

Lost messages: The Handmaid's Tale, novel and film

Article

Accepted Version

Bignell, J. (1993) Lost messages: The Handmaid's Tale, novel and film. *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, 8 (1). pp. 71-84. ISSN 1757-8078 Available at <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/71221/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Published version at: <http://online.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/loi/bjcs>

Publisher: Liverpool University Press

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Lost Messages: *The Handmaid's Tale*, Novel and Film

Jonathan Bignell

Margaret Atwood's novel was adapted for the cinema by director Volker Schlöndorff in 1990, with a screenplay by Harold Pinter.¹ The story tells of a woman whose life is taken over by a late twentieth-century Christian fundamentalist state, The Republic of Gilead. The heroine becomes a Handmaid, whose role is to produce children for this repressive state which has reorganised the social system on precepts based on Biblical stories. The use of novels as the basis for films is extremely common, accounting for more than a quarter of English-language film production. In most of these cases, the relationship between novel and film goes unremarked, because the written text is either little-known, or deemed unworthy of serious consideration. A film version of an Atwood text, on the other hand, attracts attention from the numerous readers of her novels (enlarging the market for the film), and from the academic community. The film version might also encourage those who see it to read the 'book of the film', thus introducing more people to Atwood's work specifically, and perhaps to Canadian writing in general. The film version of *The Handmaid's Tale* therefore exacerbates the situation described here by Frank Davey:

For many readers of the past two decades Atwood's books constitute contemporary Canadian writing - yet without her books, such readers might not think of Canadian literature at all.²

One of the problems in writing about the adaptation of Atwood's text is the issue of whether the film supports her literary reputation, or furthers the cause of Canadian literature. Atwood unfortunately can come to stand for Canadian literature in general, to subsume the many different kinds of Canadian writing. This problem of unification and difference relates to how Atwood's name is used in the context of Canadian literature, and it is also analogous to the idea of Canadian identity in a larger sense. Canadianness is made up of a number of different identities; Canada is a multicultural society with two official languages. Since 1971 multiculturalism has been official policy, and in 1988 the Multiculturalism Act set out the principles of respecting the claims of aboriginal peoples, the different cultures and heritages of Canadians, and the rejection of discrimination.³ Canadian identity is a unity composed of differences, and the notion of Canadianness is a master-term which organises, names, and brings together a number of different component cultures, languages and discourses. Canada represents itself as a state which respects difference in the name of national identity.

I intend to argue that Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* thematises respect for gender difference, and the respect which separates one kind of writing from another (like fact from fiction), and does these things by exploring the relationship between language and identity. Atwood's text is not distinctively Canadian in its setting or its subject, but its emphasis on unity and difference, language and identity, is particularly relevant to issues of multiculturalism and nationhood.

In comparing the novel and the cinematic version I shall show how and why the film fails to deal with these features of the literary text, its lost messages. I intend to demonstrate that American popular narrative film is structured in a way which will necessarily render Atwood's exploration of gender and writing impossible to re-present. Cinematic adaptations are always re-writings of their original, to be read as cinema and not as literature, but the very fact that Atwood's name is linked to the film as part of its marketing invites us to make comparisons. As Dudley Andrew has pointed out:

Every representational film adapts a prior conception. Indeed, the very term "representation" suggests the existence of a model. Adaptation delimits representation by insisting on the cultural status of the model, on its existence in the mode of the text or the already textualised. In the case of those texts explicitly termed "adaptations", the cultural model which the cinema represents is already treasured as a representation in another sign system.⁴

The difference between cinema and novel is a difference of medium and institution. This must entail differences of meaning, so that a first premise of this article must be to understand the differences arising from the use of a cinematic sign-system rather than a literary one. What is at stake is how much the film adaptation respects features of the "treasured" novel, and how the form of commercial narrative cinema imposes constraints on the adaptation which cause messages to be lost. Schlöndorff's adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* is not simply a translation of the novel into visual terms, it is a transformation in which vision, unity, cultural identity and storytelling change their meanings.

