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The Dystopian Transformation of Urban Space in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

The present contribution examines the representation of the city in Margaret Atwood's 1985 dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, with the aim of uncovering how the urban space is transformed and repurposed in order to uphold the ideological pillars of the theocratic regime described in the book. The urban space depicted in the book, which the reader sees through the eyes of the protagonist and narrator Offred, is built upon the contrasting image of "everything looks the same" versus "everything is fundamentally different." Inspired by the Puritan colonies of 17th-century New England, the Republic of Gilead, in a manner similar to many real-life totalitarian regimes throughout history, remodels the urban space in such a way as to correspond to its worldview and help maintain its hold on power. The first part of the article examines how this is done in the novel itself (also making brief references to the representation of the city in the 2019 sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, entitled *The Testaments*) while the second part discusses how the city is portrayed in the 2017 TV series adaptation of the novel in order to highlight similarities and differences between the literary and televised versions.

Keywords: Cambridge, Gilead, *The Handmaid's Tale* (novel), *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017 TV series), urban transformation, urban landscape, *The Testaments*

Introduction

The Canadian novelist and poet Margaret Atwood is undoubtedly one of the world's most celebrated and well-known contemporary authors. In a literary career spanning almost six decades, she has published 18 books of

poems, 18 novels, and numerous collections of short stories, non-fiction works, children's books, and even two graphic novels. She is also a two-time recipient of the Booker Prize, as well as numerous other literary accolades in the course of her prolific writing career. Interest in her works has surged in recent years due, in no small part, to the success of the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale*, whose first season is largely based on Atwood's famous 1985 novel, as well as to the popularity of the mini-series adaptation of Atwood's 1996 novel, *Alias Grace*. In the fall of 2019, Atwood published the long-awaited sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, entitled *The Testaments*, a book that has consistently topped the fiction bestseller list ever since its publication a few months ago.

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel depicting an oppressive theocracy that takes over most of the United States during what could be the late 20th or the early 21st century while the plot of the novel itself unfolds in New England, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the area around Boston. Certainly, it is no accident that Atwood chose to set her novel in what used to be the heart of 17th-century Puritan New England, a society that valued many of the same rigid Old Testament principles the reader finds in the 1985 novel (Palumbo 29). *The Handmaid's Tale* is, incidentally, Atwood's first foray into an extended representation of the United States, as its story of gender oppression and dictatorship is situated in a thoroughly North American setting (Tomc 83). The book is dedicated to Perry Miller, who was one of Atwood's professors at Harvard and undoubtedly opened her eyes to some of the more rigid and grotesque facets of the New England religious imagination in the age of its "founding fathers" (Evans 181),ⁱ as well as to one of her ancestors, Mary Webster, who was hanged as a witch in 17th-century Connecticut, but who miraculously managed to stay alive until the following day, when she was cut down and thus walked free.ⁱⁱ The story of Mary Webster is mentioned in one of Cotton Mather's works that Atwood would have certainly encountered during her studies at Harvard in the 1960s (Evans 178). Interestingly enough, in Mather's book entitled *Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions*, he refers to the women of New England at the time as "Those *Handmaids of the Lord*" (Evans 182, original italics) – a term that may have struck a chord with the young

Canadian author at the time. The Handmaids in the novel are forced to undergo a kind of re-education that might very well mirror the way in which their Puritan female ancestors were brought up, if one is to read carefully Cotton Mather's work. The ideology espoused in the novel by the Sons of Jacob, who orchestrate the takeover of the United States and its transformation, bears some similarities with the Christian fundamentalism and rigidity displayed by several prominent Puritan figures, most notably John Winthrop (Zivic 4).

These observations, in a sense, beg the question to what extent the pillars of 17th-century Puritan New England society resemble the societal organising principles Atwood describes in her novel. Certainly, the novel is a dystopian fiction, not unlike other seminal examples, such as Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), whose caste society echoes the clearly defined social hierarchy in *The Handmaid's Tale*, or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), but as the author herself stated on many occasions, she did not write about anything that did not happen, in one form or another, at some point in history (Atwood, *Handmaid* 17; *Cartographies* 77).ⁱⁱⁱ Reading the novel today is a rather terrifying experience and, in the words of the reputed literary critic and academic Harold Bloom, "it is not at all a period piece under our current circumstances" (Bloom, *Guide* 8) – if one thinks only about the massive influence of the Christian Coalition on the American Republican Party, to give but one example.^{iv} Bloom calls the novel a fine example of "Gothic dystopia," drawing inspiration from the darkest aspects of the history of American Puritanism,^v not unlike Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and serving as a stark warning that its principles are best kept mostly in the past, although Puritan intransigence is still celebrated today as a quintessential part of the American spirit (Bloom, *Guide* 9; Tomc 88).

