

## RESEARCH

## Reading Media Culture Politically: The Case of *A Handmaid's Tale*

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From the 1960s to the present, media culture in the United States has been a battleground between competing social groups with some artifacts advancing liberal or radical positions, and others conservative ones. Likewise, some artifacts of media culture promote progressive positions and representations of gender, sexual preference, race or ethnicity, while others articulate reactionary forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, and rightwing values and beliefs. Hence, media cultures articulates a contradictory matrix of liberal, radical, and reactionary representations, discourses, and narratives.

From this viewpoint, media culture can be read as a contest of representations and a contested terrain that reproduces existing social struggles and *transcodes* the political discourse of the era (Ryan and Kellner 1988; Kellner 1995). I am using the term *transcode* to describe how specific political discourses and positions like liberalism or rightwing nationalism are translated, or encoded, into media texts. For example, films like *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Woodstock* (1970) transcode the discourses of the 1960's counterculture into cinematic texts in image, sound, dialogue, scenes, and narrative, while feminist films like *Thelma & Louise* (1991) and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) transcode feminist discourses.

From the political right, films like *Red Dawn* (1984) and *Missing in Action* (1984) transcode the conservative discourses of Reaganism, while the 2017 TV series based on Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* could be read as a protest against the global rise of conservatism throughout the world and against attacks on women. Indeed, *The Handmaid's Tale* became a global sensation, as women throughout the world donned the white hat, cloak, and modest uniform of the handmaids as symbols

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of resistance to the attack on women's rights in the Trump administration and elsewhere, while debates raged whether Trump's America was coming to embody features of Atwood's dystopia (Robertson 2016, Engelhardt 2019). In this article, I will first present my multiperspectival method of reading media culture politically and then will illustrate this through a reading of Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and a 2017 TV mini-series that is based on it.

Films, TV series, and other forms of media culture are multiperspectival and polysemic, containing multiple and often contradictory meanings open to numerous and variant interpretations, as I demonstrate in *Cinema Wars* (2010) and *Media Culture* (1995). Yet, there are a number of recurring themes in Hollywood films and TV series of the past decades, which articulate some of the key events and socio-political and economic relations of the time. Indeed, many of these texts of media culture resonate, and can be interpreted, within the history of the social struggles and political context of their period. In this way, media culture can help interpret the social and political history of an era, and contextualizing media culture texts in their matrix of production, distribution, and reception can help interpret the multiple meanings and effects of specific films, genres, or filmmakers.

## 1. Media Culture and Socio-Political Struggles

This study focuses on U.S. media culture in the 2000s, covering the eras from the Bush-Cheney Gang's militarist and conservative regime (2000-2008) to Trump's hard right and extremely erratic presidency (2016-2020), culminating in the attack on democracy in Trump's insurrection of January 6, 2021, in which his Stormtroopers invaded and tried to occupy the Capitol. This has been a particularly turbulent and contested era of U.S. history and media culture reproduced its passionate polarization, intense political struggle, and often surprising and dramatic events.

I take the artifacts of media culture as providing illuminating access to social and political realities of their period, and see media interpretation and critique as contributing to knowledge of the present age through contextualization, interpretations and critique of popular media culture artifacts. In general, media texts can display social realities of the time in documentary and realist fashion, directly representing events and phenomena of an epoch. Yet media entertainment can also provide symbolic-allegorical representations that interpret, comment on, and indirectly portray realities of an era. Finally, there is an aesthetic, philosophical, and anticipatory dimension to media culture, in which they provide artistic visions of the world that might transcend the social context of the moment and articulate future possibilities, positive

and negative, and provide insights into the nature of human beings, social relations, institutions, and conflicts of a given era, or the human condition itself.

