

**FROM PAGE TO SCREEN: MALE GAZE, FEMALE
OPPRESSION, AND DOCILE BODIES IN *THE
HANDMAID'S TALE*¹**

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Abstract

This paper examines Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and its television series adaptation through the lens of Laura Mulvey's theory of the *male gaze*, complemented by Michel Foucault's concept of the *docile body*. It explores how the visual and narrative strategies of the television series reframe the protagonist's subjectivity, alternately resisting and reinforcing patriarchal dynamics. The analysis compares the novel's narrative interiority with the adaptation's visual language, highlighting tensions between feminist resistance and aestheticized surveillance. By integrating Foucault's surveillance and discipline theory into the Mulveyan framework, the study offers a nuanced account of how adaptation can reframe feminist narratives for contemporary audiences, by either perpetuating or subverting gendered oppression. The findings suggest that while the television series reconfigures Offred's character into a more active agent of resistance, it simultaneously risks reinforcing objectification through its visual focus. Ultimately, the paper argues that adaptation is not a neutral process but

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one that reconfigures both the political and aesthetic meanings of the source material.

Keywords: disciplinary mechanisms; gender politics; Laura Mulvey; male gaze; Michel Foucault.

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, published for the first time in 1985, is a seminal work of dystopian fiction that explores themes of power, gender, and resilience. It has been adapted into many types of art, including a film directed by Volker Schlöndorff (1990), an opera (1998), a ballet (2013), the critically acclaimed Hulu television series (2017–), a sequel novel, *The Testaments* (2019), and a graphic novel (2019). While all of the versions are set in the fictional theocratic regime of Gilead – with the story following the life of Offred, a Handmaid subjected to reproductive servitude – each interprets Atwood's themes differently, reflecting the medium's affordances and the era's cultural values.

The Handmaid's Tale, both the novel by Margaret Atwood and its film/TV adaptations, depicts a dystopian society where women are systematically oppressed and reduced to reproductive roles. Using Laura Mulvey's theory on the *male gaze* and Michel Foucault's concept of the *docile body*, this paper focuses on how the visual and narrative structures reflect or resist the male gaze. It aims to analyze how the male gaze operates in both the novel and the TV series adaptation and how these interpretations affect audience reception. Adaptations are not just translations of a text into another medium; they reshape the "imaginary" of the original work, often engaging with contemporary sociopolitical issues. When it comes to gender politics, adaptations can highlight, criticize, or even redefine the gender dynamics of the original text.

Although the series introduces both character modifications and stylistic adjustments to Atwood's original narrative, these changes do not constitute fundamental alterations to its thematic core. A particularly notable divergence

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lies in the representation of Offred. In the novel, her anonymity is carefully preserved, positioning her as an everywoman figure whose narrative reliability is ultimately undermined by the *Historical Notes* section at the end of the novel. By contrast, the series dispels this anonymity, assigning her a personal name (June) and portraying her as a strong and determined woman. Furthermore, whereas the novel leaves the authenticity of Offred's account open to question, the adaptation constructs her testimony as factual, effectively assuring viewers of its veracity. This transformation personalizes the protagonist, shifting her from an ambiguous, potentially unreliable narrator to a concrete, fully realized subject whose perspective anchors the visual narrative. However, Gerrits (2022) points out that because the series started adding plotlines and characters to the original text, its "rendition of Offred does not stand out for adding psychological complexity to her character in comparison to the novel" (p. 220). As a result, although the series retains the original theme, it can be regarded as a continuation and modernization of the novel, rather than an update of it.

The Handmaid's Tale is set in the near future, in the totalitarian society of Gilead, which has replaced the United States. In response to a sharp decline in birth rates, the regime enforces strict roles for women, stripping them of rights and reducing many to reproductive vessels. Gilead represents an oppressive regime, based on Christian values taken to the extreme, patriarchy, and a degradation of human rights.

The story is told from the perspective of Offred, a "Handmaid" assigned to a high-ranking official known as the Commander. Her only purpose is to bear a child for him and his infertile wife, Serena Joy. Offred frequently reflects on her past life – her husband Luke, their daughter, and her lost freedom – while attempting to deal with the dangers and hypocrisies of Gilead. In this theocratic regime, women are forced into positions of subservience as Gilead's officials preach the importance of returning to the "sanctity of the home" (Atwood, 2024, p. 51).