In the words of the author herself, *The Handmaid's Tale* is an example of what she calls *ustopia* – a term formed by combining utopia and dystopia, "the imagined perfect society and its opposite," as each contains "a latent version of the other" (Atwood, *Cartographies* 17, 69-70). In the case of the Republic of Gilead, what the Sons of Jacob attempted to construct was their version of a perfect society (utopia), a

rigidly hierarchical theocracy that oppressed everyone except for a privileged few, and thus became a living nightmare in which most of its residents lived in constant fear of death and torture, not to mention in a permanent state of war, much like Orwell's Oceania (Somacarrera 54).^{vi} Another common bond between Atwood's novel and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the way in which those in "salvagings," "prayvaganzas," and "particicution" represent a theocratic form of Newspeak (Macpherson 54). The rewriting of history in the novel is not limited only to propaganda, designed to extol the "virtues" of the new regime and reveal the "sins" of the old one, but it also takes the form of a profound transformation of the urban space.

While the representation of the city in *The Handmaid's Tale* may be a rather peculiar or minor aspect to examine in a scholarly article (given that it does not take centre stage in the book) – and indeed, it has received limited attention in the critical literature dedicated to Atwood's work, it is nonetheless quite important if one considers the connection between architecture and politics in many totalitarian regimes and how these regimes, once in power, attempted to both erase urban landscapes and landmarks or repurpose them in order to make them standing embodiments of its ideology. Certainly, this idea is not among the book's primary themes. Yet Atwood, through many clues scattered throughout the chapters, reveals how the urban space of Gilead – a place with which she was very familiar, i.e. Cambridge, Massachusetts, which the book's setting identifies as such – is transformed from a quaint university town into an oppressive, menacing urban landscape. Concurrently, she shows how visible city landmarks, once peaceful and serene, have become scenes of mass executions or places where bodies are displayed as a reminder of the price of disobedience. Although the TV series does not specifically mention Cambridge as its primary setting, it does reveal that the plot unfolds in the Boston region.

The aim of the present article is to look into how this transformation of the urban space is depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale*, what purpose it serves, and how it fits in with the overall ideology of Gilead. In so doing, I will examine both the novel itself and, to a much smaller extent, its sequel, *The Testaments*, in the following section of the

present article. The third section will look at how the MGM/ Hulu TV adaptation of the novel (specifically, its first season, the only one based on the novel's plot) deals with the representation of the urban space and how much it adds to, or deviates from, its literary basis. The concluding section will then present a few more reflections on the impact that the transformation of the urban space, as depicted in the two works mentioned above, might have on the contemporary reader.

Repurposing and Transforming the Urban Space in *The Handmaid's Tale*

In her 2017 introduction written for a new edition of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood states unequivocally that the setting for her book is Cambridge, Massachusetts, "home of Harvard University, now a leading liberal educational institution but once a Puritan theological seminary" (19). Cambridge is a place the author knows very well, as she spent four years studying there at the start of the 1960s, so she is quite familiar with many of the landmarks of this quaint university town – such as the Widener Library, which in the novel serves as the headquarters of Gilead's Secret Service. Additionally, some of her ancestors of Puritan extraction, such as Mary Webster, hail from this part of New England (Bloom, *Guide* 14; Tomc 87). The Republic of Gilead (a name borrowed from the Old Testament – the place where Jacob and Laban "made a deal" concerning Laban's daughters, Leah and Rachel (Wilson 66; Staels 113)) is a modern-day theocracy built on 17th-century Puritanical foundations underpinning the evolution of the American mindset since the foundation of the first New England colonies in the early 1600s.^{vii} Atwood also borrows from the Old Testament when she introduces the handmaids, whose function is modelled on the biblical precedent of Jacob and his two wives, Rachel and Leah, and their two handmaids who bear children for their master and his barren wives. The author rightfully remarks that what the 17th-century New England Puritans were trying to build was also a utopia of sorts, a "city upon a hill" whose image John Winthrop borrowed from the Book of Isaiah; yet the first public works built in the

Massachusetts Bay Colony were a prison and a scaffold (Atwood, *Cartographies* 62-63).

Although the novel does not deal primarily with the representation of Cambridge or any other urban space, the author provides the reader with numerous clues throughout the narrative, pointing to the fact that the urban space of what was once familiar to both herself and the reader has either been destroyed or repurposed to serve the aims of the regime. Consider the very first sentences in the novel: “We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 38). Although the structure still stands, its details being recognizable to the reader, the new purpose it serves is a sinister one: a centre for the re-education of the few fertile women who were forced to become handmaids. The outer signs of their captivity are evident everywhere: the football field where they are allowed to walk every day has now been enclosed by a chain-linked fence topped with barbed wire. The urban space surrounding the handmaids is a constant reminder of their condition as prisoners who can be killed at any moment whereas their bodies displayed on the wall serve as a warning to those who disobey.