Realist media texts would include critical documentary and films like Oliver Stone's historical dramas that attempt to provide a representation of events like the Kennedy assassination (*J.F.K.*), the Vietnam war (*Platoon*, or *Born on the Fourth of July*), *Nixon*, or countercultural figures like *The Doors* and the counterculture they influenced. Of course, both documentary films, however rigorous, and realist films are constructs, and as the Oliver Stone examples easily suggest are interpretations and specific versions of social and historical reality. It is similar with documentary films by committed filmmakers like Michael Moore whose *Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, or *Mr. Hoover and I*, properly interpreted and contextualized, can provide key insights into specific historical persons, events, or eras (Kellner 2019 and 2013).

Allegorical films include fantasy and horror genres which require theoretically-informed interpretations concerning what socio-political realities, or fantasies, specific artifacts of media culture represent. The series of haunted and collapsing house films of the 1980s (i.e. *The Amityville Horror* and the *Poltergeist* trilogy; see Kellner 1995), for example, can be interpreted as projecting fears of middle class families losing their homes or having their families torn apart during the Reagan era in which the middle class was indeed downwardly mobile, divorce was up, and families were losing homes (as happened again in accelerating fashion during the Covid lockdown in which many people could not keep up their home payments).

Likewise, a series of political thrillers in the 2000s can be read as allegories articulating liberal fears of rightwing oppression under the Bush-Cheney administration, including *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), *Syriana* (2004), and *V for Vendetta* (2006). The texts of media culture thus provide insight or illumination into the contemporary moment through their images, scenes, or the narratives as a whole. As the German exile writers Walter Benjamin and T.W. Adorno argued, cultural forms can provide *dialectical images* that illuminate their social environments, as Adorno claimed regarding the poetry of Hölderlin, or as Heidegger claimed that Greek tragedy and epic poetry illuminated the world of the Greeks (Kellner 1989). Media culture is, to be sure, a less sublime mode of culture, although its artifacts have their moments of beauty and transcendence, and modernist moments of style, innovation, contestation or resistance.

More aesthetic and philosophical readings of media culture engage themselves with the *aesthetic dimension* (Marcuse 1978) that ranges from analysis of media form and style to the transcendent visions of another world presented in some media artifacts

(Kellner 2007). By virtue of style and form, innovative and visionary works of media culture can present visions of a better life, as well as provide critical insight into the present moment. Media culture has a utopian dimension which enables audiences to transcend the limitations of the present moment to envisage new ways of seeing, living, and being. As Fredric Jameson has pointed out (1981 [1979]), popular films like *The Godfather* or *Jaws* can have utopian moments, as the opening scenes of a communal family life in the *Godfather* wedding scene, the New England community before the shark attack, or the male bonding and heroism of the disparate men seeking to protect the community from the shark attacks.

In addition, media culture has been a rich terrain and a productive field for aesthetic and philosophical exploration of its texts. Films and television at their best interrogate the human condition as well as specific social relations and deal with universal aspects of human being-in-the-world as well as specific socio-historical conditions. Thus media culture can be engaged by the disciplines of aesthetics and philosophy, and categories from this realm can be applied to analyze and interpret its artifacts. Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2002), for instance, combines fantasy, dream, and scenes from everyday life with characters discussing issues of philosophy in which aesthetics and philosophy, form and content, are combined (Bradshaw 2002; Wartenberg and Curran 2005; Carroll 2008).

Indeed, the texts of media culture can be used to illustrate and discuss a wide range of philosophical, religious, or social-political issues and can be an effective pedagogical tool that engage contemporary audiences in a direct and immediate fashion. The audio-visual spectacles of cinematic and televisual culture are a crucial part of contemporary cultures and are embedded in fundamental economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions of the present age. The artifacts of media culture raise issues and can provoke debates concerning salient issues of the present moment as when Andrew Light claims in *Reel Arguments* (2003) that contemporary films raise important issues concerning surveillance technology, identity politics, or environmentalism, generating arguments and debates that contribute to political enlightenment or philosophical understanding.

