

# Enjoyment After the End of Times

## The Role of “Enjoyment” in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*

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### ABSTRACT

Utopia and dystopia are two interconnected genres. With the vision of a utopian future comes a manifesto for political action or belief, and so the opponents of that vision will find it a dystopia (Atwood 2007, n.p.; Clute and Nicholls 1993, 680). Literary dystopias can play out current societal anxieties and have evolved into sets of “what if?” scenario’s that show us our possible futures. The basics of these novels are the basics of our lives; what do people eat, what about money, what do they do? (Atwood 2007, n.p.). Enjoyment is an often overlooked but telling element to these world-formations. Who is allowed to enjoy what, under which circumstances, and in exchange for what? Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) is a dystopian novel in which the 'old' society is overturned by the new puritan society of Gilead. Women are no longer allowed to have possessions and those that are still fertile become subservient to high-ranking men. In this process, women become reified, handed around like commodities. My central theses revolve around the following questions: what role does “enjoyment” play in the commodification of people in the dystopian society of Gilead in *The Handmaid’s Tale*? What is Atwood’s vision of this possible future, what societal structures/what structures of exchange do they represent? Why are these images dystopian? Enjoyment and what is or is not enjoyed are maneuvered expertly into the systems that the novel represents; they are part of the overarching structure, yet not a good thing. How does this paradox come about?

### KEYWORDS

Enjoyment, (Neo)Capitalism, Speculative Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia, Atwood

### INTRODUCTION

[A]s had already been discovered in literary utopias, perfectibility breaks on the rock of dissent. What do you do with people who don't endorse your views or fit in with your plans? (...) Forced re-education, exile and execution are the usual choices on offer in utopias for any who oppose the powers that be. (Atwood 2007, n.p.)

This remark by Margaret Atwood illustrates the overlap and entanglement that exists between the notions of utopia and dystopia. In spite of its seemingly idyllic nature, there is an element of coercion in the notion of the utopia that applies to those that do not see or acknowledge the 'ideal' of the utopian situation. What is a utopia to some is a dystopia to others, and the notion of a utopia

can quickly become a dystopia in practice. Similarly, the two literary genres lie close together. In “Everybody is Happy Now,” the latest foreword to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*,<sup>1</sup> (1932) Margaret Atwood points out that oftentimes dystopias, whether real-life or literary, start out as utopias (as stated in the epigraph). It is the hegemonic nature of the imagined utopia that proves problematic, as it seeks to underline man and society’s perfectibility.

In this paper, I will analyze the dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood. I will address the various notions of the apocalypse and utopia/dystopia in relation to Atwood’s work mainly through the theory of Fredrick Buell and the *Anticipations* (1901) by H.G. Wells. Aided by theories on ‘enjoyment’ and (neo)capitalism by Slavoj Žižek, Frans-Willem Korsten and others, the novel and these theories will enter into debate with each other and the (economic) systems of exchange they portray and/or theorize. In Atwood’s novel reification/commodification and the status of these commodities—be they people or inanimate products—are important in their own respect, but also play a role in the way people relate to each other socially. In these relationships, the role of enjoyment is more important than it might seem. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, enjoyment is forbidden for the handmaids who have become commodities due to their now rare fertility, as well as for the ruling classes that have organized society according to strict religious rules. As a way of dealing with and relating to commodities and people, the notion of enjoyment as Žižek theorizes it can give insight in the way enjoyment influences human (inter)actions. Central are the following questions: how does “enjoyment” play a part in the commodification of people in the dystopian society of Gilead in Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*? What is Atwood’s vision of this possible future, what societal structures/what structures of exchange do they represent? Why are these images dystopian? Enjoyment and what is or is not enjoyed are maneuvered expertly into the systems that the novel represent; they are part of the overarching structure, yet not a good thing. How does this paradox come about?

## UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA

According to *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, (1993) the ‘dystopia,’ as the antonym of eutopia/utopia, “denotes that class of hypothetical societies containing images of worlds worse than our own” (Clute and Nicholls, 680). Clute and Nicholls point out that dystopian images gesture fearfully at the road the world is supposedly going down, showing a bleak future that is often intended to provide urgent propaganda for a change in direction (1993, 680). Like Atwood in the aforementioned quote, they tie this to the notion of the utopia, showing the interconnectedness of the two genres by stating that

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<sup>1</sup> Later it was published separately in *The Guardian*.

[a]s hope for a better future grows, the fear of disappointment inevitably grows with it, and when any vision of a future utopia incorporates a manifesto for political action or belief, opponents of that action or belief will inevitably attempt to show that its consequences are not utopian but horrible. (Clute and Nicholls 1993, 680)

Today, this means that the skyrocketing rise of neoliberalism creates an (idealized) image of the future (where no-one is hungry or poor, and has disposable income for vacations and the latest 5-blade razors), which in turn will also create a counter-image. Those that are more skeptical or downright oppose the reality of this vision have the ability to create an image in which the political, financial, ideological, ecological, etc. implications that (neo)capitalism (and neoliberalism) brings are brought to our attention—if not the “urgent propaganda” Clute and Nicholls identify, then at least a reality check. The dystopia is the form *par excellence* to execute this kind of thought-experiments in. According to Atwood herself, “the Utopia-Dystopia as a form [...] challenges us to re-examine what we understand by the word ‘human’, and above all what we intend by the word ‘freedom’” (qtd. in Wagner 2013, 67).