The protagonist and narrator of the novel, Offred, whose real name is never explicitly revealed in the book (the TV series gives her name as June Osborne), observes the world around her in minute detail, especially the elements present in her room, to which she is confined most of the day; deprived of any books or other means to pass the time, her detailed exploration of her surroundings is a way to keep her sanity. She takes her time with the examination, wanting to make the experience last and observes the tiniest details, such as the unevenness of the wallpaper or the paint scratches on the windowsill (Atwood, *Handmaid* 160-161). For the reader, it is an opportunity to see how even the domestic space of what used to be a comfortable and spacious late Victorian-style mansion has been transformed to remind her that she is without means of escape of any kind (Bloom, *Guide* 25): the chandelier has been removed, leaving a “blind plaster eye” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 171) on the ceiling, the

shatterproof glass windows only partly open, and the watercolour of irises hanging on the wall has no glass.^{viii} The floor is covered with what looks like an archaic-style rug, to mark a return to folksy art and traditional values. Everything looks antiquated and impersonal, a space designed to serve only one purpose: keeping the handmaid person in a cage. Time is not measured by a clock but by bells, as in a monastery, and mirrors are mostly absent (Atwood, *Handmaid* chap. 2 *passim*). From the descriptions Offred provides, the reader could get the impression that she is describing a photograph of objects, rooms, houses, because everything is quiet, static, devoid of actual life and movement (Atwood, *Handmaid* chap. 14 *passim*). The air itself is stagnant, suffocating, oppressive, symbolising the oppression endured by its female prisoners (Rubenstein 18).

Offred describes the garden of the commander's wife, Serena Joy, on several occasions, paying particular attention to flowers, especially tulips, which are mentioned several times throughout the narrative not only as a symbol of both regeneration and rebirth, but also of mutilation, blood, and death, echoing the symbols occurring in Sylvia Plath's poem "Tulips" (Dvorak 151):

The garden ... is large and tidy: a lawn in the middle, a willow, weeping catkins; around the edges, the flower borders, in which the daffodils are now fading and the tulips are opening their cups, spilling out colour. The tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they have been cut and are beginning to heal there. (Atwood, *Handmaid* 59)

The serenity of the garden contrasts visibly with the militarised appearance of the neighbourhood where it is placed, patrolled by armed guards at all times (Rubenstein 16). Offred often finds herself describing various natural elements she encounters on her daily walks (flowers, worms, etc.) as if to show that fragments of life stubbornly persist, despite all the regime's attempts at transformation and regimentation (Rubenstein 15; Staels 121): "There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 411).

Several parts of Cambridge, as described in the novel, appear not to have changed much – the red brick sidewalks "kept much cleaner than

they used to be” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 79), the large houses lining the streets, the tidy lawns, and the gracious facades^{ix} – while others have acquired sinister attributes:

The first barrier, which is like the barriers blocking off roadworks, or dug-up sewers: a wooden crisscross painted in yellow and black stripes, a red hexagon which means Stop. Near the gateway there are some lanterns, not lit because it isn’t night. Above us, I know, there are floodlights, attached to the telephone poles, for use in emergencies, and there are men with machine guns in the pillboxes on either side of the road. I don’t see the floodlights and the pillboxes, because of the wings around my face. I just know they are there. (Atwood, *Handmaid* 82-83)

Offred’s observations about the space she sees around her include constant references and comparisons to what used to be there *before* – before the Republic of Gilead that knows no bounds because “Gilead is within you” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 93). She used to imagine herself living in one of the houses she passes by with her husband Luke and their children, dreams that now seem from another life: a lot of what “used to be” looks the same, but everything is fundamentally different.^x Her mind’s eye constantly moves between the past and the present, memory bridging the gap between then and now, between the “freedom to” and the “freedom from,” as she was taught by Aunt Lydia at the Red Centre (Atwood, *Handmaid* 96; Grace 198; Staels 119). Every time she walks down the streets she knows so well she retraces the old city map in her mind and her memories are in constant conflict with the regime-sanctioned ideology as though her remembrance exposed the lies at the heart of Gilead (Howells 166).^{xi} Remembering, for her, becomes a form of passive anti-regime resistance (Grace 196). Even the shops she goes to no longer have lettered signs outside because women are not allowed to read anymore; they only have pictures showing what is sold inside because reading the names would be “too much temptation”: a shop now called Lilies of the Field, selling the uniforms the handmaids wear, used to be a movie theatre, where women “on their own” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 98) could go and choose whatever they wanted to see (Bloom, *Guide* 28).^{xii} Now, there is no choice anymore. An ice-cream shop Offred used to go to with her daughter is gone and she cannot remember its name because

