "failing" to reproduce. The success of this visual manipulation is evident in Offred's reaction to hearing from her doctor that most Commanders are sterile: "I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (79). Although Offred seems to know intuitively that the Commanders are sterile, her shock at hearing the doctor voice this truth demonstrates how easily people can accept as a social fact even what they know is a lie. Because this particular lie is enforced as law, Offred has accepted it to some extent — it does, after all, have life or death consequences for Handmaids.

In attempting to create the illusion of truth, Gilead censors information that contradicts its version of reality. The regime consequently wages a war against history, especially recent history, and relies heavily on spectacle and mass media forms in this effort. As an example, men and women in Gilead are required to attend dramatic public hearings and to participate in public executions, which the regime's leaders use to provide the citizenry with an outlet for pent up frustration and anger. Later, the bodies of those executed are displayed theatrically on "the Wall," their faces hidden behind bags and a sign hung around their necks indicating the "official" reason for their execution. Though Gilead forbids or limits many kinds of looking, the regime encourages



people to look at the bodies on the Wall. Offred observes, "It doesn't matter if we look. We're supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall. Sometimes they'll be there for days, until there's a new batch, so as many people as possible will have the chance to see them" (42). Through these spectacular displays, Gilead enforces "historical amnesia," what Fredric Jameson describes as "the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve" (125). Michael Rogin further elaborates on the role that spectacle plays in such amnesia, explaining that in contemporary American culture, "Spectacle is the cultural form for amnesiac representation, for specular displays are superficial and sensately intensified, short lived and repeatable" (507). Gilead's success in enforcing amnesia is evident in Offred's continual struggle to retain memories of her former life throughout the novel, and she realizes that, because the next generation of Handmaids "will have no memories of any other way," they will accept life in Gilead as normal (151).

Gilead also strategically employs a range of sometimes incongruous visual images in support of its ideology. In the place of the recent past, Gilead claims a legacy from the Puritans, and images of stern Puritan women and men provide background to Gilead's homes and communities. In a small church museum near the Wall, Offred notices paintings "of women in long somber dresses, their hair covered by white caps, and of upright men, darkly clothed and unsmiling. Our ancestors" (41). Similarly, in the Commander's living room, Offred observes "two paintings, both of women, one on either side of the fireplace. Both wear dark dresses, like the ones in the old church, though of a later date[,] ... their backs and mouths stiff, their breasts constricted, their faces pinched, their caps starched, their skin grayish white, guarding the room with their narrowed eyes" (102). Like the images of antiquity employed by the Third Reich, Puritan images function largely to grant Gilead legitimacy by grounding the regime in America's Puritan, and more generally religious, history.

While Gilead freely uses images of Puritan men and women to claim a legacy from the Puritans, the regime carefully edits other images that do not so neatly support its ideological agenda. The images used for

educational purposes at the Rachel and Leah Center are edited in this way. Handmaids-in-training watch a film once a week; the film will usually be either “an old porno film, from the seventies or eighties” (152) or documentary footage of feminist, or Unwomen, protests from before the takeover of Gilead. The pornography depicts graphic violence against women, and the soundtrack is played because “They want us to hear the screams and grunts and shrieks of what is supposed to be either extreme pain or extreme pleasure or both at once” (153). (Sound, however, is removed from the documentary footage of feminist protests because the message of the feminists is considered too dangerous to hear.) Pornographic images are used as evidence by the regime of the mistreatment of women in American culture and to justify Gilead’s excessive “protection” of women. Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids to “Consider the alternatives.... You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then” (152). Gilead does protect women from such violence, but only at the expense of basic freedoms, and the underlying motivation for creating and viewing pornography is still active in Gilead; as Laurel Gardner points out, “The human proclivity to dominate, exploited by pornography, is pervasive throughout Gilead” (7).