In this and other critical studies, I use history and social and political theory to analyze media culture, and deploy its texts to illuminate historical trends, conflicts, possibilities, and anxieties of the era. From this diagnostic perspective, media culture can provide important insights into the psychological, socio-political, and ideological make-up of U.S. society at a given point in history. Reading culture diagnostically allows one to gain insights into social problems and conflicts, and to appraise the dominant ideologies and emergent oppositional forces. Moreover, diagnostic

critique enables one to perceive the limitations and pathologies of mainstream conservative and liberal political ideologies, as well as oppositional ones (Ryan and Kellner 1988). This approach thus involves a dialectic of text and context, using texts to read social realities and context to help situate and interpret key artifacts of media culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Much as Benjamin (1997) used the poetry of Charles Baudelaire to illuminate the scene of Paris in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as other historical and political sources and artifacts, and the ephemera of everyday life, so too can we use media culture to provide critical insight and knowledge into our own historical era. For diagnostic critique, media culture is an important source of knowledge, used judiciously with the tools of theory and cultural studies, that provides privileged insight into how people behave, look, and act in a particular era, as well as their dreams, nightmares, fantasies and hopes.

In addition, German exile writer Siegfried Kracauer, once close to Benjamin and Adorno, laid bare the allegorical dimension of film and provided one of the first systematic studies of how films articulate social and psychological content. His book *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947) argues that German inter-war films reveal a highly authoritarian disposition to submit to social authority and fear of emerging chaos. For Kracauer, German films reflect and foster anti-democratic and passive attitudes of the sort that paved the way for Nazism. While his assumption that “inner” psychological tendencies and conflicts are projected onto the screen opened up a fruitful area of sociocultural analysis, he frequently ignored the role of mechanisms of representation, such as displacement, inversion, and condensation in the construction of cinematic images and narratives. He posits film-society analogies (“Their silent resignation foreshadows the passivity of many people under totalitarian rule” (Kracauer 1947:218) that deny the autonomous and contradictory character and effects of film form and the multiple ways that audiences process cinematic material.

Hollywood has long been seen as a dream machine that articulates the subconscious yearnings and fears of a culture, as well as an ideology machine that inculcates the dominant ideology—and, as well shall see, projects dreams of liberation, resistance, and a world of freedom, happiness, and justice. Sociological and psychological studies of Hollywood film proliferated in the United States in the post-World War II era and developed a wide range of critiques of myth, ideology, and meaning in the American cinema.

Parker Tyler's studies of *The Hollywood Hallucination* (1944) and *Myth and Magic of the Movies* (1947) applied Freudian and myth-symbol criticism to show how Walt Disney cartoons, romantic melodramas, and other popular films provided insights into social psychology and context, while providing myths suitable for contemporary audiences. In *Movies: A Psychological Study*, Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites (1950) applied psychoanalytical methods to film, decoding fears, dreams, and aspirations beneath the surface of 1940s Hollywood movies, arguing that "(t)he common day dreams of a culture are in part the sources, in part the products of its popular myths, stories, plays and films" (1950:13). In her sociological study of *Hollywood: The Dream Factory*, Hortense Powdermaker (1950) studied an industry that manufactured dreams and fantasies, while Robert Warshaw (1962) in *The Immediate Experience* related classical Hollywood genres like the Western and the gangster film to the social history and ideological problematics of U.S. society.

Building on these traditions, Barbara Deming (1969) demonstrated in *Running Away From Myself* how 1940s Hollywood films provided insights into the social psychology and reality of the period, providing a diagnostic critique the complex relations between politics, society, and consciousness and an exemplary text of political sociology. Deming argued that "(i)t is not as mirrors reflect us but, rather, as our dreams do that movies most truly reveal the times" (1969:1). She claimed that 1940s Hollywood films provided a collective dream portrait of its era and proposed deciphering "the dream that all of us have been buying at the box office, to cut through to the real nature of the identification we have experienced there" (1969:5-6). Her work anticipates later, more sophisticated and University-based film criticism of the post-1960s era by showing how films both reproduce dominant ideologies and also contain proto-deconstructive elements that cut across the grain of the ideology that the films promote. She also undertook a gender reading of Hollywood film that would eventually become a key part of film criticism.

