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The Restrictions of Genre

The Television Series THE HANDMAID'S TALE as a Classic Dystopia

Abstract

While there is a long tradition of literary utopias, there are hardly any positive utopias in film. Cinematic dystopias, by contrast, abound. The typical dystopia usually features a protagonist who is in opposition to the ruling regime, a built-in dramatic conflict that makes dystopias particularly well-suited for films. Although the huge success of Hulu's THE HANDMAID'S TALE seems to confirm the affinity between film and dystopias, the show also highlights that a series spanning multiple seasons has very different dramaturgical demands than a feature film. Those demands are at odds with the narrative structure of a typical dystopia. While the standard rebellion plot provides the needed tension, it cannot be prolonged endlessly. Sooner or later the rebellion either succeeds or fails, at which point literary dystopias normally end. A series like THE HANDMAID'S TALE needs to be able to continue that plot, which is the primary reason why the protagonist Offred never leaves Gilead despite having several opportunities to do so.

Keywords

Utopia, Dystopia, THE HANDMAID'S TALE (TV series), Genre, Science Fiction

Biography

Simon Spiegel is a senior researcher and lecturer at the Department of Film Studies at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. From 2014 to 2018 he was a collaborator in the research project *Alternative Worlds. The Political-activist Documentary Film*, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, which resulted in his professional thesis on utopias in nonfiction films (published in German with Schüren as *Bilder einer besseren Welt* in 2019, and in English with Palgrave Macmillan as *Utopias in Nonfiction Film* in 2021). He has published widely on science fiction, utopias and the theory of the fantastic and is co-editor of the interdisciplinary *Zeitschrift für Fantastikforschung*.

In the medium of film, the genre of dystopia – the depiction of a bleak totalitarian future ruled by a merciless leader or party – has proven to be extremely popular. Starting in the early 1970s with films like *THX 1138* (George Lucas, US 1971), *SOYLENT GREEN* (Richard Fleischer, US 1973), and *LOGAN’S RUN* (Michael Anderson, US 1976), it has become one of the dominant forms – if not *the* dominant form – of cinematic science fiction. This trend seems only to have intensified since the turn of the millennium, with productions like *CHILDREN OF MEN* (Alfonso Cuarón, UK/US/JP 2006) and *SNOWPIERCER* (Joon-Ho Bong, US/FR/SK 2013), various young adult dystopia franchises such as the *THE HUNGER GAMES* (US 2012–present), *THE MAZE RUNNER* (US 2014–2018), and *THE DIVERGENT* (US 2014–2016) series, and TV series like *BLACK MIRROR* (Channel 4 / Netflix, UK 2011–present), *THE HANDMAID’S TALE* (Hulu, US 2017–present), and, more recently, *BRAVE NEW WORLD* (Peacock, US 2020).

In this contribution I will analyze *THE HANDMAID’S TALE* (Hulu, US 2017–present) in terms of genre and look at how the show and the Margaret Atwood novel on which it is based fit within the dystopian tradition. After reflecting on utopia and dystopia, first in general and then specifically in relation to film, I will focus on the Hulu series, arguing that dystopias are, perhaps surprisingly, an ill fit for a long-running TV show.

Looking for a Positive Future

But first a few words about the enduring popularity of dystopias. Explanations for the genre’s lasting success vary. One reason often given is that dystopias reflect the dire state of the world we live in. The films speak to us because we recognize our own miserable situation in their bleak scenarios. Or, as Heather Hendershot puts it in reference to the alleged surge in sales of dystopian fiction following the election of Donald Trump as US president: “Dark times call for dark stories.”¹

This line of reasoning is by no means specific to the Trump era, for it has been a staple of columnists and op-ed writers for some time. Often it is combined with a more or less explicit lament that cinema – or TV, for that matter – is no longer capable of depicting a positive future, in effect confirming the famous Fredric Jameson quotation “It’s easier to imagine the

1 Hendershot 2018, 13.

end of the world than the end of capitalism.”² Things are so bad that we are simply unable to imagine that they could be better one day. An inverse take is also common: filmmakers could very well show us visions of a better future, but they fail to do so – because of either cynicism or laziness. Whatever the cause, they are failing in their responsibility as artists to provide us with the inspiring positive images and stories we so desperately need.