In its verbal descriptions of visual representations, *The Handmaid’s Tale* contains examples of ekphrasis, which Atwood uses to explore aspects of female representation. Though ekphrasis was at one time used exclusively for poetry describing painting, the term has been expanded to refer to descriptions of art across various genres.<sup>4</sup> Ekphrasis has also been subdivided into two types. The first is “actual” ekphrasis, in which writers describe real works of art. The second type is “notional” ekphrasis, describing imaginary art. Homer’s description of Achilles’s sword in *The Iliad* and Keats’s description of the urn in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” are probably the best-known examples of notional ekphrasis. Atwood employs notional ekphrasis throughout *The Handmaid’s Tale* in order to describe a number of visual representations, and, rather than commenting on a particular work of art or style of representation, Atwood uses the technique to explore the connection between ideology and images, particularly images of women. For example, her ekphrastic descriptions of pornographic films and documentary footage of feminist protests reveal a startling similarity between these two, seemingly quite opposite, representations of women. Offred recognizes that both types of

representation depict violence against women. While the pornography is explicitly misogynistic, going so far as to represent the mutilation of the female body, the film footage of the feminists depicts women committing violence against women symbolically through their images. Though the feminist protest captured on film is intended to oppose violence against women, it reminds Offred of a similar protest she attended with her mother that left her with the disturbing mental image of "parts of women's bodies, turning to black ash, in the air, before my eyes" (51). In this way, Atwood responds to feminist calls for an end to pornography, suggesting that rather than destroying pornographic images, a new context for creating and viewing all images of women is required.

Additionally, Atwood uses ekphrasis to describe domestic scenes in a way reminiscent of visual art. Ekphrastic writing relies on figurative techniques such as metaphor, colour imagery, and simile to develop word pictures. Atwood describes Offred's experience as a Handmaid in language that establishes a direct parallel to artistic representations of women. Offred explains that, seen from a distance, the Handmaids are "picturesque, like Dutch milkmaids on a wallpaper frieze, like a shelf full of period-costume ceramic salt and pepper shakers, like a flotilla of swans or anything that repeats itself with at least minimum grace and without variation" (275). She also realizes that Aunt Lydia's insistence on the posture of the Handmaids during prayer is because "she liked the look of the thing. She wanted us to look like something Anglo-Saxon, carved on a tomb; or Christmas card angels, regimented in our robes of purity" (251).

Offred also uses the language of art to describe the experience of being a Handmaid. She graphically describes herself as caught in the always-present moment of a visual image, clearly indicating her identification with the female art object: "you live with your face squashed against a wall, everything a huge foreground, of details, close-ups, hairs, the weave of the bed sheet, the molecules of the face. Your own skin like a map, a diagram of futility, crisscrossed with tiny roads that lead nowhere" (185). She specifically invokes nineteenth-century harem paintings in order to characterize the life of a Handmaid for readers. Offred imagines

walking in art galleries, through the nineteenth century: the obsession they had then with harems. Dozens of paintings of harems, fat women lolling on divans, turbans on their heads or velvet caps,

being fanned with peacock tails, a eunuch in the background standing guard. Studies of sedentary flesh, painted by men who'd never been there. These pictures were supposed to be erotic, and I thought they were, at the time: but I see now what they were really about. They were paintings about suspended animation; about waiting, about objects not in use. They were paintings about boredom.

But maybe boredom is erotic, when women do it, for men. (89)

Like the women depicted in the harem paintings, Offred is inscribed as an "object" and often "an object not in use" by Gilead. Forbidden from activities that would help to pass time, such as reading, knitting, or smoking, Handmaids hold a place in their Commanders' households that Offred compares to that of a "prize pig" (90), and Offred's narrative is characterized by long stretches of time spent waiting.