Women are systematically divided into rigid social categories based on the specific type of service they are able to

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offer: Wives, Aunts, Handmaids, Marthas, and Unwomen. While each category performs a different function within Gileadean society, all women are subjected to restrictions in terms of their autonomy and rights outside their assigned roles. Wives offer social status, Aunts are used to control and indoctrinate, Handmaids produce children, and Unwomen supply unpaid labor in toxic environments; thus, each category fulfills a role that the others cannot. While men largely bear responsibility for institutionalizing the laws that subjugate women, female complicity plays a crucial role in sustaining this system through active participation in their own oppression by indoctrinating members of their own gender into subservient positions. Yet, this structure exists primarily to secure the prosperity of men. Gilead's political and legal systems are controlled exclusively by men, creating a framework that ensures total obedience through sexual, emotional, and physical exploitation of women, which, as Keck (2022) points out, "has lost none of its poignancy" (p. 13).

This hierarchical division reflects Atwood's intention to criticize modern American society, where the inequalities among women are sometimes exploited. By assigning specific labels to each category, the Gileadean government succeeds in separating women, creating dissent and distrust between the various groups, thereby facilitating a more effective mechanism of control. When it comes to the series, it can be observed that it presents the hierarchical structure in which men occupy the highest position of power and women are divided into distinct categories in an even more explicit manner than Atwood's original narrative. The series intensifies this gendered stratification while infusing the story with feminist symbolism that is recontextualized for a contemporary audience. As in the novel, the series also underscores the limitations of feminism in effectively stopping Gilead's rise, suggesting that ideological opposition alone may not be sufficient in the face of entrenched authoritarianism.

When examining the socio-political architecture of Gilead, the central question is related to who most benefits from the regime's power structures. While men appear to be the most immediate and unequivocal beneficiaries, such a conclusion risks oversimplifying the dynamics at play. In oppressive societies, even

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marginal authority confers a degree of privilege, allowing members of non-dominant groups to benefit, however unequally, from the exploitation of others, or as Offred puts it: “When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting” (Atwood, 2024, p. 316). Within Gilead, Wives, Aunts, and Commanders each derive material or symbolic advantage from the subjugation of Handmaids.

Within this oppressive framework, Offred experiences both resistance and complicity in various forms. Her clandestine encounters with the Commander, the possibility of rebellion through a resistance network called Mayday, and an ambiguous alliance with Serena Joy, all illustrate the strategies women employ to survive the constraints. The novel concludes with Offred being taken away, either by government agents or rescuers, thus leaving her fate uncertain.

2. The “male gaze”: Visual pleasure, narrative control, and objectification

Laura Mulvey’s theory of the “male gaze” offers a powerful theoretical framework for examining *The Handmaid’s Tale* (both the novel and the television series), where themes related to surveillance, control, and resilience intersect with the visual medium. It was first introduced in her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in which Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema objectifies women by presenting them as passive subjects for male pleasure.

Mulvey’s theory reshaped feminist film studies by articulating how cinematic structures reinforce patriarchal ideologies. According to Mulvey, mainstream cinema is structured around a male perspective, positioning women as objects of visual pleasure for the male spectator. She identifies three types of “looks”: the look of the camera (the gaze of the director), the look of the spectator, and that of the characters: “There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 17). These perspectives

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collectively contribute to the objectification of women, transforming them into passive subjects within the narrative.

Since women are framed as objects to be looked at, they become inactive participants in the narrative; they exist primarily for male pleasure. Women in this framework become the “bearers of meaning, not makers of meaning” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 7). Furthermore, as “[t]he man controls the film phantasy” he also “emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralise the extradiegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 12). This means that classical Hollywood films position viewers to identify with a male protagonist through the camera’s perspective. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Mulvey identifies recurring cinematic patterns that reveal the power dynamics embedded in the (male) gaze and the relationship with its (female) object. One of her arguments is that women in classical cinema are not represented as autonomous entities, but rather as reflective surfaces for male characters. They serve as mirrors of the male desires, fantasies, and motivations. Within this framework, women function simultaneously as erotic objects that provide visual pleasure to the male spectator and as images of likeness for male identification. Mulvey terms this dynamic *scopophilia*, or the pleasure in looking, which she argues is structured according to gendered patterns: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strongly visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). She bases her argument on the deconstruction of the notion of *pleasure* in cinema: “The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is *scopophilia*. There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 8). She traces back the term to Freud who identified *scopophilia* as one of the base components of sexuality and associated it with “taking other

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people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 8). In cinema, scopophilia is associated with “pleasurable looking” but with a further development into a “narcissistic aspect.” Mulvey (1975) further explains that this is possible because “the conventions of mainstream cinema focus on the human form” which leads to feeling “pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (pp. 9, 10). As a result, this produces an imbalance of power between the looker and the person who is being looked at. Therefore, the body of a woman becomes a commodified image that can be used with the scope of pleasing the man.