Cinematography means writing-with-movement. We have been taught since Lumière to see film as a window on the real, true-to-life, as if the camera rendered the very essence of reality, instead of "writing" it in the particular cinematic language of a specific culture.⁵ Narrative cinema and the novel customarily repress their dependence on their media of representation, in order to focus attention on the pleasurable and realistic depiction of what the medium is used to represent. But it is possible to productively displace an ideology of mimeticism to allow a deconstructive play with these media which offers more than the pleasure of imitating reality. This awareness that writing is essential for communication, but

at the same time distorts and distances whatever the medium of language attempts to represent, is exactly what Atwood's novel solicits its readers to experience. To this extent, the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* can be seen as a critical, deconstructive work.

On the other hand, the film adaptation reads the novel almost entirely as story, deploying the naturalistic illusionism of mainstream cinema. It aims to make the central character's psychological reality and the sci-fi dystopian setting present for its audience, using the narrative structure of an erotic thriller. Unlike the novel, the film attempts to use aspects of familiar genres and their cinematic conventions to hold itself together as a unified text. While similar structural devices are deployed in the novel, they are the textual effects which the writing plays not for but against.

An analysis of the adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* not only illuminates features of this literary text, and some of the problems of films based on novels. Atwood's novel can be seen to focus on the issues of how we write and read, and how these activities are bound up with identity and gender,

Women's stories could provide models for the story of Canada's national identity. The feminine insistence on a need for revision and a resistance to open confrontation or revolution might be said to characterise Canada's national image at home and abroad, while women's stories about procedures for self-discovery which are as yet (as always?) incomplete may be seen to parallel the contemporary Canadian situation.⁶

Canadian women's writing, and Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* in particular, can be shown to contain messages about Canadian identity as well as feminist explorations of gender identity. Atwood's text is a complex debate around writing and gender difference, which crucially involve the notion of respect; the notion that texts, words and people have their proper place. I shall argue that the film attempts to respect some features of the novel, but necessarily goes astray, loses its messages. This straying is a consequence of the film's omission of a notion of writing, for writing in the novel is the feature that at once constitutes it and also precludes it from being completed, from finding a coherent generic label, or offering its reader a stable position from which to read. But such an omission is not a necessity in film as a medium, though it may be in the social institution of commercial cinema. My title 'Lost Messages' refers to the theme of lost or interrupted communication in Atwood's text, to the omissions in the film adaptation, and to the meanings which are available or lost to the reader/viewer in the written and the cinematic versions.

The Novel: Fractured Identities

The novel begins by marking itself as an autobiographical piece of writing, perhaps a journal. Notions of identity are at stake, since it becomes clear that the journal both supports the narrator's sense of identity, and inasmuch as this succeeds, also challenges her to recognise the reality of her own suffering. The narrating Handmaid records her experiences, but would also like to distance herself from experience by calling the text a story:

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance."⁷

Her suffering consists in the destruction and remodelling of her identity as wife, mother and sexual subject of the state. The novel brings together questions of gender politics and the political organisation of state power, for Gilead turns the biological difference between male and female into the alibi for a tyrannical control which is parallel to colonial imperialism's division of societies along racial and cultural lines.

Canadian arguments for coexistence and national policies that take into account its own multicultural diversity may be translated into the arguments of feminism, for the power politics of imperialism and of gender have much in common.⁸

Atwood's technique of exchanging the oppression based on racial and cultural difference for an oppression based on gender difference highlights contemporary Canadian concerns around both gender and cultural politics. The science-fiction setting allows this structural device to be fully developed in a distanced but recognisable society.

In the future time of the novel there are no choices of a social role for women, because status and biology entirely determine it. Mass infertility has elevated fertile women, the Handmaids, to high status, although they must submit to the ideology which strips their dignity, identity and sexuality, so that they become merely vessels, producing healthy children for the ruling elite. Powerful men, Commanders, are permitted to be reproductively sexual, unlike the men outside the elite who have no access to reproduction. Handmaids bear the Commanders' children, infertile women are Marthas who do household work, Aunts who condition Handmaids for their role, prostitutes for the secret use of the elite men, or slaves condemned to work in the toxic wastelands. This society is justified in the text by the Commander as one where the tyranny of sexuality as the centre of identity, and the consequent overvaluing of physical appearance and the competitive consumerism of fashion have been replaced by social codes determined by the material needs of the society. But what is lost is the illusion of personal choice, and along with it the sense of personal identity. In a savage distortion of feminist rhetoric, the personal is controlled by and subsumed into the political. Atwood exposes

