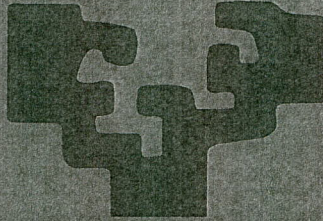


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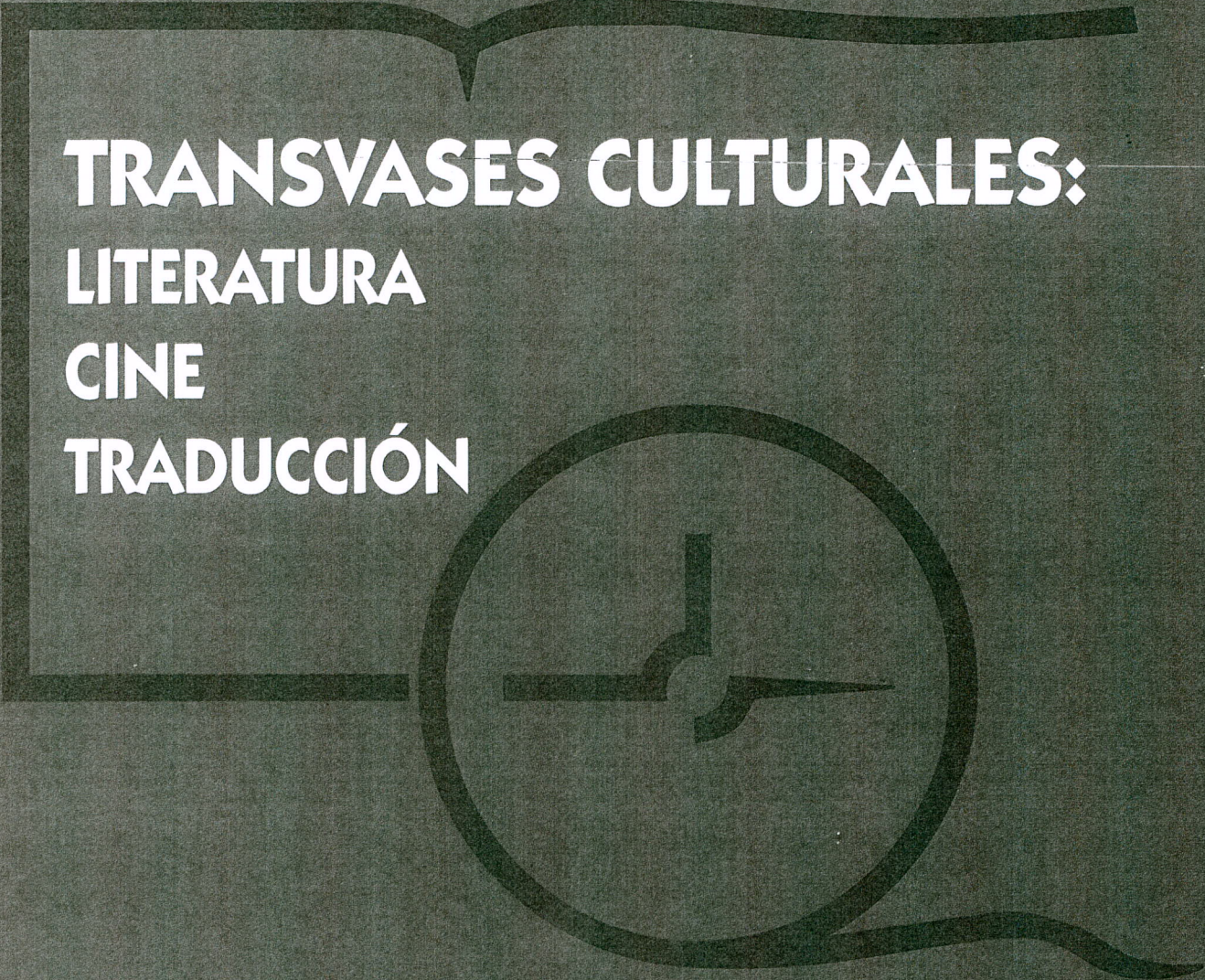


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THE HANDMAID'S TALE, MARGARET ATWOOD'S NOVEL AND VOLKER SCHLONDORFF'S FILM

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The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopia, like Huxley's *Brave New World*, or Orwell's *1984*; all the three new societies present a world which has been improved, in the eyes of some, but where in fact freedom has been considerably limited. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, written by a woman, the situation is similar in that freedom has been curtailed, but there is also a difference: the revolution has taken place at the expense of women; the new order has enslaved them and only men have the power.