As common as the idea is that the popularity of dystopias reflects the misery of our times (and judging from the many newspaper articles that have rehashed it over the years, it is very common), it is probably wrong. The “dark times call for dark stories” argument could be easily turned on its head in making the case that it is natural for audiences to crave escapism in a time of crisis. The success of Hollywood musicals during the Great Depression is often explained in exactly this way.

Ultimately, this kind of simplistic one-to-one relationship between socio-historical developments and artistic creation never holds up under close examination, but in our case, the whole premise that no positive films about the future are produced *anymore* is demonstrably false. While we rarely see desirable futures in the cinema, this is by no means a new trend. On the contrary, the good future has never been a popular theme in cinema. Not only that, but for roughly the first fifty years of its existence, cinema had very little to say about the future in general.³

While non-Western movie traditions may have developed along different lines, Hollywood – and Western cinema in general – produced only a few films set in the future until the mid-20th century. There are noteworthy exceptions like *METROPOLIS* (Fritz Lang, DE 1927), *JUST IMAGINE* (David Butler, US 1930), or *THINGS TO COME* (William Cameron Menzies, UK 1936), but these are really just that – exceptions. Science fiction as we know it today only started to hit the screens in the early 1950s.⁴ And although this decade saw a veritable boom in science fiction films, very few of these early productions

2 Although it is probably Jameson’s most quoted line, the provenance of this phrase is not completely clear. In *The Seeds of Time* Jameson uses a similar phrase: “It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism” (Jameson 1994, xii). In a piece from 2003 he uses the quotation as given above with the addition “Someone once said that” (Jameson 2003, 76), but without saying who this “someone” is.

3 The following remarks follow the argument I lay out in Spiegel 2021, 7–69.

4 There were forerunners, though. Besides the examples just mentioned, there were numerous examples of science fiction in the 1930s in the form of serials and short animations. It is no coincidence that these were narrative forms with little prestige that

take place in the future. There are several possible explanations for this development, but the most convincing is that it is likely much more expensive to produce a movie that requires futuristic sets than one that takes place in the present. And as most of the early science fiction films were low-budget B-movies, the necessary resources were simply lacking. During the 1960s, largely owing to the rise of a new generation of both filmmakers and moviegoers, science fiction gradually gained status, and the films became more expensive and more sophisticated. However, from the moment that science fiction cinema entered the future, it was dystopian. Be it *PLANET OF THE APES* (Franklin J. Schaffner, US 1968), *THE OMEGA MAN* (Boris Sagal, US 1971), *A CLOCKWORK ORANGE* (Stanley Kubrick, UK 1971), *SILENT RUNNING* (Douglas Trumbull, US 1971), or the aforementioned *THX 1138*, *SOYLENT GREEN*, and *LOGAN'S RUN*, none of them depicts a desirable future.⁵

Still, it seems odd that we find almost no examples of a good future in film, especially if we look at the situation in literature. Beginning with Thomas More's 1516 foundational text *Utopia*, there have been countless literary descriptions of better worlds and more just societies in which people live happily. Today, outside of specialized scholarship, most of these works are forgotten, but some, such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888), were proper bestsellers in their day.⁶

Thus, the question remains: if so many literary utopias have been produced, with some of them even highly successful, why are there no positive utopias in film? Are audiovisual media inherently more dystopian than literature for some reason? As it turns out, the question is wrongly posed, as we commit a category error when we compare utopian literature and feature films. Although the term “novel” is often used when we talk about the utopian tradition initiated by More, typical utopian literature does not correspond with our modern understanding of a novel. Utopias are not about telling a gripping story with well-rounded characters. They are first

were mostly cheaply produced. The big studios were simply not interested in science fiction at that time.