... the hostility towards women's sexual pleasure which lies just beneath the surface of the religious right's "pro-family" rhetoric, and the novel's emotional power derives from our ability to identify with its heroine by imagining what misery such repression would cause us.⁹

The story of Rachel in the Book of Genesis is used by the ruling elite of Gilead to justify the use of Handmaids as reproductive vessels. Human bodies are traversed and given sense by this story, and under the guise of freeing women from the symbolic and physical violence of consumer capitalism, the tyranny of reproduction gives them only this bodily function as their meaning. The Handmaid's journal is then a story which re-tells the story of Rachel from Rachel's Handmaid's point of view, and indeed the novel begins with the quotation of the Biblical story as a kind of epigraph. One story reorients and reinterprets another.

The novel ends with a transcript of an historians' symposium, another form of written record, on the subject of interpreting the journal manuscript. The supplement, titled "Historical Notes" is mainly a transcript of a talk by Professor Pieixoto, an Archivist responsible for the assembly and authentication of *The Handmaid's Tale* text. The names of some of the speakers at the symposium suggest that in this future time outside Gilead, cultural hierarchies have been modified, and that representatives of the ethnic Indian culture of the northern United States and Canada occupy important positions in the academic and political structure of the region. The historians seem to belong to a multicultural society, whereas Gilead purged itself of non-white races, referred to as the Children of Ham. After Gilead, probably in Canada, a society which respects ethnic difference has arisen, though the puns and asides in Pieixoto's address suggest that patriarchal attitudes pervade it.

The historians are preoccupied with the truth-value of the journal-text as historiography, and are not concerned with the form or literary qualities of the text. Historical truth about Gilead is legitimated by supposed journalistic truths in the journal section: by the degree to which the journal corresponds with known facts about the nature and structure of the society it describes. This facticity becomes another form of imposed identity, since it determines the genre-identity of the journal as truth and not fiction. The historical supplement shifts the journal from story to history; re-reads it, and changes the identity and destination of the journal text.

The function of the historians' symposium at the end of the novel is then to raise questions about the status of the foregoing journal, just as the journal raises questions about the foregoing story of Rachel. Is the journal truth or fiction, record or fantasy? The way that these questions are answered is not only by interpreting the journal as it stands, because the

writing contains gaps, contradictions and hesitations, which the historians cannot close up. In particular, the text which the literary historians have named *The Handmaid's Tale* was assembled by them from fragments which were not in any order. The text which is the object of the historians' inquiry is not only ambiguous but was also in some sense written by themselves, named by them, just as the *Tale's* heroine was re-named Offred, the property of Fred, by Gilead. We are told in the final supplementary chapter that the text is a transcription of audiotapes discovered long after the narrator's death in a metal box sealed with postal packing tape, like an enormous undelivered letter.

The material circumstances of the journal's discovery, and fragments of information about its supposed author and characters are used to bolster its claim to authenticity. In other words, the journal cannot stand on its own, it must be supplemented by contextual information which is read back into the text to fix its meaning. The historiographical writing supplements the journal, mixing the genres of Atwood's novel as a whole, while the subject of the historiography is how to pin the journal down in the genre of history by supplementing its text with other information. This enterprise necessarily fails to account for all of its contents. Just as the historians' reading of the Handmaid's narrative loses some of its sense, so too the narrator's telling of her story is at once an effort to stop her losing her sense of identity, and also, in her story's ambiguity, contradictions and hesitations, a demonstration that she cannot pin down the whole truth about herself in her writing.

The activity and the materiality of writing in the novel are explicitly used to debate how reading and writing construct identity: the identity of the narrator, the character, the fictional world of the text, and the text as a material object.

If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.

It isn't a story I'm telling.

It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along.

Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. [...]

A story is like a letter. Dear You, I'll say. Just you, without a name.¹⁰

Fixed points which will guarantee the status of the text are offered and withdrawn: fact or fiction, spoken or written, addressed to oneself or to another. Time and chronology are central to this uncertainty, for the journal alternates between a present tense description of thoughts and events in the story, a historic past tense which organises the narrative, and another past tense for events preceding the time of the story proper. One "I" told herself the

story of her experience as it happened, another “I” recorded it as a fragmented narrative after she left Gilead.

