
Kirsty Worrow explores how Hulu's TV adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has provided a timely and powerful icon for feminist protest in Trump's America.

**A WOMAN'S
PLACE
IS IN THE
RESISTANCE**

The Handmaid's significance in our contemporary media landscape has more potency because increasingly media is 'spreadable' (Henry Jenkins et al.); she means something to viewers in 2017, and so her image is being repeated and shared, over and over and over.



Margaret Atwood's 1985 speculative fiction novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, imagines an America ruled by a totalitarian patriarchal regime. The protagonist – Offred – experiences the loss of her own independence in this dystopia. A right-wing Christian theocracy addresses a birth rate crisis by enslaving fertile women as 'handmaids' who are forced into having sex in order to bear children. Atwood intended her vision to be horrific, but maintained that it was grounded in reality.

Offred's experiences were, thankfully, a million miles away from my own when I read the novel while pregnant in 2011. I came to define myself a feminist as part of Third Wave Feminism, where much of the focus lies on justifying the continued existence of the feminist movement, as well as challenging the more subtle, pervasive ideologies about gender (media representations, gendering of children, rape-culture, etc.) and embracing intersectional feminism. Much of the discussion around these issues happens in online spaces where feminists have come under attack from opponents such as Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), who view the feminisation of culture as the major problem in Western society. MRAs have often complained loudly about the increased prominence of women in mainstream (and traditionally male-targeted) properties like *Ghostbusters*, *Star Wars* and *Doctor Who*.

In 2016, Hulu announced that it would adapt *The Handmaid's Tale* for television. At the time, Donald Trump was making his improbable journey towards the White House, and much of the media establishment regarded his



chances as limited, especially in a fight against political veteran Hillary Clinton. Embarrassing audio of Trump relating his troubling attitudes towards women didn't diminish this view. His campaign often targeted Clinton on the grounds of her gender; he famously called her 'a nasty woman' and many of his supporters used the word 'bitch' in chants and placards at his rallies. In the middle of production, many were aghast as Trump claimed victory in the presidential election. People in the global blogosphere were full of sorrow that America seemed to be taking a step away from the egalitarian utopia they hoped for.

Trump was inaugurated in January 2017, just as *The Handmaid's Tale* production was wrapping up. The day after the president was sworn in, global protests, dubbed 'The Women's March' demonstrated the rejection of misogynist and racist ideals which perpetuated the notions of white male superiority which Trump typified to those marching. It was the largest protest in US history, and an estimated five million people protested internationally to advocate for human rights issues.

The Handmaid's Tale premiered in April 2017, receiving critical acclaim and award nominations; but its significance



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is arguably located in its uncanny commentary on Trump's America. *Rolling Stone* labelled it 'TV's most chilling Trump-era series'. Science and speculative fiction have often been vehicles for social commentary. In adapting *The Handmaid's Tale*, showrunner Bruce Miller had a choice. Either he could make a period piece, aiming for an authentic representation of the world that Atwood conjured, framing it as a kind of imagined alternate history, not unlike Amazon's successful *The Man in the High Castle*; or he could place the audience in the same position that Atwood intended her initial readers to take, looking off into the

not-too-distant future. Understandably, Miller opted for the latter, as an updated adaptation would be likely be more relevant to the audience. In doing so, the series creates an unsettling resonance between the narrative and reality.

At the end of the first episode – in voiceover – Offred reveals that before Gilead's totalitarian regime changed her name, she was called June. This was not revealed in the novel, and 'June' offers the viewer a clear name for the woman presented frequently in flashback. June in the 'before' is a recognisably contemporary woman – she is educated, has a career and is tolerant. June/Offred is also a more forceful character than in the book, as suggested by her lead role in the 'Salvaging'. The name itself – June – can be viewed as an attempt to make the protagonist a more mundane everywoman.