5 The notable exception here is *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY* (Stanley Kubrick, US/UK 1968), which, from the few hints given in the film, takes place in a world very similar to the one of its year of production. For example, the Cold War still seems to be going on. But all in all, this world seems neither particularly utopian nor dystopian.

6 Apparently, in the US before the turn of the century, only *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) sold more copies than *Looking Backward*. In addition to its commercial success, Bellamy's novel spawned a whole subgenre of books reacting to it, and it even inspired a political movement; see Bould 2015, 86.

and foremost concerned with describing an alternative – better – society. And while many literary utopias feature a narrative frame – most often, some kind of travel chronicle – it is often really just a device that serves as a pretext for lengthy explanations of how the specific utopia is superior to the contemporary world. This is true of early examples like More's *Utopia* or Francis Bacon's *Nova Atlantis / New Atlantis* (1627, published posthumously), but also for later examples like Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440 / Memoires of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred* (1770), which is often described as the first utopia set in the future, Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist *Herland* (1915), B. F. Skinner's behavioral utopia *Walden Two* (1948), and Ernst Callenbach's ecological *Ecotopia* (1975).

Granted, modern authors like Bellamy or Gilman spend more time constructing a plot and creating nuanced characters, but even in their books the descriptive parts dominate. No one reads *Herland* or *Walden Two* in search of an enthralling yarn. The classic positive utopia in the Morean tradition, despite its narrative-fictional framework, is in many ways closer to a philosophical tract or a political manifesto. It is a generic hybrid and, to put it bluntly, more directly linked to reality than most fiction.

Once we understand that literary utopias are not fiction proper, but rather a hybrid genre where the fictional-narrative element is not dominant, it becomes evident why there are no utopian movies. Utopias in the vein of More and his successors simply do not fit the paradigm of a mainstream movie, where a protagonist with clearly defined traits must overcome obstacles to reach their goal. The fact that none of the classic utopias has ever been adapted for the screen only underscores this observation.⁷

Dystopias

While positive utopias and fiction films are not a good fit, the same is not true of dystopias and film. As we have already seen, dystopian films abound. But the reason for this has less to do with how much they might reflect the audience's experience and more to do with the genre's basic narrative

7 It should be noted, however, that although *fiction* films are not suited for utopias, this does not mean that the medium of film as a whole does not offer the possibility of depicting positive utopias. As I have argued in my study *Utopias in Nonfiction Film*, there are plenty of positive utopias once we leave the realm of fiction and turn to documentary and propaganda films.

structure. Historically, dystopias grew out of the utopian tradition, but from their inception in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they have been much more focused on a traditional adventure plot.⁸ The prototypical dystopia tells the story of a protagonist in conflict with the ruling order. In the beginning, this character is often an exemplary member of the respective society, but inevitably they end up in total opposition, attempting to overthrow the dystopian leader(s).⁹

The hero's rebellion is essential for the genre, as it serves to mark the society portrayed as negative. Today, as has often been noted, classic Morean utopias do not strike us as very appealing, as they usually present a more or less totalitarian society that depends on the individual blending in seamlessly, a mere cog in the smoothly running machinery of the state. This is very similar to typical dystopias, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949). In dystopias, the subordination of the individual, which is the prerequisite of the classic utopia, has become the central bone of contention. Ultimately, the main difference between a classic utopia and a typical dystopia is not so much the actual structure of the described state, but the point of view from which it is presented. You could turn almost any classic utopia into a dystopia by inserting a non-adjusted protagonist.

In addition, and especially relevant for our purposes, the hero's rebellion changes the dramatic structure in crucial ways. With a few nonconformists fighting against the inhuman system, dystopias have the dramatic story arc utopias usually lack. In positive utopias, the plot is merely a framing device with no narrative significance; dystopias, in contrast, feature by default an exciting plot and well-defined characters with clear goals.