Atwood's use of ekphrasis allows her to underscore the ideological purposes that visual representations of women serve. Aesthetically, Handmaids conform to representational ideals of femininity and recall the domestic past of Western culture. Ideologically, their costume and demeanour reinforce Gilead's belief that women are defined by the role they play in the home and in relation to the men who essentially own them. In fact, each of the roles available to women in Gilead reinforces this belief. Although each role carries with it different privileges and burdens, each is signalled visibly by an assigned costume and colour. Marthas, whose name is taken from the biblical figure of Martha, wear green; the blue costumes worn by Wives recall the Madonna; Daughters wear white, the colour most often associated with virginity in Western iconoclasm; Widows wear black, presumably to make visible their perpetual state of mourning; and Handmaids wear red, a colour Atwood frequently uses to indicate sexual objectification in her writing and visual art, and that recalls figures ranging as widely as Little Red Riding Hood and Hester Prynne. The more complicated relationships of women on the fringes of Gilead society to the male power structure are similarly represented visually. Overworked Econowives wear a rainbow of colours, Unwomen are assigned the colour grey, and the women at Jezebels, who escape being assigned a colour, are nevertheless required to wear garish costumes that declare their role as sex objects — "government issue," as Moira describes a Playboy bunny outfit (315).

Atwood's ekphrastic writing also makes clear that Gilead draws widely from Western visual culture in crafting visual scenes to advance

its ideology, even enforcing as law some of the aspects common to representational practice. As such, the regime does not so much represent a break from the past as it does one possible evolution of contemporary Western culture. Indeed, Atwood refers to *The Handmaid's Tale* as speculative fiction,<sup>5</sup> explaining that speculative fiction takes ideas and practices already present in contemporary culture to their logical conclusions. Focusing on Gilead's manipulation of existing practices allows Atwood to highlight the danger of a fascistic use of style. In forcing visual culture to support its ideology, Gilead strips images from the social and historical contexts in which they were created, essentially conflating aesthetic productions as varied as Puritan art, pornographic films, and documentaries of feminist protests, among others. The ways in which each of these styles differ cease to matter within Gilead; similarly, differences between individuals — ways in which individual Handmaids differ from one another, for example — cease to matter. Consequently, when a Handmaid commits suicide or is moved to another house, she is immediately replaced by another, supposedly interchangeable, Handmaid. This is the most sinister of the effects of Gilead's use of style. In order to produce a "glossy surface image" to disguise its true agenda, Gilead simplifies differences between aesthetic productions and between individuals, forcing art and people to fit a Gileadean mould that supports the regime's ideology.

Gilead's success in manipulating the visual record is evident in the difficulty Offred faces in learning to see differently than the way she is supposed to see. Despite the fact that Offred never fully accepts identification with the regime or her role within it, her consciousness is colonized to a degree by Gilead, and after her "re-education" at the Rachel and Leah Center, she is unable to view the world except through the lens of Gileadean ideology. For instance, when Offred and her shopping partner Ofglen encounter a group of Japanese tourists, Offred's reaction to the clothing the women wear reveals the power of Gilead's brainwashing on her interpretive capacity:

The skirts reach just below the knee and the legs come out from beneath them, nearly naked in their thin stockings, blatant, the high-heeled shoes with their straps attached to the feet like delicate instruments of torture. The women teeter on their spiked feet as if on stilts, but off balance; their backs arch at the waist, thrusting the buttocks out. Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality. They wear lipstick, red,

outlining the damp cavities of their mouths, like scrawls on a wash-room wall, of the time before.

I stop walking. Ofglen stops beside me and I know that she too cannot take her eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this.

Then I think: I used to dress like that. That was freedom.

(37-38)

That Offred sees the women through the lens of Gilead is obvious in the language she uses: words like “naked,” “blatant,” “instruments of torture,” and “exposed” demonstrate the effects of brainwashing on Offred’s perceptual processes. That this is Aunt Lydia’s language rather than Offred’s is further signalled by Offred’s memory during the encounter of a phrase Aunt Lydia likes to repeat: “To be seen is to be penetrated” (38). Even though Offred remembers that “I used to dress like that,” she cannot help but interpret the women’s clothes through the lens of Gileadean discourse. Atwood uses this encounter to demonstrate the difficulty of resisting identification with Gilead. Despite rejecting Gilead’s ideological agenda and even acknowledging “that was freedom,” Offred’s mind is still captive to the ideology to the extent that she interprets what she sees, at least initially, through Gilead’s lens.