Another term used to describe the gaze is *voyeurism*, which, in Mulvey’s interpretation, is linked to narrative structures that allow the (male) viewer to watch women from a distance, disempowering them. The female character is framed in a way that allows the audience (through the camera) to observe her as a spectacle, while her inner life or subjectivity is often ignored. This leads to *objectification*, which involves reducing a person (typically a woman) to a body or her body parts, stripping away her individuality. In film, objectification happens when the camera lingers on the female body, especially through techniques like close-ups, slow motion, and fragmented framing.

Although Atwood’s novel subverts objectification through Offred’s interiority, the Hulu series adaptation must translate this subjectivity into visual language, thereby confronting the tension between resisting and reproducing the male gaze. Atwood’s novel is primarily told from Offred’s point of view, thus offering access to her internal world, thoughts, memories, and resistance. Her internal monologue serves as a counterpoint to her objectification and the external gaze imposed on her by the patriarchal society of Gilead. In contrast, visual adaptations must externalize internal experiences through *mise-en-scène*, dialogue, and cinematography. The television series leverages visual storytelling effectively. Through close-up shots, subjective framing, and voiceovers, it attempts to maintain the novel’s interiority and not to objectify the protagonist. As Hurley-Powell (2020) points out, Offred uses her own voice in the novel, while the television series incorporates voiceovers “in

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order to demonstrate that Offred is not complicit” (p. 100) and that she is “free to vocalize her frustration with the position she is in” (p. 100). Yet, the series must navigate the thin line between exposing violence and exploiting it. Viewers are often invited to reflect on their own gaze and complicity, particularly in scenes that echo real-world images of protest and oppression.

While in Atwood’s novel Offred declares from the very beginning that she is here “to last”, signaling a strategy of endurance rather than open rebellion, the television series reimagines her as an active fighter against Gilead’s regime. The novel positions Offred as a victim of what Keck (2022) calls Gilead’s “religiously-sanctioned rape and its ritual performance,” (p. 19) a condition she agrees to, partially as a result of her own decision to become a Handmaid. This choice, Keck argues, ultimately entangles her “in an intricate web of complicity in her own and other women’s oppression” (p. 19).

The television adaptation reframes Offred’s trajectory, shifting the narrative from passive endurance to defiant agency. The series, particularly the episodes directed by Reed Morano (who was the first woman in history to win both the Emmy and Directors Guild Award for directing a drama series), adopts a distinct visual style that subverts traditional representations of women in film. Morano’s direction emphasizes close-ups and shallow focus, centering on Offred’s facial expressions to convey her emotional depth and inner turmoil. This focus on the protagonist’s subjectivity invites the audience to experience the narrative from her perspective, challenging the objectifying tendencies of the male gaze. Where the novel situates Offred within the structures of complicity, the series recasts her gaze as an anti-tool to counteract the male gaze, an instrument of resistance to reclaim agency. The frequent use of subjective close-ups and tight frames centers Offred’s perspective. The camera lingers not on her body but on her facial expressions, capturing her resilience, pain, and defiance.

Since the male perspective is encapsulated in the construction, execution, and distribution of the male gaze, it has traditionally been regarded as the default and dominant lens through which media is created. As Mulvey observes, this gaze is

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not confined to the cinematic narrative itself, but it is transmitted to the spectator, shaping how the plot line is perceived and consumed. In the television series, however, this convention is deliberately subverted through an unconventional, female-centric visual and narrative style established in the first three episodes by director and executive producer Reed Morano. This visual language is maintained consistently throughout the series, and rather than adopting a voyeuristic point of view, it shapes the viewer's experience by focusing on the emotions of the protagonist. This approach reframes the act of looking, inviting empathy rather than objectification, and thereby resists the traditional mechanisms of the male gaze.

Because in her novel, Atwood grants Offred's character only a few fragments of a backstory, Offred becomes just one of many Handmaids in Gilead and attains significance solely through her recorded account of life under a totalitarian regime, an account later subjected to scholarly scrutiny in Professor Pieixoto's study referred to in the *Historical Notes*. The inclusion of this metafictional epilogue underlines that even in Gilead's fictional future, the identities of women it captured remain unrecovered. Offred's real name and pre-Gilead life are thus deliberately excluded, leaving her as a faceless narrator whose anonymity reflects the erasure of personal identity under the regime.