The narrative is like a letter, addressed to someone unknown, which may never arrive. The narrator imagined an other to whom the story was told, a “You” to whom the “letter” of the narrative was to have been sent, and who forms the fixed point outside herself against which she tries to constitute her “I”. She needs to believe in this other, just as she needs to await a corresponding message from her husband Luke: “It’s this message, which may never arrive, that keeps me alive. I believe in the message.”¹¹ But it is the historians of the narrative’s supplement who turn out to be her first addressees. The historians’ symposium in the supplementary section is in a present tense, which belongs to a time long after any of the foregoing times, and takes the past as its subject. The whole of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is of course set in the future, although Atwood has said that nothing in the novel has not already happened.¹² The mixing of times, tenses and genres bears witness to the way that writing is used to construct experience, fiction or truth, while at the same time failing to fix any of these properly, with propriety and without error. Writing breaks free of its author, and is always open to new readings which reconstruct its meanings and its origins differently. If the journal is like a letter, it is a letter which never arrives at the proper addressee.

The Film: Message Understood

The film adaptation has few framing devices around the narrative, few gaps between the means of telling and what is told, and little voice-over narration, except in its final scene when the Handmaid (named Kate in the film) sets up the foregoing film story as a flashback. A caption superimposed over the film’s opening shot reads “Once upon a time in the recent future a country went wrong. The country was called The Republic of Gilead”. Some of the novel’s play with truth and fiction, fact and fantasy, past and present is evident here. “Once upon a time” connotes both story and mythic past, and together with “a country went wrong” suggests an instructive parable in which The Republic can be paralleled with the United States. The “recent future” both alerts the audience to the film’s sci-fi dystopian vision and confirms that it deals with ideas about the present: the setting is between the recent past and the immediate future. As the caption fades, the camera pans to a familiar four-wheel drive car, in which the Handmaid and her family travel in contemporary dress. They are in a cold, mountainous region, suggesting the Canadian border. Elements of “future” are soon apparent in the Handmaid’s capture by a Gilead border patrol, and in the following sequence where

she is processed at a kind of Ellis Island cattle-market which sorts out fertile and infertile women. The film moves swiftly from familiar to unfamiliar, from outside natural settings to threatening inside ones, building tension with a thumping mechanical soundtrack very similar to *The Terminator*. Within the first few minutes, the ambiguity of the written caption gives way to an environment familiar from science fiction cinema.

In the film, messages arrive, and a closure of the text for the viewer is largely achieved. The film tends to resolve ambiguity and provide the viewer with a stable position from which to understand it, whereas the novel exploits difficulties of how to read, to make us question the relationship between language and identity. In the film's penultimate scene Nick, the Commander's driver, rescues the Handmaid, promising to join her later, as rebel bombs begin to devastate the city. The final scene, not in the novel, has the Handmaid sitting writing her journal in a rebel stronghold, in a mountain landscape echoing the airiness of the first scene. Her narrating voice informs us that she receives messages from Nick. Her husband has long since been dropped from the narrative, replaced by Nick as the legitimate destination of her affections, father of the child she is carrying, and she is certain that her daughter will be returned to her, "I know we're going to find her. She will remember me". The film allows the *Tale's* end to link up visually with its beginning, and promises a resolution of the plot where a family will be reunited, consisting of Nick, the heroine, and two children.

The movie tells us that the maternal instinct - not a drive for sexual autonomy or self-protection - is what motivates Kate's daring bid for freedom. Just like Gilead says: do anything for a baby. Thus the ending of *The Handmaid's Tale*, like Gilead, subordinates autonomy to procreation, and places Kate in pretty much the same position in which Gilead wanted her: alone in a small room, waiting for her baby, while its father fights for a new state.¹³

The film offers its audience visual spectacle, narrative suspense, and identification with the heroine. Colour is particularly evident in the robes of the various categories of Gileadean society, especially the red worn by the Handmaids. While colour demonstrates the harsh divisions of the regime, its vibrancy also suggests an opulence which is at odds with the portrayal of Gilead as a brutally imposed impoverished culture, glimpsed in the contrast with the dirty greys of the slave labourers' costumes. The visual spectacle of colour is most effective in the big exterior scenes of the film, which take place in sunshine and seem to celebrate coordinated mass activity, despite portraying savage public executions. The destruction which might be counterposed with these panoramic vistas is literally only glimpsed through the window of a bus in the second sequence of the film.