“things can change so quickly, buildings can be torn down or turned into something else, it’s hard to keep them straight in your mind the way they used to be”^{xiii} (Atwood, *Handmaid* 445). Another repurposed shop, whose initial designation Offred vaguely remembers as being that of a lingerie store, now houses the Soul Scrolls, a place filled with print machines that churn out rolls upon rolls of prayers ordered via Compuphone, without any human presence (Bloom, *Guide* 48). It is in front of this store that Offred has the first real conversation with her shopping partner, the Handmaid Ofglen, whom she previously viewed as loyal to the regime and a potential enemy (Atwood, *Handmaid* 451-454).

From this point forward, the two handmaids forge a closer connection and share details of their former lives during their walks. On one such occasion, they pass a building formerly known as Memorial Hall, where undergraduate students used to eat, but which now serves as a banquet hall for the Eyes (Atwood, *Handmaid* 538). Offred also learns that Ofglen is a member of the Mayday resistance, an underground organisation working to destroy Gilead from within. On another occasion, Offred goes to a women’s prayvaganza held in a modern-looking building formerly named after “some President they shot,” whose name has been obliterated by one of Gilead’s slogans (Atwood, *Handmaid* 571). The clandestine brother Jezebel, a Felliniesque establishment populated with women dressed in an almost grotesque melange of costumes from the past (Miner 28), where the commander takes Offred, is located in a former hotel where she used to meet her husband during the early days of their love affair (Atwood, *Handmaid* 631).^{xiv} By remembering all these buildings, all these landscapes through the lens of memory, Offred (alongside the reader) is able to see how everything that was useful was preserved, transformed, and repurposed by Gilead into something they could use to uphold the new regime while everything considered too reminiscent of the past they tried to erase was destroyed.

It is difficult for the narrator to properly see the space around her because of the wings that come with her uniform and obscure her visual field, leading to sensory deprivation (Macpherson 58): she can only see glimpses if she moves her head quickly and surreptitiously, “in gasps” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 119). Walking along the river, she sees the old

dormitories of the university “used for something else now” (119) as well as the football stadium that now houses both matches and public executions called “salvagings” – a two-in-one use of space that illustrates the absurd and brutal nature of Gilead. An old church is only used now as a museum where admission is free, and its ancient graveyard is still there, headstones untouched. As Offred notes, “they haven’t fiddled with the gravestones, or the church either. It’s only the more recent history that offends them,” which makes sense, since Gilead claims to be rooted in the religious principles of times long ago and tries to erase the traces of a recent present when people were “dying of too much choice” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 122). Close to the church is the Wall (most likely the outer wall of what used to be Harvard Yard), also at least a hundred years old, “once plain but handsome” (123). This serves as an exhibition place for those who were hanged for various offences and are left there on display, “hanging, by the necks, their hands tied in front of them, their heads in white bags tipped sideways onto their shoulders” (124). One of the covered heads is bloody around where the mouth must have been, forming a terrifying bloody smile which reminds Offred of the red tulips in Serena Joy’s garden (Atwood, *Handmaid* chap. 6 *passim*; Miner 25). Seeing the wall empty on a summer day is, to Offred, even more terrifying than seeing bodies hanging on it, as she fears for the life of her husband Luke, whose fate remains unknown to her: “Somehow the Wall is even more foreboding when it’s empty like this. When there’s someone hanging on it at least you know the worst. But vacant, it is also potential, like a storm approaching” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 448).

It is not only Cambridge that has been transformed under the Gilead regime. One night, Offred sees a TV news report about how the war was going and she recognises images of a city that “used to be Detroit,” where the skyline has been reduced to “columns of smoke.” Other places in the former United States have been renamed: National Homeland One used to be North Dakota, where the “Children of Ham” (African-Americans) are being “resettled” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 240; Bloom, *Guide* 36) – a practice inspired, no doubt, by the “resettlement” actions of the Nazi regime.

A theme that frequently appears in Offred’s observations about the spaces surrounding her is how everything looks unchanged on the outside:

the streets, the houses, the gardens, the university buildings,^{xv} the Memorial Hall, the hotel room at Jezebel's. However, the nature of all those landmarks is now fundamentally transformed after the establishment of Gilead: the university buildings have most of their blinds drawn and belong to the Eyes, the hotel room is a place where commanders engage in forbidden activities, the shops now sell only regime-approved items, the streets are patrolled by armed guards, the houses are inhabited by prominent figures of the new order. Thus, Atwood never misses an opportunity to remind the reader that appearances are deceptive. Even something that looks the same as it used to be, or as innocent as it used to be, can hide sinister purposes: torture can take place in places that used to be libraries and bodies can hang on the walls of Harvard University. It is perhaps for this reason, more than any other, that Atwood chose to set her novel in such an instantly recognisable location, rather than in some unnamed, unidentified American city.