The classic Hollywood movie contains two intertwined storylines: a line of action and a (traditionally heterosexual) love story.¹⁰ Typical dystopias follow this model almost naturally, as the hero's rebellion usually goes

8 In the past, the term "anti-utopia" has often been used synonymously with "dystopia". Today, most scholars distinguish between dystopias, which warn against specific political-societal trends, and anti-utopias, which target the utopian principle. The main difference is that for all their alleged negativity, dystopias are utopian insofar as they represent the possibility of changing society and human beings for the better. Anti-utopias, by contrast, often satirize specific progressive political projects and their implicit message that things can (or even should) be improved; on the distinction between dystopia and anti-utopia see Balasopoulos 2011.

9 Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921) is often considered the first full-fledged dystopia, but there are notable forerunners like H. G. Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899).

10 Bordwell/Staiger/Thompson 1999, 16.

hand in hand with a love story. It is, in fact, often love – or rather, socially unsanctioned forms of sexuality – that makes the hitherto well-adjusted protagonist aware of his – and the male pronoun is used on purpose here, since in early dystopias, the hero is almost always male – individuality and inspires him to oppose the existing order.

Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* largely follows the structure I have just outlined. The main difference is that Offred¹¹ does not experience a moment of “dystopian recognition”, but is in opposition to the state of Gilead right from the beginning. In addition, the novel's dramatic plot is rather muted. Offred's opposition is limited, the “action” much reduced; she never establishes proper contact with the resistance and does not engage in rebellion in any meaningful way. Ultimately, her most oppositional acts are her secret meetings with the Commander and her affair with the driver Nick. But neither of these actions is initiated by her, nor do they have any significant impact on her own situation or on the state of Gilead.

In the prototypical dystopia, the conflict between the oppositional hero and the ruling system builds to a clear showdown. Sooner or later, the two must collide, and the hero will either fail or succeed. Exactly what success means in this context varies: it can be anything from merely escaping the dystopian state to completely overthrowing it. Either way, there is a clear-cut resolution. We know the trajectory of the narrative in advance, and we know when it has run its course. The ending of Atwood's novel partially bypasses clear closure, as we do not know what happens to Offred after the book is finished, namely whether the men who take her away are members of the secret police or of the resistance. Although this uncertainty somewhat undermines the topical structure by leaving us with an open ending, the alternatives we are left with are still those of the classic model. Either Offred fails or she succeeds—we just do not know which.

Serial Dystopias

Arguably, the most momentous trend the film industry has gone through in the last 20 years is franchising. Today, big-budget films are produced not as single, self-contained works, but as parts of large narrative universes span-

11 Discussing Atwood's novel, I use the name “Offred” for the protagonist, while “June” refers to the same character in the Hulu series.

ning multiple media. The economic benefits of this setup are obvious. The studios, which today all belong to huge media conglomerates, can monetize their intellectual property across different media, tailoring various offerings for specific audiences. This strategy is complemented by another development: the rise of what is generally referred to as “narrative complexity”, mainly in TV series. Coined by Jason Mittell, the term refers to a bundle of formal traits which distinguish newer *quality* series from earlier shows.¹² Among the characteristics Mittell mentions are a juggling of self-contained episodes and an overall story arc, the use of non-chronological narration, plot twists, and, in general, a high degree of self-reflexivity. Mittell’s article was originally published before the advent of streaming, and many of the trends he describes have considerably intensified since then. What he deems narrative complexity is in a way what we have come to expect from a contemporary prestige TV series and can be found everywhere, from *MAD MEN* (AMC, US 2007–2015) and *BREAKING BAD* (AMC, US 2008–2013) to *GAME OF THRONES* (HBO, US 2011–2019) or *FLEABAG* (BBC, UK 2016–2019).