In becoming popular narrative cinema, the film largely omits the novel's emphasis on the simultaneous construction of text and identity, in favour of suspense and plot. The central section of the film shows the Handmaid's developing relationship with Nick in the terms of an illicit romance, subordinating complex issues of the Commander's and his wife's complicity in it. The problem becomes whether Nick and the Handmaid can escape together after they are shown enjoying sex and caring about each other. In the novel, this plot development is undercut and confused by the narrator's need to relate the sexual episode three times, each time changing the events and her estimate of their significance. In the novel it is unclear whether Nick is the narrator's saviour or an agent of Gilead drawing her into a trap. Swift cutting in the film between one segment of the story and the next sometimes has a destabilising effect (it is difficult for instance to judge the length of time with which the film's story deals), but the visual concentration on the Handmaid herself demonstrates that the emotional development and ultimate fate of a coherent central character is its main emphasis. Against this, the inexpressiveness of Natasha Richardson's Handmaid, enduring her fate with an impassive face, deprives the audience of signs to construct significance, despite the story's focus on her and the camera's frequent close-ups; "torpid and sullen, she is an unlikely future chronicler of her torments. She does not seem to be noting, analysing, committing to memory, and itching to tell her tale."¹⁴

The power of language to free or to oppress is the main theme of the novel, and words are explicitly linked to issues of power: knowing the forbidden first-names of other women, talking without being overheard by authority, getting access to written texts, are the everyday desires of the narrator. The novel therefore displaces realist descriptive modes, its language refuses to represent a coherent dystopic social world which can be visualised. Indeed, vision in the novel is the sensory register colonised most thoroughly by the state. The secret police are known as Eyes, and surveillance extends not only to the control of reading and writing, but also to social life and conversation. The Handmaid can never be seen to act against the state's interests or be seen to talk to the wrong people, for fear of a violent public execution where the state's power is spectacularly - and visually - demonstrated.

As the "eye" symbol used by Gilead's police suggests, to see (to watch, read) in this discourse is to possess power; patriarchal oppression is above all the oppression of the other four senses by the sense of sight.¹⁵

By becoming an adaptation which prioritises the visual as the true, the film misses this point. The visual resources of cinema are used to render the world of the story with verisimilitude, and the film uses the Handmaid's point of view as spectator to guarantee the truth of what we

see. By allowing her only a restricted repertoire of facial and gestural expression, it does not enable her to communicate much of a critical response to what she sees. As well as being an object of surveillance, she is a neutral relay whose point of view is equivalent to that of the camera.

Because of its acceptance of the primacy of vision, the film adaptation can denote a futuristic setting which often becomes a spectacularly savage dystopia in the set-piece sequences. Where the novel allowed the reader to construct and to question the Handmaid's first-person narrative by offering different kinds of storytelling, different points of view, the lack of voice-over or other counterpoint in the film tends to objectify and isolate her, by and for the gaze of the camera. It seems that Schlöndorff wanted to distance the viewer from the setting and the sci-fi genre, and to question the film's narration by unsettling the central character's role, "to enter within the psyche of the character and understand that this is a sort of nightmare she has, with a logic far stronger than the logic of reality".¹⁶ However there are few cinematic signs (like dissolves, music cues, voice-over, parallel narrative) which would indicate this double level of reading. Perhaps Natasha Richardson's inexpressiveness was intended to denote it, but in the context of the film it serves only to emphasise her character's visual presence without providing the means to read it.

The "logic of reality" produced by Hollywood narrative cinema is the overwhelmingly prevalent reading system available to the audience. The film adds on a thriller denouement in which the Commander is killed by the heroine, and a final scene in which she has found refuge in the grandeur of the mountains, probably over the border in Canada, looking into the setting sun and hoping for a happy ending. Philip Strick described these impositions of familiar narrative structures as "lapses in logic", and the shallowly hopeful ending as "one contradiction too many".¹⁷ Pinter wrote the screenplay for the film when it was to have been directed by Karel Reisz, and the pair had previously collaborated on the difficult but successful adaptation of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.¹⁸ Reisz was succeeded by Schlöndorff, and the fact that Pinter has never published his screenplay suggests that the finished film differs significantly from his original adaptation. It may be that extensive changes were made during shooting, and certainly the film's emphasis on character, once deprived of the questions of fantasy which Schlöndorff intended to work on, leaves the Handmaid seeming to be a curious mixture of pathetic passivity and violent or erotic impulses.