The series, however, transforms Offred into June Osborne, wife of Luke Bankole and mother to Hannah. This shift replaces the novel's unnamed, first-person narrator with a protagonist whose identity and relationships are explicitly defined. Canton (2007) suggests that the visual medium enables the audience to act as "voyeurs," silently observing June's experiences both within and beyond Gilead's borders; she also points out that "the most significant alteration that occurs when the story moves from the page to the stage [is] that readers become viewers and therefore become implicated in the story, rather than passive critics of it" (p. 127). While this reframing departs from Atwood's strict anonymity, the series preserves elements of it through visual strategies; the Handmaids' white "wings" conceal much of their faces, and in wide shots – such as the particution scene from the first episode – they appear as

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indistinguishable figures, identifiable as Handmaids only by their red dresses. The series echoes the novel's first-person narrative through frequent close-ups framed between June's white wings, a cinematographic choice that both mimics the narrator's restricted perspective and signals an awareness of Atwood's deliberate narrative constraints. In this sense, the series corresponds to Mulvey's (1975) theory which states that

“[t]he beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's spectators look” (p. 14).

However, the decision to name and individualize Offred in the series fundamentally shifts the operation of the male gaze. The novel refuses to provide the reader with a fixed image of the protagonist; therefore, the main character somehow resists objectification. Thus, the reader is forced to engage with Offred as a voice rather than an identifiable person. In the series, by contrast, June's face, her name, and personal history invite both empathy and visual consumption. As a result, this creates a dual dynamic: while the camera occasionally subverts the male gaze by granting June subjective control over her own image, it also risks reinforcing it by making her a visible, knowable body that can be looked at and recognized. The anonymity that once served as a shield against objectification is replaced by an identity that both empowers and renders her vulnerable to the very gaze that she sought to resist.

While Mulvey's framework elucidates the dynamics of visual pleasure and explains the mechanisms underlying the objectification of women, it leaves less room to account for the institutional processes that constrain the woman's body itself. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis should also engage with Foucault's concept of the *docile body*. Mulvey's insights, which foreground the gendered dynamics of the gaze, also invite a parallel inquiry into how discipline renders bodies governable, a question developed through Foucault's theory. This conceptual

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framework broadens the scope of this analysis by shifting attention from solely the representational sphere to the material process through which bodies are regulated within oppressive systems of power. From this perspective, oppression operates not solely through the semiotic and visual structures identified by Mulvey, but also through a network of disciplinary mechanisms, which include surveillance, control, and internalization of norms. Thus, this analysis can address both the symbolic economy of representation and the micropolitics of bodily regulation in oppressive regimes by situating Mulvey's visual framework alongside Foucault's disciplinary schema. The following section will explore in greater detail Foucault's notion of the *docile body* with the aim of revealing how the apparatus of discipline coerces individuals.

3. Surveillance, disciplinary power and the “docile body”

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* introduces the notion of the *docile body*, a body that “may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (1975, p. 136). In his analysis of the evolution of the modern penal system, Foucault demonstrates how mechanisms of discipline restructure social relations by regulating physical bodies through punishment. Gilead's dystopian regime disciplines women's bodies to enforce control and authority; it is a way of demonstrating patriarchal power. The bodies of fertile women in particular are used as reproductive machines. The *Historical Notes* in Atwood's novel make clear that they also become symbols of a higher social status since only those within the highest echelons of Gileadean society are entitled to “own” a Handmaid. In this way, the regime enacts both biopolitical and symbolic control, embedding patriarchal dominance into the very corporeality of women's existence:

It was clear from the internal evidence that she was among the first wave of women recruited for reproductive purposes and allotted to those who both required such services and could lay claim to them through their position in the elite [...] Men highly placed in the regime

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were thus able to pick and choose among women who had demonstrated their reproductive fitness by having produced one or more healthy children, a desirable characteristic in an age of plummeting Caucasian birthrates, a phenomenon observable not only in Gilead but in most northern Caucasian societies at the time. (Atwood, 2024, p. 312)