Complex narration is an ideal fit for franchising as the story is presented not as a straightforward narrative sequence, but as a puzzle which the attentive viewer gradually needs to solve. While traditional shows are also often built around a mystery – who is the murderer? will the lovers finally get together? – they take place in a world which we understand from the beginning. Modern shows, by contrast, are based on the principle of hyperdiegesis: the world we initially encounter turns out to be “a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text”.¹³ We never get the full picture, only bits and pieces, and we are constantly trying to make sense of the various flashbacks, flash-forwards, and story twists. This form of storytelling lends itself perfectly to franchising, as it shifts the focus from a traditional plot with a beginning, middle, and end to the construction of a narrative universe. There is no longer a fixed sequence of events which sooner or later must come to an end, but instead a vast narrative landscape which can endlessly be peopled with new characters and their stories. There are, in other words, ample opportunities for prequels, sequels, and tie-ins.

Hulu’s adaptation of Atwood’s novel in many ways exemplifies today’s quality series. Besides the main protagonist, June, there are a number of

12 Mittell 2006.

13 Hills 2002, 104.

secondary characters with their own storylines. Moreover, the series uses flashbacks and self-conscious voice-over narration, and it employs a host of carefully chosen aesthetic devices, among them

chiaroscuro and back lighting; profilmic surfaces such as curtains, mirrors, and windows; a color scheme in which red and to a lesser extent blue are set against mono-chrome backgrounds that are predominantly dark brown and occasionally bright white (the hospital, the supermarket) inside and pale gray (outside); Dutch angles; frame-within-the-frame compositions; off-center compositions; lens flares; blurring effects; and jump-cuts.¹⁴

The world of *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* is not mysterious in the same way as the worlds of *THE X-FILES* (Fox, US 1993–2002), *LOST* (ABC, US 2004–2010), or *GAME OF THRONES*. The story essentially takes place in our world, and there is no underlying big conspiracy to uncover, no magical realm or foreign species with special powers. Still, the series does follow the principle of hyperdiegesis, a fact which becomes especially visible in its use of flashbacks.

The flashback is an old formal device that can be employed for a variety of narrative purposes. Traditionally, flashbacks are often used to retroactively fill in narrative gaps; when used in this way, they are essential to making sense of the plot. The Paris flashback in *CASABLANCA* (Michael Curtiz, US 1942) is important because it tells Rick and Ilsa's backstory; without this inserted episode, we would not understand why Rick reacts the way he does to Ilsa's appearance in his bar. The purest example of this kind of flashback comes at the end of a typical whodunnit, when the identity of the murderer is revealed. Here, the flashback provides the crucial missing piece of information, bringing the story to a close.

While there have always been many kinds of flashbacks, one distinct form has come to special prominence in TV series in the last two decades: these days, flashbacks are often used to fill out the back story of a character without necessarily contributing something vital to the plot.

The type of flashback we see in *CASABLANCA* or in a murder mystery provides a central plot element. In *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, by contrast, many flashbacks mainly serve "atmospheric" purposes. In the series, a typical flashback will tell us how close June was to Moyra, Luke, or her daughter

14 Roche 2021, 141.

Hannah, or how badly she was treated by Aunt Lydia, but it rarely tells us something which is vital if we are to understand what is going on. While we need the Paris sequence to make sense of CASABLANCA'S plot, many of the flashbacks in THE HANDMAID'S TALE could simply be left out, and we would still be able to follow the plot.¹⁵

One could argue that this use of flashbacks mirrors the nonlinear structure of Atwood's novel to some extent, but I would still posit that the flashbacks in the series have a different effect from the flashbacks in the book, as is typical of contemporary serial narration. Although THE HANDMAID'S TALE jumps seamlessly between time periods, it is not non-linear in the way the novel is, or, to take a completely different example, a film like PULP FICTION (Quentin Tarantino, US 1994). Atwood's novel and Tarantino's film are truly non-linear in that there is no main line of narration and no temporal (or narrative) point of departure to which we return. In a sense, these examples do not even use proper flashbacks, as that would require a main narrative thread from which the narration could flash back. We can still discern which event happens when and build a temporal sequence in our minds, but there is no privileged strand of narration. The TV series proceeds differently. Here we do have a main thread that moves forward and serves as a point of departure.