Dystopias always have some underlying cause. Paradoxically, these political hells have been imagined not by those people who opposed an ideology, but by those who were close to a specific political tendency and could nevertheless foresee the excesses which might derive from putting those ideas into practice. Huxley was concerned with scientific progress, and that included the dangers of genetic manipulation. Orwell was alarmed at the thought of the power of the state in a socialist society. Atwood is involved with the balance of power between men and women. Atwood's prophecy comes as a threat posed by the feminist movement and the puritanical ideas of the new right wing. This connection of the present reality with the fictitious world is highlighted in the fact that Atwood dedicates her novel to Perry Miller, a writer on American Puritanism, and to Mary Webster, her ancestor, who was hanged as a witch in Connecticut (Rigney: 114).

In every fictional narrative a story is told about some characters who live and move in a world which is the textual referent. That world may be an imagined extension of the world as we know it or as we think it was in the past, or it may present some deviations from our world. In the last case the reader must be made familiar with the new referent. Dystopias illustrate this preceding case for their textual referents are worlds which necessarily differ from ours and this is intrinsically important.

Therefore in dystopias there are two parts which must be both adequately contrived for the dystopia's successful achievement. On the one hand there must be the description of the new order, with perhaps an explanation of an earlier development, in such a way that the world is made a clear referent. On the other hand, there must be some fictitious characters who will take the reader into the new world, and whose fate must be closely linked to the new order. In a study of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the novel written by Margaret Atwood, and the film direc-

ted by Volker Schlöndorff with the screenplay by Harold Pinter (1990), both parts will necessarily be examined.

The Handmaid's Tale describes a world ravaged by pollution and radioactivity, as a result of which there is a high rate of sterility in the population. Women have been deprived of all their civil rights. They cannot own anything, they are denied the benefits of an education to such an extent that they are not even allowed to read or write; they have been forcefully thrown out of their jobs, and can only fulfill domestic tasks. Those women who are fertile and have in some way opposed the new order are being brought up as handmaids for the upperclass, which means that they must try to bear them children. The state is ruled by a theocratic minority who, based on the so-called "traditional values", imposes the new rule on the rest, in a society from which religious and racial minorities have been prosecuted and expelled.

The story presented is that of one of those handmaids (Kate in the film, the nameless narrator in the novel) who, after a training period in the Red Centre, is appointed as a handmaid to a family. Her duty is to have sexual intercourse with the husband, the Commander, at the peak of her fertile period, in a most peculiar ceremony in which she lies between the thighs of the wife, following the example set by Rachel in the Bible, who offered Jacob her maid Bilah. From what is the standard behaviour in an upperclass household, where sex is exclusively linked to procreation, there arises a circle of deceit: the Commander deceives his wife; he sees the handmaid in secret (to play Scrabble, of all things) and even smuggles her into an unofficial brothel for high officers; Serena Joy, the wife, deceives the Commander, as she helps the handmaid meet their chauffeur, Nick, in secret, hoping that he will make the handmaid pregnant; Nick cheats the Commander when he complies with Serena's wishes and makes love to the handmaid; on the other hand, Nick also cheats the Commander's wife as he helps the Commander see the handmaid, and take her to the brothel. The handmaid deceives both the husband and the wife with Nick and the Commander, respectively; Nick and the handmaid deceive their masters. The handmaid, with the help of another handmaid, Oflen, deceives them all, trying to connect with the rebellious network. Lack of freedom, strong restrictions impose deceit and even favour it.

This is a summary of the common elements in the novel and the film. The end differs: The film ends with the handmaid's escape into the mountains, after she kills the Commander. The story in the novel ends a bit before then, when the handmaid is taken away by some guards belonging to the underground rebellion movement. But it also has another appendage: the *Historical Notes on the Handmaid's Tale*, whereby we get to know that the Tale was found years later, when democracy had been restored. It consisted of thirty tapes, which offers a new light on the narrator and the story itself.

Besides the different endings there are also important contrasts in the story

offered by the novel and the film which affect the characterization of the handmaid.

Kate's husband is killed at the beginning of the film, while in the novel the narrator does not know whether her husband is dead or alive. This reflects on her behaviour, as she feels guilty when she falls in love with Nick, a guilt which does not exist for the protagonist of the film, who is unattached.

Kate is much more courageous and daring than the narrator in the novel. She is altogether a different person and this is shown on several occasions. She helps Moira, the lesbian rebel, in her first escape, although she is an acquaintance met in the Red Centre. Moira in the novel is the narrator's closest long-standing friend, but she makes her escape unaided.

When the doctor suggests helping the handmaid get pregnant, the reaction also varies. In the film Kate says, "Don't touch me or I'll scream"; in the novel she says, "It's too dangerous, I say. No. I can't" (p. 57) and she even thanks the doctor. She then comments that the doctor is powerful, he could fake her tests, report her for infertility, for cancer. As we can see, the differences between the two heroines are stressed by the fact that we are introduced into the thoughts of the character in the novel, and can understand her reactions more deeply.