While the “docile body” described in Foucault’s work is sexless, neither specifically oppressed nor empowered by gender, in Atwood’s novel, as well as in the series, the gender of the body becomes a fundamental determinant in structuring the hierarchy within the system of dominance and control. The narrative lens, in both the novel and the series adaptation, is deliberately curved to fit the perspective of the woman telling the story. This alignment complicates the Foucauldian model by inserting the mechanisms of discipline within a gendered framework. The mechanization of fertile women’s bodies is portrayed in the novel and the series through a variety of rules, laws, and structures of control, all of which emphasize what Foucault calls an “uninterrupted, constant coercion” where “[t]ime, space, and movement were partitioned as finely as possible in order to generate maximum productivity” (Foucault, 1975, p. 137) and control.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this process is represented by the transfer of the Handmaids from the house of one Commander to another, according to their necessities, which also means that the women’s movements are organized through both time and space to ensure their maximum usage. Offred feels trapped in this never-ending cycle and, in the novel, she seems to have come to terms with her situation as she confesses at some point: “Time’s a trap, I’m caught in it. I must forget about my secret name and all ways back. My name is Offred now, and here is where I live” (Atwood, 2024, p. 149).

In Gilead, women are valued according to their perceived utility. While Wives provide social capital, Aunts enforce obedience through their willingness to voluntarily subscribe to Gilead’s sexist beliefs. They are trained to force Handmaids into subjection at all costs and through all methods, including

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instilling fear through severe punishment and committing acts of violence against the other women. Despite the fact that the Wives occupy central positions, they are far from being free; they are also expected to be submissive and devoted to their husbands, and, because Gilead expects wives to be perfect, they often must refrain from publicly expressing their emotions, their bodies thus becoming regulated as well.

This instance is further clarified by Angela King (2013), whose interpretation of the docile female body is related to the idea that the body represents “a particular target of disciplinary power” and femininity in particular “is a discipline that produces bodies and identities and operates as an effective form of social control” (p. 30). As Sağıroğlu (2022) points out, “the female bodies are used as incubators for population growth, and the authorities can easily control and oppress these mechanized bodies through the power of the gaze” (p. 1235). Once her own property, Offred’s body becomes, according to Gileadean law, no longer her body, but a docile, automated biological structure that can be abused and controlled by her government, which is reflected even in the erasure of her own name: “My name isn’t Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it’s forbidden. I tell myself it doesn’t matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I’ll come back to dig up, one day” (Atwood, 2024, p. 90).

Finally, if the docile body represents the outcome of discipline, surveillance is one of its most effective instruments. In Gilead, the constant possibility of being watched transforms visual pleasure into a mode of control, thus fusing Mulvey’s cinematic gaze with Foucault’s panoptic schema.

Surveillance, a central element in Foucault’s disciplinary model, becomes even more pronounced when applied to the gendered context of Gilead, where constant observation intersects with the sexualized dynamics described by Mulvey.

Foucault emphasizes surveillance as the primary mechanism of disciplining the body; he explains that constant visibility – or, more precisely, the possibility of being subjected to

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an omnipresent gaze all the time – operates as a powerful means of social control. Under such conditions, individuals internalize the disciplinary gaze, modifying their behavior to match the established norms in order to avoid coercion. Surveillance, thus, functions not only as an external constraint but also as a process of self-regulation. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, both the novel and the series, Gilead's system of gendered oppression intensifies this Foucauldian model by subjecting the Handmaids to constant monitoring – by Aunts, by the Eyes (the secret police that supervises the streets, the stores, and almost every aspect of daily life), and by one another – ensuring conformity through a well-established network of watchers. The surveillance of the Handmaids is further augmented by the fact that they are forced to wear red at all times. This not only ensures uniformity but also makes them stand out from the crowd, thus allowing for easier identification and supervision. However, at times, the readers/audience perceive a subversion of the male controlling gaze, as Offred tries to reclaim agency. One such moment occurs when Offred uses her body to gain power over men, rather than being the one controlled and disciplined. Thus, Atwood's novel disrupts the male-gaze pattern by inserting the gaze within a system of stare-sanctioned surveillance and control, devised and enforced by male lawmakers:

The one with the moustache opens a small pedestrian gate for us and stands back, well out of the way, and we pass through. As we walk away I know they're watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it, because none of this is the fault of these men, they're too young.

Then I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously. They will suffer, later, at night, in their regimented beds. They have no

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outlets now except themselves, and that's a sacrilege. There are no more magazines, no more films, no more substitutes; only me and my shadow, walking away from the two men, who stand at attention, stiffly, by a roadblock, watching our retreating shapes. (Atwood, 2024, p. 28)

The mechanisms of surveillance and control include mandatory uniforms for different categories of people and the eradication of all forms of media, therefore eliminating conventional outlets for eroticized visual pleasure. Nevertheless, Mulvey's (1975) observation that "woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacles: from pin-ups to strip-tease [...] she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire," (p. 11) remains relevant in Gilead, as the previous fragment proves. Despite its overtly pious ethos, the regime cannot fully suppress the sexualized gaze. Offred herself weaponizes this residual erotic charge since she is aware of the guards who might experience pleasure just by observing her movements, yet must repress their gaze under threat of punishment. This forced containment transforms the act of looking both into a site of pleasure and suffering, subtly inverting the power dynamic by granting Offred a measure of control over those who watch her.