Neither the assessment that the narration of THE HANDMAID'S TALE is not truly non-linear nor the fact that many of its flashbacks are not essential for understanding the plot should be construed as a value judgment. My point is not that these flashbacks are badly done, but rather that they serve a different purpose than a traditional "plot-driven" flashback. They serve to embellish the fictional world, to provide "background" in the true sense of the word. Their function is less narrative than architectural; they are in the service of hyperdiegesis. However hyperdiegesis in THE HANDMAID'S TALE does not have the same approach as in a series like the original TWIN PEAKS (ABC, US 1990–1991), THE X-FILES OR GAME OF THRONES. Over the course of GAME OF THRONES, we learn more and more about the many strange creatures and cultures in Westeros, and we slowly begin to understand the inner work-

15 These remarks on flashbacks should be taken with a grain of salt. While I find it evident that the use of flashbacks in mainstream TV and cinema has undergone significant change, this is not an area I have researched in any detail, and there is, as far as I can see, basically no literature on the subject. The classic study on flashbacks in film by Maureen Turim was published in 1989 and therefore has nothing to say about more recent developments.

ings of this universe. This is not the case in *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, where we actually learn remarkably little about how Gilead is organized. Instead, the past of this world, or rather of its characters, is fleshed out in more detail. It is a temporal form of hyperdiegesis, so to speak.

To some extent, this is also a consequence of the longer format. A series offers more time to provide “superfluous” details and to add nuances that have to be left out in a feature film. However, even more importantly, the flashbacks are also a consequence of a different narrative logic, one that is more concerned with constantly fleshing out its world than with bringing a story to its conclusion. Again, the economic advantages of such an approach should be evident.

Dystopia's Limitations

The success of *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* seems to prove that dystopias are suited not only for feature films but also for longer formats and that they can be smoothly combined with elements of narrative complexity. However, even though the show has found a large audience, for the remainder of this article I will make the argument that the exact opposite is true: if anything, *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* demonstrates the problems that inevitably arise when a typical dystopian plot is stretched out over multiple seasons. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that all of the show's major problems stem from its “dystopian origin”.

As I have suggested, Atwood's novel can be characterized as a kind of reduced or muted dystopia. What I mean by this is that not much happens on the plot level. A large part of the book is dedicated to establishing the world of the story. Offred's life is characterized by repetition – her walks with other handmaids, the Ceremony, and so on. The only real plot developments are her meetings with the Commander and her affair with Nick.

Offred's lack of action is no accident, but rather in a way one of the novel's points. The protagonist has been stripped of any agency and individuality – in the novel we do not even learn her real name – and she is therefore simply unable to do anything of real consequence. The series is well aware of this and extensively depicts June's powerlessness. There are whole episodes in which she is mostly passive; for example, S01E04 “Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum” (Mike Barker, US 2017) spends considerable time just showing her lying on the floor.

While the show's creators apparently want to do justice to the literary source, there are limits to what can be done in a long-running series aimed at a mass audience. A commercial show has to offer more than a main character vegetating on the floor and reminiscing about the past; it needs a certain amount of action. You could also argue that a completely passive female protagonist would not be appropriate for a contemporary show that wants to be taken seriously as a political intervention.

The moments of extended passivity are therefore counterbalanced by very eventful – and sometimes very violent – scenes. Episode S01E04 is typical in this regard, as it ends with a display of empowerment and determination. June, feeling a new sense of solidarity toward both an earlier incarnation of Offred and the other Handmaids, is finally allowed to leave her room. The episode's last shot shows her joined by other Handmaids walking in slow motion towards the camera; on the soundtrack we hear powerful music and June's voice: "Nolite te bastarDES carborundorum, bitches" – Don't let the bastards grind you down.