At stake in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is individual agency and whether one can locate any viable space of resistance to totalitarianism. Atwood’s sense of agency is complex, and given the bio-physiological limits of seeing and the political exploitation of these limits, she is not entirely optimistic about the possibility of successful resistance. Consequently, some of Atwood’s critics argue that agency is not possible in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, that Offred’s identity is too seriously compromised by her position as a Handmaid, and that she identifies with this position despite her memories of her former life — evidence of which is that she does not include her name in the record.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, Offred is no model of active resistance, and Atwood “delegitimize[s]” (Dopp 54) those characters, such as Offred’s mother, Moira, and Ofglen, who pursue a different and more actively resistant course than Offred. Marta Caminero-Santangelo points out, though, that “Resistance by the sword is not condemned by the text — it is merely seen as useless” (24). Instead, *The Handmaid’s Tale* advocates context-specific resistance, the power of which has been explained by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.... These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. (95-96)

Caminero-Santangelo describes *The Handmaid's Tale* as having "a particularly *postmodern* feminist sensibility in its conceptualizing of resistance to a dominant order and of the constraints upon such resistance" (20). Rather than actively working in opposition to Gilead, as Offred's mother, Moira, and Ofglen do, Offred locates a space of resistance "*within* the discourses of the symbolic order (including technologically produced and disseminated discourses)" (Caminero-Santangelo 39). Although in the context of late-twentieth-century feminism, Offred's actions often seem "passive," taken in the context of Gilead, Offred's actions are locally resistant and help her to assert her own sense of identity in opposition to the one allowed to her by Gilead. Danita Dodson argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* is most appropriately regarded as a fictional slave narrative, and that Atwood's point is that to end oppression one must give voice to suppressed histories. As such, Offred's expressed willingness to share her story and to listen to the stories of others signals her resistance to the forces that seek to suppress her story and other stories of oppression (see *Handmaid's* 344). The repeated line "I compose myself" throughout *The Handmaid's Tale* also supports the interpretation that Offred maintains her identity through making her record.

### Reading Beneath as Visual Literacy

Offred's ability to tell her story is predicated on her ability to see differently from the way she is authorized to see, and Atwood's use of a first-person narrator ensures that readers who identify with Offred will experience a shift in perspective along with Offred as she becomes an alert and politicized spectator. For all of its ability to be manipulated and shaped, and in spite of its dependence on blindness, seeing is par-

ticularly good at offering moments of slippage in hegemony, which is why the Gilead regime tries so hard to control visual representation and what individuals can see. As Chow, Sontag, and Gilroy note, fascism's success depends on fostering identification and loyalty in its subjects, exploiting the natural desire for "a transparent, idealized image and an identifying submission to such an image" (Chow 45). Visual culture serves this effort because it helps people to understand their place in their culture and gives them images with which to identify and out of which to build identities. It also helps to articulate which differences between people are significant and establishes a visual hierarchy based on difference. Fascism's success is therefore threatened when instead of submitting to the idealized image, the individual "read[s] beneath" (*Handmaid's* 105) it to discover the unspoken ideological agenda that the image supports. When Offred begins to read beneath Gilead's visual culture, she learns to see differently from the way she is supposed to see, and, in doing so, she recognizes subversion and cracks in the Gilead regime everywhere and is motivated to seek identification with others through language.