The flashbacks of June's life before are recognisably 'now'. Smartphones are commonplace; she uses social media in her first interaction with Luke. Contemporary US issues are also referenced: June and Moira discuss the threat of sexual assault on the university campus, and misogyny bubbles beneath the surface, evidenced when a barista calls June a 'slut' when her debit card doesn't work. Most pointedly though, *The Handmaid's Tale* engages in the debates around reproductive rights. The birth-rate crisis creates a tension between the societal fear of extinction and the individual freedom of women to choose when and if they should become mothers. In deciding to make the setting of the adaptation contemporary, Hulu presents a more relevant, and for some a more frighteningly prescient American dystopia. In less than a week in office, Trump signed an executive order to remove Government funding from organisations which promote access to abortion around the world. The order was commemorated with a picture taken inside the Oval Office which was criticised for the complete absence of those who stood to be most significantly affected by it – women themselves.

On May 3rd, 2017, during the show's run on Hulu, a group of activists in Missouri protested against proposed changes to access to birth control. What made this newsworthy was that the activists were dressed as Handmaids. A few days



later, while Texas lawmakers were debating anti-abortion legislation, Handmaid activists held a silent vigil in the foyer of the Capitol building. On 13th June, another group of Handmaids appeared to bear witness to a legislative debate on abortion in Ohio. Similar protests have been seen across the US, and Trump was greeted on his state visit to Poland by a group of Handmaids too. Postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard coined the term 'hyperreality' to explain the notion that the lines of reality and fiction are blurring. As our lives are increasingly filtered through media lenses, the world is becoming 'mediatised' so the distinction between real and fake is harder to spot. Baudrillard's ideas are useful in understanding that Miller's decision to set *The Handmaid's Tale* in contemporary America has led to Handmaids actually materialising in contemporary America. Not fully of course, but activists have recognised that the image of the Handmaid is a powerful and distinctive icon for female subjugation and reproductive rights. Fascinatingly, this use of the symbol in this context has altered the meaning of it; the Handmaid now also signifies female resistance.

So what? Why this now? The image of the Handmaid is not new; her striking scarlet dress and white bonnet have featured prominently on the variant cover art. The pro-life/choice debate is long-standing, too. Perhaps the answer to why the Handmaids have become a newsworthy symbol in 2017 lies with the media themselves. They rely on recognisable, simple images and have the capacity for faster amplification, exceeding that of older forms of cultural delivery like the printed book. The Handmaid's significance in our contemporary media landscape has more potency because increasingly media is 'spreadable' (Henry Jenkins et al.); she means something to viewers in 2017, and so her image is being repeated and shared, over and over and over. A wider audience is able to become familiar with her, as with any pop culture icon, through repetition; and recognition of her meaning as a symbol is no longer predicated on a familiarity with the show or the book.

Social media culture now provides a whole set of opportunities for political protest, and is increasingly the platform for political debate. Shots and sequences in *The*

Glossary

Third-wave feminists

Third-wave feminists believe that while women have come a long way in society, there is more to be done to achieve global gender equality. The concerns of the third wave may include domestic violence, the wage gap, sexual harassment, sexual inequalities.

Intersectional feminism

Intersectional feminism is an inclusive movement that acknowledges not only gender inequalities but those related to race, disability, sexual identity and culture.

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Handmaid's Tale have been repurposed on memes and gifs as part of the discourse of gender and reproduction. Online activism spills over into action IRL (in real life) and fannish practices like cosplay are now used as acts of protest. Unwittingly, Hulu originated the idea of the silent Handmaid protest by using cosplay as a marketing strategy at the SXSW media and music festival before the show's debut.

The use of the pop culture symbols in political protest is not new though. There is a tradition in Feminist protest of using strong, intelligent and independent female characters to symbolise an idealised female archetype: Princess Leia, Wonder Woman, Buffy Summers, Sailor Moon and Hermione Granger are all popular symbols of feminist protest. Hulu's handmaids have joined these ranks because the adaptation revitalises them with a solidarity, determination and rebelliousness which has clearly inspired some to stand up to a very divisive president. In reflecting on the relevance of *The Handmaid's Tale* in the Trump era for the *New York Times*, Atwood acknowledges that '[i]n the wake of the recent American election, fears and anxieties proliferate.' She denies that the work is a prediction of the future, but indicates that she is informed by a cautious ethos: 'Anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances.'

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