It is typical of the series that after dwelling on June's helplessness, the episode ends on a rather energetic, almost upbeat note. It is also characteristic that her new-found confidence hardly carries over to the next episode. While June is less passive than in the previous episode, the events of S01E05 "Faithful" (Mike Barker, US 2017) – Serena arranging a sexual encounter between June and Nick, Emily killing a guard with a car and being deported – are not really a consequence of her previous experiences.

Compared to Atwood's novel, the series substantially expands the number of both characters and plot lines. This is standard procedure for this kind of adaptation and more or less unavoidable. A 300-page novel simply does not provide enough material for a multi-season series. But although most of what happens after the first half of Season One has no direct equivalent in the literary source, what does not change is the basic conflict underlying everything. It is June against Gilead, and the overarching question that drives the entire series is whether she will be able to escape or overthrow the government. Once that question is answered, the show is over.

Because *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* was conceived not as a limited series but as a long-running prestige show, none of the storylines can ever be fully resolved. This is why every major plot development is immediately followed by a moment of retardation. June can never be completely successful; she only ever manages to *almost* leave Gilead or to *almost* get Commander Waterford

or his wife, Serena, on her side. If she actually succeeded, there would be nothing more to tell.

According to Matt Hills, hyperdiegesis in cult series goes hand in hand with what he calls “endlessly deferred narrative”.¹⁶ What he means by this is that many shows have a central enigma at their core that they slowly reveal over time – Who killed Laura Palmer? Will Mulder and Scully prove the existence of aliens and will they get together? What is it with flight Oceanic 815?

It is important to note, however, that an endlessly deferred narrative, according to Hills, is a specific characteristic of *cult shows* and not just of any series. Also, an endlessly deferred narrative is not the same as a typical cliff-hanger or the unanswered open question that can be seen in most series. Rather it is more like a nucleus or center of gravity, accumulating more and more details over time.

The central question of *THE HANDMAID’S TALE* – or of any typical dystopia, for that matter – has, I would argue, a very different quality. Whether June will be able to escape from Gilead can be answered straightforwardly. It is not a mystery that can continuously accumulate new layers of complexity. It is no surprise, then, that by the third season at the latest, it has become obvious that the basic mechanics of the genre do not smoothly gel with the demands of a long-running series. We surely get a lot of deferrals in *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, though not of the kind Hills has in mind, in that they are rather blunt plot reversals. For example, by Season Two we are already seeing a constant back and forth in alliances: In S02E07 “After” (Kari Skogland, US 2018), Serena seeks June’s help, and the two find a kind of mutual respect. However, only three episodes later, in S02E10 “The Last Ceremony” (Jeremy Podeswa, US 2018), Serena mercilessly helps her husband rape June. Nevertheless, by the end of the season Serena accepts that it would be better for her – or rather June’s – daughter not to be raised in Gilead.

Serena’s attitude toward June can change from moment to moment, depending on the current needs of the plot. Many series display such constant reversals after a certain running time; normally, it is an indication that a show has run out of steam, that there simply is not much left to tell. As the original plot has run its course, the writers resort to this rather mechanical way of creating new conflicts to keep the story going. What is unusual in the case of *THE HANDMAID’S TALE* is that we see these symptoms as early as Season Two.

16 Hills 2002, 98.

This phenomenon becomes even more pronounced in Season Three. At the end of Season Two, Serena has agreed that June can take her daughter to Gilead. But with the beginning of Season Three, the big climax of the preceding season is simply undone. Suddenly, Serena has another change of heart and does everything in her power to get hold of the baby again. The big twist at the end of Season Two is immediately reversed by a new, rather unmotivated twist. Later in the season, we also learn that another climax of the previous season finale did not endure either. Aunt Lydia has actually survived Emily's attack and is getting back on her feet.