As a first step in reading beneath, Offred recognizes how the "glossy surface image" (Chow 24) of Gilead's visual culture supports the regime's underlying ideology. Offred's evolution into a critical consumer of television demonstrates clearly her development of a gaze capable of reading beneath the surface of things. Though she recalls that during Gilead's initial takeover she felt reassured by the message from television, "Keep calm.... Everything is under control" (225) — and at one point actually felt grateful that someone was in control, since, as she explains, "it was obvious you couldn't be too careful" (225) — Offred comes to recognize that the media is complicit in spreading Gilead's ideological message, and she no longer uncritically accepts the messages she receives from television. Instead, when she has the chance to watch television, she looks for evidence in the types of stories that are reported, as well as those that are not reported, as to developments in Gilead's war and the progress of the resistance movement. She acknowledges that "it could be faked. But I watch it anyway, hoping to be able to *read beneath* it" (105; emphasis added). Offred similarly reads beneath the Puritan images hanging in the Commander's living room when she suggests that Serena Joy chose the paintings "after it became obvious to her that she'd have to redirect her energies into something convincingly domestic"



and "had the intention of passing them off as ancestors" (102). Reading beneath also involves Offred's recognition of the extent to which her visual and perceptual processes have been colonized by Gilead's ideology. Consequently, as she recounts her experience as a Handmaid, Offred's critical gaze is evident in her ability to understand how her own reactions to images and events are shaped by her immersion in Gileadean ideology. Such is the case when Offred relates her shock at hearing the doctor announce that most Commanders are sterile or when she explains her reading of the Japanese tourists' clothes.

As Offred reads beneath Gilead's visual manipulations she assumes the gaze of the artist rather than the art object. She comes to recognize that "What I need is perspective. The illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface. Perspective is necessary.... Otherwise you live in the moment. Which is not where I want to be" (185). Offred rejects Gilead's definition of her as sexualized art object by choosing to pursue an artistic perspective, and as a first step in achieving this perspective, she recognizes the ways in which her patterns of seeing keep her blind to other realities. The first time she becomes aware of how her own visual processes are a trap for her thinking comes as she looks at bodies on the Wall with Ofglen. Offred tries to come up with a satisfactory way of thinking about the men's bodies hanging from hooks on the Wall. She thinks:

It's the bags over the heads that are the worst, worse than the faces themselves would be. It makes the men like dolls on which the faces have not yet been painted; like scarecrows, which in a way is what they are, since they are meant to scare. Or as if their heads are sacks, stuffed with some undifferentiated material, like flour or dough.... The heads are zeros.... The heads are the heads of snowmen, with the coal eyes and the carrot noses fallen out. The heads are melting. (43)

When she notices blood seeping through one of the bags she compares the blood to "A child's idea of a smile" (43), and later says, "The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal" (44). These analogies help Offred to distance herself from the fact of the men's murdered bodies and in many ways prevent her from seeing the bodies. The analogies ultimately don't suffice, however, and Offred cannot sustain the image of the men as snowmen or the blood as a tulip

or smile. It is unusual to see blood on the white bags, and it disrupts Offred's usual seeing of the bodies and forces her to evaluate the analogies. She asserts, "These are not snowmen after all" (43):

The red [of the blood] is the same [as the tulips] but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other. The tulip is not a reason for disbelief in the hanged man, or vice versa. Each thing is valid and really there. It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way. I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind. (44-45)

The most significant consequence of Offred's growing ability to see clearly is that she recognizes numerous ways in which women resist the Gilead regime. She discovers a hidden message in her room, left by a former Handmaid and reading "Nolite te bastardes carborundum." When Offred questions Commander Fred about the phrase later she learns that it was a line he and his friends used during their time at an all-boys school and that he scrawled into one of his school books. Though the Commander and his friends used the line to thwart the authority of their schoolmasters — who presumably wouldn't understand the phrase since it is "dog Latin" — for Offred the line becomes a message of encouragement from the former Handmaid. Shifting contexts changes the meaning of the message entirely. Similarly, Offred realizes "There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently" (196). The garden, which Offred originally thinks "looks like peace" (17), in fact only looks this way from a distance. When she looks at it from the perspective of an artist and in a different context, she identifies the garden as a symbol of her own imperative to tell her story. Most importantly, when Offred finally begins to look around her she catches Ofglen's gaze and learns of the existence of an underground resistance as a result: "There's a shock in this seeing; it's like seeing somebody naked, for the first time. There is risk, suddenly, in the air between us, where there was none before. Even this meeting of eyes holds danger" (217). Each of these examples demonstrates the way in which Offred's "maturing consciousness about the immense power of language" is facilitated first by her decision to see differently (Dodson 82).<sup>7</sup>