The same models of interpretation that critics of an earlier era applied to film can be applied to the texts of television. In addition to laying bare the socio-political fantasies and personal dreams and nightmares of an era, critical analysis of film and television can help dissect and deconstruct dominant ideologies, as well as show key ideological resistance and struggle in a given society at a specific moment, providing diagnostic critique of the form, content, and effects of media culture.

The groundbreaking work of critical media theorists like the Frankfurt School and French structuralism and poststructuralism revealed that media culture is a social construct that reproduces dominant ideology and its contestations, intrinsically linked to the vicissitudes of the social and historically specific milieu in which it is

conceived. Media and cultural studies unavoidably had to engage the politics of representation, which drew upon feminist approaches and multicultural theories to fully analyze the functions of gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual preference and so on socio-political dimensions that are vital to the constitution of cultural texts and their effects, as well as being fundamentally constitutive of audiences who appropriate and use texts (Durham and Kellner 2012; Winter 2010).

Feminist film criticism of the 1970s to the present combined critical theories like psychoanalysis and poststructuralism to interrogate how cinematic and televisual form, production, and reception contributed to the oppression of women and could contribute to their liberation. During this period, British cultural studies adopted a feminist dimension, paid greater attention to race, ethnicity and nationality, and concentrated on sexuality, as assorted discourses of race, gender, sex, nationality and so on circulated in response to social struggles and movements (Gilroy 1991; McRobbie, 1994; and Ang 1998). An increasingly complex, culturally hybrid and diasporic world calls for sophisticated understandings of the interplay of ideological representations, politics, and the forms of media, challenging the critic to draw on a wide of critical theories, thus developing models of multiperspectival cultural studies and media critique.

Poststructuralism stressed the openness and heterogeneity of the text, its embeddedness in history and desire, its political and ideological dimensions, and its excess of meaning. This led critical theory to more multidimensional interpretive methods and more radical political readings and critique, which combine discourses and methods from these multiple traditions of critical theory, cultural studies, and film and television criticism to provide diagnostic critiques which show how media texts reproduce dominant ideologies and struggles over race, class, gender, sexuality and other major components of human socio-political existence.

Critical social theories, like the Frankfurt School, show how global film and television industries are an important part of the culture industries through which mega-corporations seek mega-profits through producing blockbuster films and TV shows, which can be recycled in reruns throughout the world in various media and their digital reproduction, circulating commodities that can generate a high return. From the 1980s to the present, media culture was increasing corporatized, commodified, and produced often mediocre works to gain maximum profits. Hence, familiar *high concept* films that can be *presold* because of recognition of their source material and recycled through sequels can become franchises that can sell merchandise and spin off other products like the *Star Wars* and *Disney* films, while many popular films became blockbuster TV series like *The Lord of the Rings*.

Thus, increasingly, the culture industry has been producing media culture that can be sold through saturation advertising and booking to turn-over large profits in a quick release that brings in mega-audiences before going into DVD, TV, foreign release, streaming and other digital forms. Nonetheless, media culture in the US in the past decades has managed to turn out a surprising number of critical and oppositional films, television, and popular music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The radical movements of the 1960s spawned movements of independent film and radicalized Hollywood film directors, actors, and many throughout the production community. A generation of *movie brats* emerged from film schools in the 1970s to make ground-breaking and in some cases immensely successful films such as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and others who were able to make a great variety of projects in the succeeding decades and opened the way for others. Younger independent filmmakers emerged from the indie movement range from male filmmakers like John Sayles, Spike Lee, David Lynch, and Richard Linklater to female cineastes like Chantal Ackermann, Martha Coolidge, Cheryl Dunye, Miranda July, and Ava DuVernay. The success of their early low-budget films gave them access to higher budget cinema production in some cases, or at least steady financing of their projects.

In the next section, I will carry out a case study of how Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* provided a global feminist intervention against patriarchy from the time of its publication and has continued to articulate with struggles of women against patriarchal oppression such as have been especially visible in the United States in the struggle against the anti-feminist politics of the Donald Trump administration and then the Supreme Court's shocking attack on *Roe vs. Wade* and women's reproductive rights. I will accordingly interpret in the following section the 2017 TV mini-series version of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* as a dystopic critique of a patriarchal society that intersects in interesting ways with the presidency of Donald Trump (2016-2020) and rightwing attacks on women.