Atwood's 2019 sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* is entitled *The Testaments* and contains considerably fewer descriptions of urban spaces and landmarks, focusing instead almost exclusively on the tales of the three narrators: Aunt Lydia and Offred's two daughters. However, the recurrent theme mentioned earlier – how urban landmarks are appropriated and repurposed to serve the aims of the masters of the new regime – is present on several occasions throughout the book: "The Eyes hold sway in a former grand library. It now shelters no books but their own, the original contents having been either burned or, if valuable, added to the private collections of various sticky-fingered Commanders"^{xvi} (Atwood, *Testaments* 134). Also, the idea that some things endure with only minor changes is recurrent:

I am pleased to relate that no one has erased the murals on either side of this building's interior staircase: since they depict dead soldiers, angels, and wreaths of victory, they are pious enough to have been deemed acceptable, although the flag of the erstwhile United States of America in the right-hand one has been painted over with that of Gilead. (Atwood, *Testaments* 135)

The Testaments uses a lot of the same urban imagery the reader is familiar with from the previous book: high fences, barbed wire, floodlights, high

brick walls, locked gates, juxtaposed with serene images of nature, sunlight, and flowers or with women dressed in distinct colours peacefully walking down the streets: “So peaceful, the streets; so tranquil, so orderly; yet underneath the deceptively placid surfaces, a tremor, like that near a high-voltage power line” (Atwood, *Testaments* 531).

The representation of the city in Atwood’s two novels – but especially in *The Handmaid’s Tale* – while less bleak and oppressive than, say, the representation of Oceania in Orwell’s dystopian masterpiece, serves nonetheless as a warning about what happens when a brutal political regime with totalitarian tendencies is allowed to take control and shape both public and private space: the transformation of what used to be into what is sometimes so profound and so entrenched that even the bridge of memory can no longer help one remember the sights and shapes of the past and their original purpose.

Representations of the City in *The Handmaid’s Tale* – the TV Series

The first season of the TV adaptation based on Atwood’s novel premiered on May 28, 2017. So far, three seasons have been released, met with largely positive reviews and popular acclaim, but only the first season, consisting of ten episodes, follows the novel’s plot, the other two presenting the life of the main protagonist, Offred, beyond the literary material. The TV series is produced by MGM/ Hulu, created by Bruce Miller and starring Elizabeth Moss, Yvonne Strahovski, and Joseph Fiennes as the protagonists.

Although the urban scenes do not account for a large portion of the visual imagery of the TV series, they are nonetheless important as they give the viewer a sense of what the city (unnamed in the series, but still recognizable as a New England location close to or in the suburbs of Boston) looked and felt like through the eyes of the protagonist who – much like in the novel – serves as the plot narrator. There is an ever-present visual contrast, clearly drawn from Atwood’s descriptions, between what appears to be a quiet, almost serene small town and brutal images of blood, dead bodies, and even executions taking place in famous

landmarks repurposed by the new regime (such as Fenway Park, which appears in the season two premiere, no longer used for baseball games, but for mass hangings). There are numerous examples of such contrasts, especially in the first season, which established the setting, characters, and main plot points. The viewer sees Offred walking along peaceful streets, with imposing late Victorian houses and manicured lawns, guarded by menacing guards with machine guns. We hear the soothing sounds of bells tolling, calling people not to church services but to executions, we see very ordinary-looking buildings, such as schools or shops, all heavily guarded by men and vicious-looking dogs. When Offred walks by the river, the scenery is drenched in golden sunlight, appearing idyllic and giving off the sense that this is a place where no evil can reside, until the camera pans slowly and reveals a high wall where dead bodies are displayed. The town the viewer sees is built on contrasts and exposes, just like the novel does, the lies and hypocrisy at the heart of Gilead. The serenity of the urban landscape induces a false sense of security and creates a rather ominous feeling that evil and danger are always lurking in the background and that one must always pay close attention to one's surroundings.