Offred's ability to read beneath Gilead's visual culture prompts her to narrate her own experience, using the genre and conventions of eyewitness testimony to expose Gilead's "glossy surface image" as a carefully crafted lie. Offred's use of this genre also allows her to avoid the editorial trap into which Gilead, and later Professor Pieixoto, fall in seeking to impose a single truth on complex social reality. In interviews, Atwood has asserted the importance of eyewitness testimony, explaining, "it's obvious now that everything passes through a filter. Doesn't mean it's not true in some sense. It just means that nobody can claim to have the absolute, whole, objective, total, complete truth. The truth is composite, and that's a cheering thought. It mitigates tendencies toward autocracy" (qtd. in Castro 232). In contrast to Gilead's careful editing of information that does not accord with its version of reality, Offred highlights the inconsistencies within her own narrative and continually reminds the reader that her narrative is a reconstruction, which necessarily involves interpretation and editorializing. This anti-fascist approach is consistent with Atwood's belief in the importance of recognizing that truth itself is often a matter of context and is best approached by allowing for as many perspectives on any issue as possible.

### Fascism of the Future: Reading Beneath "The Historical Notes"

Lest the reader mistake Atwood's purpose in *The Handmaid's Tale* and take away the message that only fascist regimes are guilty of manipulating information in a fascistic way, she stresses again in "The Historical Notes" section of the novel how tempting it is to deny the complexity of truth and to silence information that does not accord with one's own ideas about truth. In this section, readers discover that *The Handmaid's Tale* has been edited by Professor Pieixoto, a sexist academic who disdains Offred's narrative style and seeks to force his own interpretation of the book onto readers. In a parallel to Gilead's obsession with controlling the appearance of things within the regime, Pieixoto attempts to control Offred's narrative and how readers interpret it. He is responsible for placing Offred's non-linear, oral narrative into the order in which readers find it, raising questions about the extent to which readers should trust the voice of narration throughout the novel, since Offred's voice is literally mediated, if not subsumed, by Pieixoto's throughout. Consequently, Atwood implicitly reminds and warns readers about the power of editing, since the originally oral version of Offred's story is

subject to editing and is therefore no more inherently truthful or accurate than are the carefully crafted visual scenes created and employed by Gilead.

The “Historical Notes” section is not without its own irony, however, inasmuch as the “speech” that Pieixoto delivers on the subject of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is presented in narrative form by Atwood. Atwood uses multiple narrative levels to develop this irony. Just as Offred’s originally oral eyewitness testimony is converted to text by Pieixoto, Pieixoto’s originally oral academic presentation is converted to text by Atwood. And, ultimately, of course, as author, Atwood employs the conventions of both of these genres to craft her own novel, and she uses the genre of academic discourse to parody and problematize a discourse that is often guilty of making overarching truth claims.

Furthermore, as it is recorded, Pieixoto’s speech contains a striking inaccuracy that provides insight into how to understand the novel’s unusual ending. That Pieixoto has missed the entire point of Offred’s account is obvious throughout his speech, which trivializes and once again objectifies Offred. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his comparison of Offred to Eurydice, a comparison that he makes in the book’s final paragraph:

Our document, though in its own way eloquent, is on these subjects mute. We may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer; and when we turn to look at her we glimpse her only for a moment, before she slips from our grasp and flees. As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they have to say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day. (394-95)