The tension created by the gendered hierarchy of power and the control of women's bodies is especially evident in the series in the episode that depicts the monthly "Ceremony." The scene is visually constructed starting from the same episode depicted in the novel, but it takes the idea further in order to reinforce the dynamics of the male gaze. June is placed in a position of double subordination: physically beneath the Commander while her hands are restrained by Serena Joy in a performative display of ownership and control. In the novel, the hand-holding is described as a symbolic gesture meant to convey unity between Wife and Handmaid, a notion that holds partial validity if one considers that both women are victims of Gilead's patriarchal oppression. The series, however, reframes this moment to highlight Serena Joy's dominance over June, thus shifting the focus from potential solidarity to hierarchical divisions among women. Here, Mulvey's theory is particularly

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instructive: the camera does not merely replicate the Commander's controlling gaze but also stages Serena Joy as a secondary enforcer of that gaze, revealing how the male gaze can be internalized and reproduced within female structures of power and surveillance. The viewers are positioned as witnesses to this layered act of subjugation while the whole scene becomes the essence of what life in Gilead means for a woman: an intertwining of patriarchy, complicity, and surveillance.

Foucault's idea of the "docile body" finds articulation in the Ceremony scene, where the action itself operates as a ritualized act of discipline. Here, the Handmaid's body is systematically subjected and used while being transformed into a reproductive instrument. The episode unfolds through a strict choreography: June is positioned beneath the Commander, her movements restrained by Serena Joy's grasp, enacting a tableau that mirrors the regimented corporeal control described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. Power here does not reside primarily in the exertion of physical force, but in the normalization of the act of submission itself, whereby ritual repetition renders the act both ordinary and incontestable. In this sense, Mulvey's visual regime of the male gaze and the Foucauldian surveillance converge because the Handmaid's body becomes both an object of patriarchal sexual authority and the site upon which institutional power is inscribed.

4. Conclusion

The interplay between Mulvey's theory of the *male gaze* and Foucault's concept of the *docile body* reveals *The Handmaid's Tale* (both the novel and the television series) as a complex negotiation between visual pleasure and embodied discipline. While Mulvey's framework exposes the underlying mechanisms of patriarchal power that allow the objectification of women, Foucault's own concept highlights the disciplinary mechanisms that render those same bodies governable. Taken together, these perspectives reveal that Gilead's oppressive regime is sustained not only by the visible structures of domination based on gender separation but also by the individuals' internalization of

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submission and the normalization of a system based on discipline and punishment.

When applied to the television adaptation of Atwood's novel, Mulvey's theory explains that while the narrative depicts female power as constrained by patriarchal structures, it also uses narrative and cinematic strategies to subvert and criticize the male gaze. The series illustrates how media forms shape narratives and the impact they have on the audiences. Given that the television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* has garnered more than fifty awards, including two Golden Globes, its artistic and cultural value has been widely acknowledged by both audiences and critics. Such critical acclaim suggests not only that the series still has relevance in contemporary culture but also the enduring relevance of Atwood's source material. The continued success of the adaptation implies that the novel's thematic concerns have transcended their original historical moment, retaining their potency as a socio-political commentary decades after its initial publication.

The male gaze persists in shaping how audiences perceive female characters, particularly in dystopian contexts. However, it can also be challenged and subverted through deliberate artistic choices. While the novel offers a deep, emotional account, the visual adaptation opposes the dynamics of the male gaze, depicting the gendered structure of power that allows for both critical engagement of the topic and commercial entertainment.

Ultimately, by examining *The Handmaid's Tale* through a synthesis of Mulvey and Foucault, we can reframe the narrative not simply as a feminist allegory of resistance, but as an exploration of how oppression operates. While the novel provides a rich narrative that challenges patriarchal structures through Offred's voice, the film adaptations engage with visual techniques that either reinforce or subvert these dynamics, demonstrating how contemporary feminist filmmakers can employ cinematic language to reclaim agency and offer new perspectives on female subjectivity.

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

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