By showing only the present of the story, the film cannot either explain or debate issues of sexual difference, identity and power. It combines elements of thriller, science-

fiction, romance and the erotic, and this potential for shifting the spectator's position between genres might promise a critical point of view on the narrative; a kind of framing and re-framing which disturbs our viewing productively. But the lack of signs which indicate reframing make it unclear how we should read the heroine. Four figures are proposed as the objects of her desire: her husband, her daughter, her lover Nick, and also the Commander. Since the film lacks voice-over narration, and the Handmaid has no confidant whom she might tell, we don't know why she moves her affection from her husband Luke to her daughter, and then to Nick, the Commander's chauffeur. Her sudden attraction to Nick seems unmotivated and illogical. The husband disappears from the story, and Nick replaces him, appearing to offer her the hope of reunion with her daughter. Rather than questioning how desire works in this odd society, or how familiar motherly or wifely emotions are dealt with, the film portrays the Handmaid as inexplicably eccentric and fickle.

As we have seen, the novel falls into three parts; the Biblical epigraph, the journal, and the historians' symposium. Each part frames and reorients the other two parts, though all three are together titled *The Handmaid's Tale*. The epigraph quotes the Biblical story of how a handmaid was brought into a reproductive process, the journal tells the story of how one woman became a Handmaid to help Gilead reproduce, and the symposium elaborates the circumstances and significance of reproducing her journal as written text. Each part belongs to a different time, a different literary form, and is attached to different author figures. The separation of the parts, the internal difference of the novel text, solicits the reader to read differently, and to attend to how sexual difference is articulated by each kind of writing. Biological reproduction and the representations available through language are linked, and reflect upon each other.

The film can also be divided into three parts; the capture of the heroine, her life as a Handmaid, and her reflections after her escape. The three parts are nevertheless a single narrative, unified by their central character. The status of women as reproductive, and the ability to represent the identity of women and their bodies, are questions which the novel displaces into questions about the representative and reproductive capacities of writing. The medium of film, the writing produced by image and sound, is deployed instrumentally in the film to communicate the identity of the fictional character and the coherent reality of the future world of the story.

These issues return us to the notion of respect, the way that different identities are kept in their proper place. Gilead claimed to respect women by freeing them from commodification, from being an object held up to the gaze of men. But this freedom

produced and legitimated another kind of oppression, where women were not allowed desire or sexuality, and were made into objects again, this time as vessels for the reproduction of a male-dominated culture, and the objects of a controlling gaze. While Gilead claimed to respect gender difference, to respect women, it actually fixed them into restricted roles.

The historians of the Historical Notes section of the novel respect the status of the Handmaid's tale. They try to be objective about it, to relate it to facts and not emotions or literary qualities. In respecting the *Tale* as a historical document, they repress many of its features, and read it differently from the way that we, the readers of Atwood's novel, have read it. Our identification with the Handmaid, and the complexity of the multi-levelled narrative she produces, are secondary and incidental features to the historians. At both the thematic and the discursive levels, Atwood's text deconstructs the notion of respect, of putting texts and people into a proper place, and shows that respect may also be a form of repression and oppression.

Schlöndorff's film of the novel disrespects the text by using only parts of it, like the plot, the characters and the setting. The theme of respect for women as an alibi for oppression partially survives, but the end of the film puts the heroine into a position parallel to that which she suffered in Gilead. The structural critique of the respect for genres of writing and ways of reading, which Historical Notes introduces, is omitted, and the film becomes linear, resolved, and readable through references to familiar film genres.

The apparent familiarity, or readability of the film arises then from an exaggerated respect for the perceived difference between a novel and a commercial film. The linear narrative, cinematic verisimilitude, and happy ending of the film make it easy for us to fix it in the mode of popular cinema. The missing features in Atwood's novel have been perceived as the most "literary" ones, to do with the complex ways of reading required by the novel's formal structure, and its exploration of different kinds of writing. The filmmakers have respected a false difference between literature's awareness of the medium of writing, and cinema as a mirror of visible reality, or window on the real. Cinema is in fact able to render these "literary" features in terms appropriate to the medium. Pinter coped with similar problems in his adaptation of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by adding a parallel modern story to the nineteenth-century plot of the novel, showing a group of filmmakers constructing a self-conscious image of Victorian England. A rewriting of a novel in the medium of cinema, a kind of creative disrespect, can successfully produce an adaptation which respects the textuality of the novel as well as just its story.