These examples of heavy-handed plot reversals are not accidental or simply signs of lazy screenwriting; they are a direct consequence of the basic dystopian plot. At its most fundamental level, *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* is about one question: Will June make it out of Gilead? This question is made more complicated as the series progresses, but only slightly. For the first three seasons, the main strategy for countering the simplicity of the basic plot and prolonging the story is retardation. In a way, the specific "hyperdiegetic" use of flashbacks described above already serves this purpose. Instead of continuing the story and moving toward a conclusion, the series will often insert a flashback that does not advance the narration but instead slows it down.

What we see here is another example of how well a certain kind of narration fits the commercial needs of a TV network. The combination of complex narration and hyperdiegesis allows not only for prequels, tie-ins, and so on, but also for constantly stretching and extending the narration. With the kind of temporal hyperdiegesis visible in *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* – and particularly in its specific use of flashback – retardation becomes part of the very structure of the narration.

On top of this form of structural retardation, we also get retardations on the level of the plot, like the kind described above. Most salient in this regard are the endings of Season Two and Season Three. In both cases, June has the opportunity to leave Gilead, but ultimately she stays behind.

One could object that June does finally leave Gilead toward the end of Season Four and that the series does still continue. This is certainly true, but it is also obvious that from that point on, June has very little to do, which is why she now has to display all kinds of irrational and depressive behavior as well as aggression toward Luke.

There is one provision in the series' setup that ensures that it can be prolonged almost endlessly, and that is the fate of Hannah – June's first daugh-

ter – who is a kind of dramaturgical wild card that the series always brings into play when an ending is looming. Even when June escapes Gilead and is reunited with Luke, Nichole, and some of her closest friends, she cannot find closure as she still misses her daughter.

What I find particularly interesting about this narrative device – and Hannah is really not much more than a narrative device – is that it runs counter to the supposed feminist agenda of the series. *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* presents itself as a commentary on the role of women in modern society. It is supposedly about women's empowerment, about their right to have control over their own lives and bodies. But below the emancipatory veneer is an elemental force that proves to be stronger than all the talk of female self-determination, and that is motherly love. If there is one thing that is never in doubt, which is never even up for discussion, it is the fact that June, as a mother, needs to be with her children. She may be able to leave Gilead, but without her daughter, the story is not over yet. Thus, the series may be able to escape the confines of the dystopian plot, but it can only do so by resorting to what is, ultimately, a very traditional understanding of motherhood.

Conclusion

It has probably become apparent that I have some reservations regarding *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*. In fact, I think that the show has serious flaws on the level of plot and dramatic construction. As I have tried to show in this article, these largely stem from its origin as a classic literary dystopia.

There are countless other series with dystopian elements, for, as I have explained, very few science fiction films set in the future are without at least a hint of dystopia. However, most of them tell a much larger story and, unlike *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, do not stick to the basic dystopian plot. As much as the series expands on Atwood's novel, at its core it still adheres to the structure of the book, which is deeply rooted in the tradition of the genre.

It is instructive to compare *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* to another series that draws on a – if not *the* – classic of dystopian literature: *BRAVE NEW WORLD*, based on Aldous Huxley's famous novel of the same name. On a structural level, the creators of *BRAVE NEW WORLD* faced very similar problems to those of *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, for they also had to expand on the limited plot of the original novel. But they chose a different strategy. *BRAVE NEW WORLD* also builds a much larger story world, but unlike *THE HANDMAID'S*

TALE, the series constructs an intricate backstory in which the dystopian world turns out to be the product of a rogue AI.

Thus, the two series engage in very different kinds of hyperdiegesis. While *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* ultimately sticks to the classic dystopian plot, *BRAVE NEW WORLD* considerably expands its plot and story world beyond the novel. *BRAVE NEW WORLD* quickly proved to be much less successful than *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* and was canceled after only one season. While its lack of success may have nothing to do with the issues raised in this article, the fact that the series dispenses with Huxley's novel, more or less, and comes up with completely new storylines again suggests that the basic dystopian plot does not work well for a long-running series.

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