The protagonist's memory meanders between past and present, remembering her husband and daughter, her life before and how things used to be, and occasionally notes, just like Offred in the novel, that there are some things the new regime has not changed: "The moon's the same. They haven't changed that" (Ep. 1). Many of the places she sees look a lot like what she remembers from before, with one visible difference: they are all surrounded by armed guards, by careful eyes always watching for a mistake or a step out of line. The handmaids we see walking down the streets exude an almost palpable sense of fear and dread as if they expected to be pushed into a black windowless van at any moment. One day, walking along with her partner Ofglen, Offred/ June sees the ruins of what used to be a gothic-style church, which has been demolished by the new regime that clearly has no use for such symbols of past times, although it claims to be a theocratic republic. Ofglen quietly remarks that the same fate befell the famous St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York – a

sign that the new regime is probably making room for buildings designed in its own image.^{xvii}

The interior of the Waterfords' mansion, where Offred lives in a small room on the top floor, resembles a labyrinth, with its long narrow hallways, winding staircase, myriad of rooms filled with what appears to be antique furniture. The commander's office is lined with books from floor to ceiling, although this is officially forbidden in Gilead. The windows are large and tall, and yet, somehow, the rooms are often dark as if the sun itself were struggling to break through and shed some light inside the house. Unlike the book, the TV series does not focus so much on Serena's garden and the flowers growing there, although we sometimes see her outside or in the greenhouse, tending to her plants.

The dominant colour palette of the first season is also symbolic. For the most part, the colours in both interior scenes and outside ones appear to be somewhat muted, dull, with subdued tones and non-contrasting hues of grey, blue, brown, yellow, and green. Many scenes are bathed either in bluish or yellowish tones that seem to wash out the details. The only vivid splash of colour the viewer sees is the red of the handmaid's uniforms or the red blood staining the wall where bodies are displayed, which the handmaids, in one memorable scene, are forced to wash off with hoses. The juxtaposition between the river of blood rushing down and the cream-coloured steps forms a striking contrast and reminds the audience that the urban setting, despite its serene appearance, is actually part of a brutal, oppressive dictatorship that executes people for the smallest offence. Any site and every site can serve as a place of execution, not just the wall by the river: the former, now deserted offices of the *Boston Globe*, where June hides for a few episodes at the start of season 2, or the abandoned church that Luke comes across on his escape route to Canada, with bodies hanging from the ceiling.

When Commander Waterford takes June to Jezebel, he takes the opportunity to proudly list the achievements of the new regime in transforming the former urban landscape that she recognizes as something that "used to be Boston" (Ep. 8). He mentions that the new regime built parks and installed solar panels, conveniently keeping silent about how many buildings they tore down or repurposed as prisons, torture sites or

“re-education” centres. The journey to Jezebel’s takes place at night, so many details are obscured: June is only able to see glimpses of how the city she used to know has been transformed. In the season’s final episode, when Serena takes her to see her daughter Hannah, who has been taken away from her and given to a new family, June struggles to identify the neighbourhood she is in, but all the street signs have been removed^{xviii} and she is unable to figure out where her daughter is kept. Moreover, all the fences they pass by resemble tall prison bars that seem – in an ironic twist of fate – designed not to keep the residents inside from getting out, but those outside from getting in: June is locked in the car and can only see her daughter from a distance, through the prison-like bars of the fence.

In fact, the entire visual representation of the city in the TV adaptation of Atwood’s novel evokes the feeling of a prison: the viewer should not be deceived by the peaceful streets, beautiful houses and gardens, opulent interiors, and the pervasive surgical cleanliness. The entire space is actually a prison, complete with barbed wire, armed guards, floodlights, and dogs, from where escape is almost impossible. Everyone, the handmaids, the wives, the commanders, the aunts, the Marthas, the children are held inside a giant penitentiary in which the symbols of the “old world” (such as the Washington Monument, transformed into a giant cross, and the wrecked Lincoln Memorial, seen in episode 8 of season two, when June travels to Washington D.C.) are either torn down or refashioned to serve the regime. Gilead may not be “inside” the protagonists, as Aunt Lydia claimed in the novel (a line that June remembers in the TV series), but it is certainly everywhere on the outside.

Conclusion

In her 2011 work entitled *Dire Cartographies*, in which she provides some insight into *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the MaddAddam trilogy, Margaret Atwood wonders how one would accomplish a totalitarian takeover of the United States and how difficult such a process would be: how much social instability would it take before citizens traded their freedoms for safety (Atwood, *Cartographies* 75-76)? As she describes in the novel, Gilead took power after killing the president, assassinating all

the members of the U.S. Congress and suspending the Constitution over a relatively short time, thus capitalising on the fears and insecurities of the population. But assuming power and maintaining power are two very different things, as all scholars of totalitarian regimes know: if they wanted to keep power, the Sons of Jacob had to create an entirely new order, a new social hierarchy, with new rules and new mechanisms of control. In the new order they envisioned, transforming the old space (be it urban or domestic) to suit their needs was of prime importance.^{xix} The novel is, in many respects, a product of its time, of 1980s American society in which neo-conservative religious trends and their potentially destructive impact were evident (Howells 161).