Modern Canada is a nation where, unlike Gilead, respect for difference is enshrined in law; where gender, racial and cultural difference is acknowledged. Canada does not just tolerate difference, it states that difference is at the heart of the nation because the nation is defined by the different groups which compose it. That is the meaning of multiculturalism.

Any politics of domination and submission is based on the principle of an absolute difference existing between two protagonists which vindicates the claim to superiority of one over the other. By now we have had the chance to learn that difference need not be a static irreducible separation between two categories (like biological difference) but something rather less stable where, by a process of displacement, boundaries between categories like identity and gender may be blurred. Such awareness of instability undermines traditional structures of political authority, making it possible to envisage “new solutions” where opposition is discredited in favour of a more pluralistic approach to questions of social and cultural order.¹⁹

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is also difference at the heart of identity, in the multiple “I”s of the journal, as well as between the different discourses which compose the novel without any one of them resolving it. There is no legitimate master-discourse in *The Handmaid's Tale*. These are the features which are distinctively Canadian about Atwood's novel, and these are the messages which are lost in the film adaptation.

It is not possible however, to translate the plural discourse of the novel into the discourse of national politics. Although multiculturalism is an important step towards pluralism and social justice, every state must produce a discourse (particularly in its laws) which sets out and prescribes how difference is to be accommodated. This discourse must be a meta-language, or master-discourse, which is outside and above the differences which it describes and organises. Canadian cultural policy respects difference, and states that the messages originating in the different cultures, languages and races of the nation all arrive at the destination of “Canada”. “Canada” is made up of these different identities, so that the origin and the destination are identical. “Canada” is the master-term which stands in the place of difference, thus establishing a unified national identity. This circular containment of difference affects every nation which tries to legitimately name itself, but the problem of respect is particularly difficult in Canada because of its colonial past, and the legacy of multiple cultures, languages and races which still exists in the present.

Endnotes

¹ M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto 1985. References in the text are to the first UK edition, Jonathan Cape 1986. *The Handmaid's Tale*, directed by Volker Schlöndorff, produced by Cinecom, Bioskop and Cinetudes, USA & Germany 1990.

² F. Davey, *Reading Canadian Reading*, Turnstone, Winnipeg 1988, p.63.

-
- ³ The text of the Multiculturalism Act is available in English in an Appendix to L. Hutcheon & M. Richmond (eds), *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*, Oxford University Press 1990.
- ⁴ D. Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory*, Oxford University Press 1984, p.97.
- ⁵ The relationship between cinema and a deconstructive notion of writing is discussed with theoretical rigour in P. Brunette & D. Wills, *Screen/Play: Derrida And Film Theory*, Princeton, New Jersey 1989.
- ⁶ C. A. Howells, *Private and Fictional Worlds: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s*, Methuen 1987, p.3.
- ⁷ *The Handmaid's Tale*, *op.cit.* p.49.
- ⁸ C. A. Howells, *op.cit.* pp.3-4.
- ⁹ C. Baughman, review of *The Handmaid's Tale* film; *Pinter Review: Annual Essays* 1990, p.92.
- ¹⁰ *The Handmaid's Tale*, *op.cit.* pp.49-50.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.* p.116.
- ¹² Margaret Atwood, quoted in C. Davidson, 'A Feminist 1984', *Ms*, 17 February 1982, p.24.
- ¹³ C. Baughman, *op.cit.* p.96.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.94.
- ¹⁵ F. Davey, *op.cit.* p.72.
- ¹⁶ V. Schlondorff, quoted in P. Strick, review of *The Handmaid's Tale* film, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol.57 no.682, November 1990, p.322.
- ¹⁷ P. Strick, *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Pinter's adaptation of Fowles' novel is discussed in N. Sinyard, *Filming Literature: The Art of Screen Adaptation*, Croom Helm, Beckenham 1986.
- ¹⁹ C. A. Howells, *op.cit.* p.4.