Thus Atwood's novel and the TV mini-series based on it can be used as a social text to illuminate the struggles over gender, class, and sexuality during the Trump era and beyond. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a global popular that has been received as an iconic feminist critique of patriarchy and the TV mini-series was especially relevant during the Trump era and continuing attacks on women, as I shall demonstrate in the following study.



## 2. The Handmaid's Tale as Dystopia and Ecological/Political Critique

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* was first published in 1985 as a critique of what she saw as disturbing conservative trends in U.S. politics during the Reagan era, embodied in groups like the Moral Majority, rightwing segments of the Republican Party, and evangelical religious groups, and in their attacks on women's freedoms and rights. Having taught at Harvard and lived in Boston and the Cambridge, Massachusetts area during this time, Atwood set her novel in a Northeastern U.S. urban area in a near future time frame.

Atwood's father was an environmentalist and she spent much time in the north of Canada and thus became involved in the ecology movement of the era. It is often overlooked that Atwood's dystopic novel is also an ecological parable showing a U.S. society some few decades further along than our own which has poisoned the environment, caused infertility in most women, and thrown modern industrial-technological societies into crisis.

*The Handmaid's Tale* envisages a small rightwing U.S. male cabal carrying out a revolution, murdering the previous power elite, and establishing the *Republic of Gilead*, a religious patriarchal theocracy in which women are reduced to child-bearing and reproduction or, oppressive forms of servitude. In Atwood's dystopic vision of Gilead, women have no rights and are the property of their husbands. Women are either the wives of the dominant male caste, or "Marthas" who serve in household as servants, "Handmaids" whose sole task is production of children, or "Jezebels" who are condemned to serve in houses of prostitution for the male elite, or are sent to the colonies to engage in slave labor in a nuclear polluted area where their lives are nasty, brutal, and short.

In 2017, shortly after Trump's election, the Hulu channel inaugurated a TV limited series of Atwood's novel and *The Handmaid's Tale* became a global sensation, as women throughout the world donned the white hat, cloak, and modest uniform of the handmaids as symbols of resistance to the attack on women's rights in the Trump administration and elsewhere, while debates raged whether Trump's America was coming to embody feature of Atwood's dystopia (Robertson 2016, Engelhardt 2019). The first season of the Hulu broadcast focused on the events told in Atwood's novel, whereas the second and third seasons went beyond Atwood's text, envisaging the main character Offred/June (Elizabeth Moss) escaping from bondage, encountering a resistance movement, then returning to her bondage as a Handmaid to try to save her daughter who had been taken away from her, while still attempting to resist and help cultivate a movement to overthrow the fascist theocratic state of Gilead.

The proliferation of cable channels in the 2000s and growth of streaming channels like Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, and others has proliferated TV production to previously unimaginable levels, and allowed for the production of more radical series and movies like *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-2019), Joseph Heller's anti-war novel *Catch-22* (2019), Armistead Maupin's gay drama *Tales of the City* (2019), and countless other series or films that embody a diversity or productions by different races, creators, and individuals previously kept out of conservative white male dominated TV production.

The Hulu TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* opens with June Osborne attempting to escape to Canada with her husband, Luke, and daughter, Hannah. June is captured and due to her fertility, she is made a Handmaid to Commander Fred Waterford and his wife, Serena Joy, and is now known as "Offred". The handmaid's names are created by the addition of the prefix Of- to the first name of the man who owns them, so Offred is Of-Fred, the property and reproductive handmaid of Fred and his family. When handmaids are transferred, their names are changed, and at the end of the first episode and throughout the series, Offred keeps reminding herself and the viewers that she is really *June*. This narrative device highlights how in patriarchal societies women are the *property* of men and must submit to their domination, as well as to a class society in which the underclass is forced to labor in the interest of the ruling elite.