When Serena Joy, the Commander's wife, shows Kate the photograph of her little girl in the film, she rebels verbally, while in the novel she does not. In fact, the scene in the novel consists only of an unfinished conversational exchange, with her painful internal reaction instead of her oral answer.

In the film, Kate meets Nick in the dark as she is groping to find a pair of scissors, a weapon she may want to use eventually. In the novel she goes downstairs but she is not looking for the scissors; she only wants to steal a flower.

The character in the film has been shaped more fitfully for her final behaviour, as she kills the Commander. Her literary counterpart is merely capable of thinking about it, without any intention of carrying out the idea.

The handmaid in the novel is a different, quite malleable person, who cannot fight outside conditions. She fights them internally, which may seem quite a task under the circumstances, as the story shows how it is possible to give in and accept the change internally, in the way Janine, another handmaid, does. The narrator remembers and tries to keep her wits about her. She resembles the protagonists of others novels by the same author in the lack of heroism, for they value their lives more than their dignity.

There are some further changes worth mentioning, like the fact that in the novel handmaids have also been deprived of their names and are obliged to take a patronymic, like Offred or Oflen, with the name of their commander in it, and change it along with their post. The narrator, called Offred after her Commander, remains unnamed as an individual all through the novel, and she voices how she feels about what she considers her maimed identity on several occasions (pp. 91, 135, 254). In the final scene when she is arrested and Nick arrives with the men

who take her away, besides pronouncing the password, *Mayday*, he calls her by her real name, as proof that he is on her side. In the film this detail is overlooked and the protagonist is called Kate.

An interesting point to take into account is the different treatment of time. In the film the new world must necessarily be represented from the initial image. The novel can postpone the description of it until later. This is probably the reason why the film has opted for chronological order, (that is the *fabula* and the *syuzet* coincide) while the novel starts *in medias res*.

So the film starts with a caption,

*Once upon a time
in the recent future
a country went wrong
the country was called
the Republic of Gilead*

and the scene where Kate flees with her family and they are caught. Then, there must inevitably be a kind of summary explaining the change to the new type of society. Summaries, as D. Bordwell and K. Thompson say (p. 230), are not filmed with ease, and therefore the director has resorted to “montage-sequence”, where different shots are shown of crowds of people, especially of coloured people and women, who are being transported by force. Some short scenes present the training and indoctrination of the handmaids at the Red Centre. In a solemn ceremony of the Consecration of the handmaids, which does not exist in the novel, the audience is informed of their role in the new society, through the speech of the Commander. He blames the previous society for bringing about the punishment of God, infertility, through their vices of birth control, sexual promiscuity, test tube babies, abortion and genetic engineering. It is now the duty of those women who have the precious gift of fertility to give birth for their country.

Later, the film proceeds with the story of Kate in chronological order, until she makes her escape and is left in the mountains to await the birth of her child. There are only two flash-backs, of her little daughter walking on the snow, which are like a continuation of the initial scene of the film. As can be seen, Kate’s life before her flight with her family and the reason why they had to escape are neither shown nor explained in the film. On one occasion only is there a reference to Kate’s previous life, when the Commander mentions her profession, that she was a librarian. The political situation which developed into the revolution is not presented. The assumption of the new order is justified by Aunt Lydia, an instructor-gaoler at the Red Centre, and also by the Commander.

The novel is divided into fifteen parts and the *Historical Notes*. Seven of the fifteen parts, entitled *Nights*, and another one, entitled *Nap*, are inserted between the other seven parts and they refer to the time the narrator is confined to her room:

The problem of time is treated in a different way in the novel than in the film. After a first brief *Night*, told in the past, which cannot be immediately understood for it depicts a night in the Red Centre, comes the narration in the present, in what seems an immediate rendering of what is happening to an unnamed narrator, the handmaid. She is then living in the house of the Commander, her third assignment, and not the first as in the film. The reality surrounding her is described slowly, and only after some steps back into the past, analepsis, to use Genette terminology (Genette, 1972: 90), can the situation be gradually perceived. This gradual reconnaissance of the reader builds up a growing expectation as he/she is made aware of the abnormal circumstances. The narrator often resorts to comparison of the present and the "time before":

"She's in her usual Martha's dress, which is dull green, like a surgeon's gown of the time before." (p. 9)

"Sometimes I listen outside closed doors, a thing I never would have done in the time before." (p. 10)

Those comparisons inevitably enhance the change. The stratification of the society, with the outward manifestation of uniforms, red dresses for handmaids, blue for Commanders' wives, striped for Econowives, green for Marthas (domestic help, in a Biblical metaphor) is soon transmitted. The narrator's restriction of movements is also quickly revealed. The curiosity of the reader is then oriented to the reason for the change both of society in general and the narrator's life in particular. The narrator goes back into her past, in an apparently haphazard way and the reader gets to know how the change in society has come about. The society depicted in the film seems to be absolutely unconnected with ours, as happens in most science fiction, while the novel is much more threatening and terrifying for it narrates a not altogether implausible evolution of a democratic society into a world of women slavery, through what Barbara Hill Rigney (1987: 114) calls "avoidance of responsibility". Because of a lack of involvement, a large part of society, which included the narrator, has allowed the change to occur. The description of the revolution is not a frequent element in American science fiction (James, 1990: 101).