Pieixoto’s reference to Eurydice reveals his attitude toward Offred’s account, which overtly privileges his gaze and objectifies Offred and her story. However, it is appropriate that Atwood should end *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a novel so concerned with the visual objectification of women, with a reference to Eurydice. Offred recalls elements of many mythical figures, including Scheherazade, Red Riding Hood, and Persephone.<sup>8</sup> In addition, she is figured throughout the novel as a contemporary Eurydice, a comparison made explicit in Pieixoto’s reference. Eurydice is the ultimate woman unseen for being seen, and issues

of visibility, storytelling, power, aesthetics, and gender converge in traditional accounts of her story. Eurydice is in many ways emblematic of women's victimization by the male gaze, and Atwood's inclusion of the reference to her attests to the importance of the issue of visual objectification throughout the novel.

Pieixoto's reference to Eurydice differs from traditional accounts of the story, however, in a way that reflects a central difference between the mythical Eurydice and Offred, and gives insight into how to understand Offred's position at the end of the novel. In traditional accounts of the Eurydice myth, Orpheus is prohibited from looking at Eurydice lest she be banished to hell again. Of course, he does look at her in most of these accounts, and Eurydice is remembered best for inspiring Orpheus to create his greatest art, which he does in the grief he feels over losing Eurydice a second time.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, Eurydice is silenced as well as visually objectified by Orpheus's gaze. While he goes on to create beautiful music based on his experience of losing her, Eurydice is both unseen and unheard. Eurydice's fate testifies to the relationship that exists between seeing someone and hearing them and to the importance of voicing suppressed histories. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood essentially rewrites the story of Eurydice and Orpheus so that her contemporary Eurydice "slip[s] from our grasp and flees," rather than passively being banished back to hell.

Although she can do little to alter the manner in which she is viewed and is still subject to the objectifying gaze of those such as Pieixoto at the conclusion of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred is no longer banished to hell by such a gaze, and she is no longer silenced. In fact, she has already escaped from hell when Pieixoto catches sight of her; her account is possible because of her escape from Gilead.<sup>10</sup> Even more importantly, Atwood's Eurydice is not silent and does not depend on a male artist to give her a voice. Although Pieixoto desires this role and seeks to possess Offred's story by interpreting it for listeners, the story is ultimately "imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which [it came]," and he is not able to adequately decipher it. Jessie Givner explains that Offred's voice is the part of her that "may not be captured by [Pieixoto's] eye" (73) — and, as a result, cannot be objectified by his gaze. Instead, Offred tells her own story with her own voice and uses the act of storytelling to testify to what she witnessed as a Handmaid in Gilead. Although the story is subsumed by Pieixoto to some extent,

he “cannot make her answer” the questions he thinks are so important, even though he is editor of the story. Rather than answering biographical questions, Offred’s story addresses the more significant questions of why people such as herself allowed the takeover of a regime like Gilead, and why they went along with it after the takeover even at enormous personal costs to themselves.

As part of its larger exploration of totalitarianism, *The Handmaid’s Tale* highlights the danger of using information in a fascistic way, to simplify complex social problems and force conformity on individuals. Drawing on the history of the Third Reich to explore the role of visual culture in furthering fascist governments, the novel has relevance for contemporary democratic societies as well, especially in light of the ever-increasing theatricality of politics and the more recent mobilization of American visual culture to support unilateral military operations on the part of the United States around the world. Atwood’s strategy of “reading beneath” is a welcome and sane alternative to either embracing oppressive ideologies or rejecting them through violent means, suggesting that visual literacy can empower individuals to resist identification with oppressive visual images and to understand the ideology driving those images. Ultimately, however, Atwood charges the reader with the task of creating a new context in which natural differences between people do not lead to visual objectification — Eurydice is not in hell, but she is still on the run.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Sharon Wilson’s “Eyes and I’s” for a consideration of vision in all of Atwood’s works up to and including *Cat’s Eye*. See also Laura Wright’s “National Photographic” and Laurie Vickroy’s “Seeking Symbolic Immortality” for recent examinations of the visual in relation to *Surfacing* and *Cat’s Eye*, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> See Gilbert for a discussion of Spinoza’s ideas about the perception of images.