The Cambridge that Atwood describes in the novel is a fairly accurate depiction of the Cambridge that the reader might know from real life – and yet, it is fundamentally different. As I have argued earlier, by choosing a real-life location with recognisable characteristics, instead of setting her novel in a far-away imagined location à la Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, for instance, Atwood forces the reader to think how this urban space has been transformed and repurposed, how the famous Harvard Library has been turned into a giant torture chamber and how an ordinary high school gym has been converted into a forced re-education institution in which fertile women are imprisoned and indoctrinated into the spirit of the new regime. The often mentioned or implied contrast between how everything, houses, streets, shops, gardens, looks almost the same and how everything is essentially different (a theme also illustrated in the TV series) makes the reader aware of how evil can be concealed behind the most ordinary, the most innocent-looking things.

Behind every imposing façade, behind every well-tended bush and tree there are Eyes: Gilead is a society under constant surveillance, where one must watch one's every step not to fall out of line. The model of the panopticon described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* can very well be applied to Gilead (Foucault, chap. 3; see also Howells 53). The entire city that Atwood describes in her superb yet subdued prose is thus transformed into an instrument of surveillance and control in which the landmarks of urban space (buildings, parks, walls, fences) serve as a constant reminder for the novel's protagonists as well as for the reader

that they live in a controlled environment in which their lives are in the hands of brutal fanatics serving a ruthless theocracy.

Notes:

ⁱ In an essay entitled “Errand into the Wilderness,” Miller analyses John Winthrop’s well-known work, *A Modell of Christian Charity*, in which the man who served 18 terms as governor or lieutenant-governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony described his vision of an ideal society: when Winthrop speaks of “a due form of ecclesiastical government,” he clearly means a pure Biblical polity largely modelled in precise detail on the precepts of Old Testament (and less on the more tolerant love-thy-neighbour teachings of the New Testament) (Miller 12).

ⁱⁱ Unfortunately, Mary Webster did not survive her hanging for much longer because her acquittal prompted a violent response from an angry Puritan mob that dragged Webster out of her house and eventually killed her. The attackers suffered no consequences for their actions, which shows that the community saw them as just reprisals. This summary dispensation of mob justice is perhaps a very early example of the kind of “salvaging” Atwood describes in the novel, when a mob of angry handmaids tear apart a man presumed guilty of rape (Evans 180).

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, the colour-coded costumes worn by the different categories of women in the novel are mostly derived from religious iconography: the Wives wear the blue of purity often seen in representations of the Virgin Mary, the Handmaids wear red, reminiscent of the blood of parturition, but also of Mary Magdalene, while the Marthas wear clothes of a dull brown colour, often seen in artistic depictions of women of lower status (Atwood, *Handmaid* 28). The author’s use of such distinctive colour categories is based on many historical examples of using clothing to single out “undesirable” categories (the yellow star) or to mark status (the Roman purple robes). The design of the handmaids’ uniforms also draws inspiration from the fashions of Victorian England and from a figure on the packaging of “Old Dutch Cleanser” that scared the author as a child (Atwood, *Cartographies* 79; Tolentino, 2019). Additionally, historical atrocities such as the burning of books, the Nazi *Lebensborn* programme, the history of slavery, and the child kidnappings perpetrated by Argentinian generals figure in the novel in one way or another.

^{iv} Atwood herself also remarks that, in recent years, American society has moved much closer to the conditions necessary for a takeover by an anti-democratic and repressive government (*Cartographies* 82-83).

^v Another source of inspiration for the figure of the Handmaid in the novel comes from the old folk tales reinterpreted and reconstructed by Charles Perrault in *Petit Chaperon Rouge* and the Grimm Brothers in the tale of Little Red Riding Hood (Dvorak 149; Appleton 1; Bloom, *Guide* 26). Margaret Atwood even changed the original title of the book, “Offred,” to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, partly to honour Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* and partly in reference to fairy tales and folktales (Atwood, *Handmaid* 21).

^{vi} Also, in the novel, echoes of utopia can be found in remembrance of past things, people, buildings, and events as well as in the afterword at the end of the narrative, placed in a distant future in which the tyrannical Republic of Gilead has become nothing but a subject for academic conferences and research” (Atwood, *Cartographies* 85). The author remarks ironically that “I suppose that’s what happens to utopian societies when they die: they don’t go to Heaven, they become thesis topics” (86). Just like Oceania in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* both is and is not the post-war London of the author’s time, Gilead is and, at the same time, is not, the United States of today (Bloom, *Guide* 97).

^{vii} The Republic of Gilead comes into existence after a series of coups executed most likely by the Sons of Jacob, during which the President and Congress members were shot (an action blamed on Islamist fanatics) and the Constitution was suspended. These details are more explicit in the TV series than in the book, however. In *Dire Cartographies*, Atwood provides a more detailed explanation of how a totalitarian takeover of the United States similar to the one she describes in the novel might take place (75-76).