The Waterford's are part of the Gilead elite as Fred Waterford is a high-ranking government official and his wife Serena Joy was a former conservative activist, writer, and celebrity. Serena has accepted her new role in Gilead, despite losing her fame and cultural power. Infertile herself, she yearns to have a child and willingly participates in the bizarre sexual ceremony, whereby Serena folds Offred in her arms as the latter copulates with Fred, attempting to impregnate Offred and have her much desired child.

Aunt Lydia (Ann Dowd) is in charge of the training of the Handmaids and is a major figure in the plot, and in early episodes she indoctrinates the handmaids with their role as childbearer and their importance to the survival of the society. Aunt Lydia uses a fundamentalist version of Christianity to indoctrinate the handmaid's into performing their roles as bearers of children and submissive underlings. While Lydia appears to be deeply religious, she is capable of great cruelty and embodies an authoritarian personality who serves to discipline and control the young women, thus showing how religion can take authoritarian forms and serve as instruments of domination.

Early episodes depict Offred/June and other Handmaids going shopping and meeting on the street and in various stores where they are doing errands which also affords the opportunity to present the oppressive features of Gilead such as a wall where men are hung for being gay, or not conforming in some way. The handmaid's also observe *Savagings* where rebels are hung to death or executed in public ceremonies. The Handmaids wear long red dresses, heavy boots and white coifs, with a larger white coif to be worn outside, concealing their facial figures from public view and restricting their own vision. Indeed, the women of different castes wear different clothing, with "Marthas" who are housekeepers and cooks, wearing long, loose-fitting dull green garments and covering their hair with headwraps. The upperclass "Wives" wear elegant, tailored dresses in blue and turquoise, cut in styles evoking the 1950s, while "Jezebels" who work in brothels to service the male elite dress in provocative lowcut blouses, tight skirts, and clothing to show off their bodies.

Flashbacks show June and other women losing their jobs, having their bank accounts frozen, and forfeiting all their rights, in cautionary warnings that oppressive patriarchy can return women to second class citizenship and worse. Throughout, there are also flashbacks to June's past pre-Gilead life, her relation to her husband Luke, her child Hannah, her feminist mother, and her friend Moira, creating contrasts between the former human life and the inhuman life of Gilead. In many images in the series, the camera tightly focuses on June's face and depicts the story from her point-of-view, showing the misery etched on her facial expressions and the indignities and oppression forced on her and the other Handmaids, although on occasion June's face expresses flashes of anger and resolute resistance, while the final episodes of Season 3 depict June as relentlessly focused on freeing the oppressed women and children.

The first season that follows the storyline of Atwood's novel and focuses on June's relations with the other Handmaids, depicting their shared oppression and moments of solidarity, and June's increasingly complex relations with the Waterford family. Seeking to humanize the nonhuman relations, the Commander Fred invites June/Offred to his private study where they play Scrabble and eventually talk like normal people; he also takes her to a brothel, meant for the entertainment of the male elite where she meets her friend Moira and begins forging relations of resistance. Serena, jealous of Offred's relation with Fred and afraid he may be infertile, encourages Offred to have sexual relations with Fred's driver Nick, which she does and begins to have a relation with him that will eventually yield Serena's much desired child.

At the end of the first season, Moira escapes to Canada where a Gilead resistance movement is forming, and Offred is arrested and taken away in a black van. In the

second season, Offred escapes her imprisonment, but decides to stay in Gilead to unite with her first daughter Hannah. She ultimately hopes to go to Canada with Hannah to join her husband Luke and second daughter who is stolen from Serena near the end of the second season and who Moira spirits to Canada. Thus the series depicts the transformation of women as the object of male desire and domination contrasted to depictions of women as autonomous and active subjects of resistance and liberation.