<sup>3</sup> Synaesthesia refers to the experience when one type of stimulation (visual, oral, aural etc.) evokes the sensation of another type of stimulation — when a sound evokes the visualization of a particular colour, for instance. Pajczkowska explains that in adults synaesthesia, “as a merging of sensory experiences and representations, is limited to certain cultural forms, notably *visual culture*” and is a primary source of the pleasure spectators take from viewing visual images (21; emphasis added). She concludes that, as a result, “visual culture becomes a privileged site for the production and deciphering of the unconscious in culture” (21).

<sup>4</sup> See Heffernan’s “Ekphrasis and Representation” and *Museum of Words* and Mitchell’s *Picture Theory* for contemporary definitions and (re)definitions of ekphrasis.

<sup>5</sup> See Atwood, "A Feminist '1984'" for what is perhaps Atwood's first reference to *The Handmaid's Tale* as speculative fiction.

<sup>6</sup> Jamie Dopp refers to Offred's "fatalistic passivity" and Stephanie Barbé Hammer offers an analysis of Offred's "consistent passivity" (42). While Dopp disputes claims that *The Handmaid's Tale* works against women's oppression, Hammer contends that Atwood offers Offred as a negative example to warn readers about the dangers of passively accepting the flaws of our own culture. Despite their different interpretations of the novel, though, both writers agree that Offred's own identity is comprised mostly of passivity, a quality central to Gilead's definition of femininity.

<sup>7</sup> Recognizing that the visual is vulnerable to manipulation also allows the individual to manipulate his or her own appearance — as Ofglen does, for instance, when she kicks a political prisoner in the head during the Salvaging. Although this appears to be an act of cruelty, it is really merciful, ending the prisoner's suffering before he is dismembered. Offred is so successful at appearing to accept Gilead's rhetoric, so "stinking pious" in Ofglen's words, that Ofglen mistakes her for "a true believer" (218). As she becomes involved in separate intrigues with Serena Joy, the Commander, Nick, and Ofglen, Offred's ability to avoid drawing attention to herself is crucial to her survival. Offred suggests that manipulating one's appearance in this way becomes a form of language in and of itself — a body language that allows individuals to speak to one another without violating prohibitions on speech. She describes Nick, for instance, as "my flag, my semaphore" (235) as he communicates the Commander's desire to see her by wearing his cap sideways on his head.

<sup>8</sup> See Stein for an analysis of Offred as a "Scheherazade of the future" (269). See Wilson's "Off the Path to Grandma's House in *The Handmaid's Tale*," in *Margaret*, for an analysis of elements of the Red Riding Hood story in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

<sup>9</sup> Eurydice was first named during the time of Virgil. In the earliest accounts of Orpheus's story he is often successful in rescuing his beloved from the underworld; Charles Segal explains that Orpheus's loss of Eurydice became increasingly necessary as writers focused on Orpheus's turn to pederasty after losing Eurydice for a second time. Her death motivated and gave meaning to his heroic descent into the underworld, and her second death motivated the extreme sorrow that led Orpheus to create beautiful music and turn to pederasty. Ovid is especially significant for directly attributing Orpheus's pederasty to his loss of Eurydice. Beyond her role as motivation for his actions, though, Eurydice does not really play much of a part in most of the numerous versions of Orpheus's story. Margaret Bruzelius explains that "Eurydice is twice forgotten: forgotten first because she is remembered only as the occasion of Orpheus's first miracle, his descent to the underworld, and forgotten again when her second death endows Orpheus's voice with such overwhelming power that her loss seems nugatory" (447).

<sup>10</sup> Wilson explains that "Gilead fulfills traditional scholarly definitions of 'hell' primarily because of its treatment of 'gender traitors,' nonwhite races, religious minorities, and especially women" (*Margaret* 274-75).

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