^{viii} The narrator astutely observes that “it isn’t running away they’re afraid of. We wouldn’t get far. It’s those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 46). It is during this minute and long exploration that she discovers a message, perhaps from her predecessor, scratched into the darkest corner of the cupboard: “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 160). She later finds out that it is written in a sort of mock Latin and translates as “Don’t let the bastards grind you down,” which gives her hope and determination.

^{ix} Offred notes that streets look almost like museum exhibits or the model towns one could see in home and garden magazines, very quiet, almost paralysed, with no children visible anywhere. The kind of people who lived there once, such as lawyers or university professors, have disappeared, as “there are no lawyers and the university is closed” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 93). The university buildings, however, are still standing and have been repurposed to house the Eyes, the dreaded guards whose presence is inescapable in Gilead.

^x Standing in the kitchen, Offred sees some dishtowels and thinks “dishtowels are the same as they always were. Sometimes these flashes of normality come at me from the side, like ambushes.” The ordinary or the usual is a “reminder, like a kick. I see the dishtowel, out of context, and I catch my breath” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 152-153).

^{xi} This act of remembering also subverts the claim that Gilead is a state founded on Christian principles, since it lacks any acts of mercy, forgiveness or benevolence (Malak 4). The state-controlled religion of Gilead, like the Puritan theocracy of Massachusetts, offers its adherents very little spiritual solace and sustenance, as its core belief system is a harsh theology based on a vindictive God, not on a nurturing divinity (Stein 131).

^{xii} By banning any sort of reading, even street signs and shop signs, the regime wants to transform a literate population into an illiterate one, easier to control and indoctrinate – a goal of any totalitarian regime (Macpherson 54).

^{xiii} Even with all these transformations, the new Gileadean Cambridge remains a bizarre tourist attraction: Offred encounters a group of Japanese tourists at whom she stares as if they were from another world.

^{xiv} Upon entering one of the rooms, Offred looks around and has a sense of frozen time: “Everything is the same, the very same as it was, once upon a time. The drapes are the same, the heavy flowered ones that match the bedspread, orange poppies on royal blue, and the thin white ones to draw against the sun; the bureau and bedside tables, square-cornered, impersonal; the lamps; the pictures on the walls: fruit in a bowl, stylized apples, flowers in a vase, buttercups and Devil’s paintbrushes keyed to the drapes. All is the same” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 678-679). Yet everything, except the objects and room details, is fundamentally different.

^{xv} A relevant example occurs in chapter 42, when Offred walks to a salvaging: “To the tolling of the bell we walk along the paths once used by students, past buildings that were once lecture halls and dormitories. It’s very strange to be in here again. From the outside you can’t tell that anything’s changed, except that the blinds on most of the windows are drawn down. These buildings belong to the Eyes now. We file onto the wide lawn in front of what used to be the library. The white steps going up are still the same, the main entrance is unaltered. There’s a wooden stage erected on the lawn, something like the one they used every spring, for Commencement, in the time before” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 722-723).

^{xvi} Also, when Aunt Lydia narrates in flashbacks the story of how she was arrested by Gilead guards in the early days of the new regime, we learn she was taken first to the same stadium where public executions would later be held. At that time, as she puts it, “it was no longer a stadium. It was a prison” (Atwood, *Testaments* 153; Tolentino, 2020). Later, when she is taken to a hotel she recognises as part of the Holiday Inn chain, she sees workmen removing the lettering before the building is repurposed. Police stations have also disappeared – or least their identifying signs have – as the buildings once housing police stations have been turned into Eyes headquarters (Atwood, *Testaments* 315).

^{xvii} In episode 6 of season two, we see the almost completed new Rachel and Leah Centre, a massive futuristic looking building, all glass and sleek lines, which is supposed to serve as a training centre for the new handmaids. Aunt Lydia, giving Commander Waterford a tour of the facilities, proudly remarks: “Imagine how many more girls we can *process* here” (*italics mine*) – a choice of words that brings to mind various Nazi documents, such as the minutes of the Wannsee Conference, which also spoke of European Jews who were supposed to be “processed.” There are several references to Nazi Germany throughout the series, including a scene where Offred sees a pile of burning books, presumably destroyed because of their “subversive” nature.

^{xviii} At the start of season 2, we see a large warehouse where all the removed street signs are stored, far away from any prying eyes, as if they were valuable commodities to be kept safe.

^{xix} A lot of research has been conducted on the link between architecture and politics, especially in totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany: the grandiose architectural projects Hitler commissioned, designed by Albert Speer, were

designed to transform Berlin in order to reflect the power and authority of the regime.

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