The second and third season of *The Handmaid's Tale*, produced during the Trump era, depict the growing resistance to Gilead, parallel to growing resistance to Trump, and *The Handmaid's Tale* is widely discussed as a critique of Trump's America, although Trump's defenders attack the interpretation making the series one of the most contested and debated TV series of all time (for a warning against fast analogies, see Crispin 2017; for a conservative rejection of the analogies see Lowry 2017). As states from Georgia and Alabama to Missouri have been banning abortion rights for women, protestors often show up with the Handmaid's uniforms and hats, and Atwood's novel has periodically jumped to the top of the *New York Times'* best seller's list, decades after its initial publication in 1985.

The first three seasons of the Hulu TV-series of *The Handmaid's Tale* were broadcast from 2017-2020, during Trump's presidency and served as a critique of the patriarchal nature of his administration, as well as anticipating the deep roots of an oppressive patriarchy in U.S. institutions. In 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court passed a landmark decision in *Roe v. Wade*, in which the Court ruled that the Constitution of the United States conferred the right for women to have an abortion. The decision struck down many federal and state abortion laws, and over almost fifty years this ruling served as law of the land, guaranteeing women the right to abortion.

Trump had promised when he was running for President in 2016 that he would overturn *Roe v. Wade*, and subsequently nominated three conservative judges who were committed to overturning the law that guaranteed women the right to abortion. Although Trump lost his re-election bid in 2020 to Joe Biden, in 2022, Trump's Supreme Court passed *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, overturning *Roe v. Wade* and ruling that the court held that the Constitution of the United States does not confer a right to abortion. This decision caused an uproar in the highly divided U.S. political scene and may have been seen as Trump's most consequential and controversial action of his presidency.

Atwood's novel and the Hulu TV mini-series anticipated the extreme measures that a patriarchal male-dominated society would take to control women and how women

could rebel against their oppression in resistance movements. The final episode of Season 3 *Mayday* (August 14, 2019) opens with a flashback depicting June, after being captured, witnessing women being rounded up and presumably executed, a scene transcoding the brutality of Gilead that has led June to become a leader of revolt. In this episode, June is organizing a flight from Gilead for the children and the “Marthas”, creating a network of resistance that will lead the oppressed women and children to a transport plane that will fly them to safety. The “Guardians” learn of the escape plan and send out patrols to the woods to apprehend the rebels. A determined June ambushes a Guardian, seizes his gun, and forces him to declare “All Clear”, allowing the group to escape to the plane and freedom. In a triumphant scene, the children disembark in Canada, are greeted by the Handmaid’s who have escaped and in some cases are reunited with their families.

June, however, was left behind, as she and some other “Handmaids” and “Marthas” threw stones at soldiers in order to allow the children to board the airplane. June is shot in a scuffle with a soldier, but in the closing scene is found alive by some of her fellow handmaids who carry her to an indeterminate future as she closes her eyes and recites scripture. The popularity of the *The Handmaid’s Tale* TV-series and its divided reception shows a country split between those seeking to defend women’s rights and democracy and those who deny they are under attack or are happy to oppress women along with Trump, his most rabid defenders, and rightwing media.

A diagnostic critique thus shows how popular media texts can transcode, anticipate, and comment on current socio-political texts and even become weapons of critique in political struggle. It can also evaluate how specific media texts provide positive or negative representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality—or ignore certain of these representations and issues altogether. In an otherwise positive review of the TV-series *Guardian* critic Ellen E. Jones (2017) accurately notes that the TV version of Atwood’s novel contains “the inclusion of race without the depiction of racism”. While the TV-series has, unlike the novel, a variety of characters of color, it never addresses racism, despite its critical optic on gender, class, and sexuality, constituting what “*New York Magazine* has described as the show’s “greatest failing”.”

Perhaps never before has media culture become so politicized and during the same period blockbuster hits like *Wonder Woman* and *Black Panther* show the resistance of women and people of color to rightwing oppression and how new superheroes have entered the pantheon of major Hollywood icons, exhibiting a desire to diversify media culture and its heroes and ideals. Thus a political sociology and cultural studies provides theories and methods that situate media texts within the context

of their production and reception, while deploying multiple perspectives to interpret the text and to show what popular media texts reveal about existing society, its modes of oppression and struggles to transform it.

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