The different treatment of time in the novel and the film conditions the transmission of contextual information, as we have seen. Nevertheless there is a coincidence in both cases in the lack of preparation for the scene when the Commander and the handmaid have sexual intercourse. Surprise enhances the degrading usage of women for procreation, which is unacceptable both for the wife and the handmaid who must mutely submit to the barbaric sexual consummation disguised as a ritualised liturgical ceremony.

Focalisation also produces a difference between the novel and the film. In the novel we perceive the story from the narrator's point of view. As a result not only are all characters tinted by her opinion, but we also obtain her attitude to the story. On several occasions she remonstrates against her role as a narrator:

“I don’t want to be telling this story.” (p. 257)

The attitude of the narrator towards the story she is telling varies according to the content. When she tells Moira’s story she feels prouder of it because Moira rebels.

The difficulties the narrator finds for the transmission of the story grow as the novel proceeds. Sometimes her reluctance is due to the pain produced by the recollections of her previous life, but on other occasions she is unwilling to continue because of her own role in the story:

I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia. I wish it had more shape. I wish it were about love, or about sudden realizations important to one’s life, or even about sunsets, birds, rainstorms, or snow. (p. 251)

The narrator is worried about providing a faithful transmission of the story, and this fact is highlighted when she offers two contradictory reconstructions of her first encounter with Nick.

The material part of the transmission of the narration frequently lies within the suspension of disbelief on which fiction is based. On relatively few occasions is there a reference to the fact that novels are written, or to the alleged circumstances in which the narrator actually wrote the story. The mere lack of information on this subject would not have been worth mentioning, but in the case of the novel we have the opposite situation, the narrator is stressing the fact that there is no possibility for her to write the story, as writing is strictly forbidden and prosecuted and no other means of recording the narration are mentioned. Since there are no possible ways of transmission, the reader must then accept that the text comes to him/her in some mysterious way, straight from the narrator’s mind. Again, this material impossibility of the narration could have been overlooked if the transmission of the narration had not been specified in the *Historical Notes*. There it is said how the handmaid’s story, as it appears in the book, is the transcription of some cassettes found years later somewhere on “The Underground Femaleroad”. The sequence of the chapters is no longer seen as the product of the narrator, for it is explained that it is due to guesswork on the part of two scholars. The temporal perspective is also in contradiction with the content of the narration, where the reader obtains the impression of the immediacy of the narration to the event.

The ambiguity the narration presents cannot be solved, as it has become part of the story itself. We can see that the contradiction has been foregrounded, in the way which characterizes postmodern fiction. “In fiction it is self-reflexivity that works to make the paradoxes of postmodernism overt and even defining.” (Hutcheon: 43)

This ambiguity of the narration has disappeared in the film. There are no self-conscious reflections and the transmission of the story is not commented

upon. The film starts with "Once upon a time, in the recent future..." which distances the story, setting it in the realms of fantasy. This impression is intensified by the colourful uniforms characters wear. Red, which brings about reminiscences of *The Scarlet Letter*, stands out more in the film, especially in the scenes of the formal celebrations where the rows of handmaids move with a processional cadence. The celebrations, especially the Salvaging, where the handmaids take part in the executions, are more impressive in the film, with the alternation of aerial shots and very low shots taken at ground level. The Ceremony, the sexual scene, is probably even more incongruous in the film.

It is undeniable that literature and cinema are two different media and must consequently produce different results. Therefore, *The Handmaid's Tale*, the novel and film have not been analysed and compared in order to see whether the film was a faithful reproduction of the novel, but in order to decide which of the two convey the story better.

In my opinion the answer falls heavily in favour of the novel; it describes a new order which is not a remote fantasy but a plausible prophecy which may come about in a near future. As for the fictional heroine, the handmaid in the novel, with her divided heart, her cowardice, is easier to understand than the daring Kate, a modern Judith, more difficult to identify with. The novel discloses a much more poignant and disturbing story than the film, from the start to the very ambiguity of the ending which has given place to the happy ending in the film, in spite of the fact that the cinema has enough resources to present internal contradiction. As it is, a story of sexual politics has been weakened and trivialized in the film into a tale with some bizarre sex in it.

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