The utopia is described as a “future-historical goal, to be achieved by the active efforts of human beings, not a transcendental goal reserved as a reward for those who follow a particularly virtuous path in life” (Clute and Nicholls 1993, 2340). This becomes evident in H.G. Wells *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human life and Thought*, in which he weighs (technological) progress and probabilities, creating a look into the future; a future that cannot be gained through good behavior, but which he anticipates the world would arrive at through the sweeping motion of innovation and its consequences. The 'New Republic' he sees for the future does not sound ideal. It will “establish a world-state with a common language and a common rule. All over the world its roads, its standards, its laws, and its apparatus of control will run” (Wells 1902, 315). Here he specifically refers to race divisions and their eventual disappearance, a vision that, true to the utopia/dystopia paradox, sounds ideal for some (no race divides or discrimination), but terrible for others (complete assimilation and loss of individuality and cultures that are marked as 'other').

Dystopias as well as utopias are speculations about, and give us looks into, possible futures. In regard to speculative fiction, “[i]t can be argued that all utopias are speculative fictions, in that they are exercises in hypothetical sociology and political science” (Clute and Nicholls 1993, 2340). In the 1960s, Frank Manuel<sup>2</sup> argued “that a significant shift in utopian thought took place when writers changed from talking about a better place (eutopia) to talking about a better time (euchronia), under the influence of notions of historical and social progress” (qtd. in Clute and Nicholls 1993, 2340).

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<sup>2</sup> In *Utopias and Utopian Thought*.

As a consequence, utopias began to be speculative statements about real future possibilities, such as H.G. Wells did, instead of imaginary constructions with which contemporary society could be compared (Clute and Nicholls 1993, 2340). This is emphasized by Jennifer Wagner in *Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions* (2013). Wagner states that contemporary speculative fiction is a powerful tool for reshaping and re-envisioning, (even “revising”) the role of history and imagination (2013, 2). She proposes a “speculative standpoint”, urging us to not only allow for an empirical knowledge base, but to add the imaginary as a legitimate source of knowledge (Wagner 2013, 2). These speculations can function as forecasts based on certain data. As we imagine and conceptualize transition and transformation, they give us insight into past and current situations.

These fictional structures are bound to represent our own. They might be intended as a commentary, but logically speaking, we can only predict with the symbols that are known to us, and only very few can think and invent radically outside of what we know. In the article “The Origins of Futurism” (2012) from the *Smithsonian Magazine*, Bruce Sterling points out that the most popular and well-known manner of predicting the future is what he calls “scenario forecasting”. Scenario forecasting consists of a set of moves ('rituals') and is often the shape speculative fiction takes. Sterling identifies its eventual goal as encouraging “mental change through various forms of playacting and rehearsal” (2012, n.p.), essentially giving us a set of “what if? Then this!” scenario's. This takes many forms of course: speculative fiction encompasses novels that create new worlds entirely from scratch, or stay close to home and base their 'speculations' on structures that are already present in the world. According to Atwood:

[U]topias and dystopias from Plato's Republic on have had to cover the same basic ground that real societies do. All must answer the same questions: where do people live, what do they eat, what do they wear, what do they do about sex and child-rearing? Who has the power, who does the work, how do citizens relate to nature, and how does the economy function? (2007, n.p.)

H.G. Wells made predictions for the future based on latest developments of the time, and the way he anticipated they would influence life. His *Anticipations* (1902) focus on several aspects of society, such as the invention of the steam engine and the types of movement and transportation it would propel humans into, the wars of the twentieth century, and the social elements and reactions that were to be expected. The synthesis of these different aspects of life come together in a specific form, a form that has a ring of the utopian/dystopian to it in its language. Wells claims that the

attainment of this great synthesis [...] has an air of being a process independent of any collective or conscious will in man, as being the expression of a greater Will; it is working now, and may work out to its end vastly, and yet at times almost imperceptibly, as some huge secular movement in Nature, the raising of a continent, the crumbling of a mountain-chain, goes on to its appointed culmination. (Wells 1902,

247)

It is as if we hear talk of the (neo)capitalist system, in which everything is assimilated, or, as Korsten formulates it: “Whereas capitalism seems to be nothing more than an economic system, it is also a political system that directs everybody’s choices” (2007, 34). Or, as it is more crudely put by Fisher, “capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (2009, 8), providing no outside to the system. Though it must be pointed out that “[t]he single most prolific stimulus to the production of dystopian visions has been the political polarization of capitalism and socialism” (Clute and Nicholls 680), this manifests itself in literature in the most basic structures of society—food, reproduction, money, etc. Faced with the dystopia, the utopia has currently fallen into abeyance as a form. Frederick Buell points out that

[o]ver the course of [the last] three decades, the utopian imagination seems to have first swallowed a large dose of catastrophism and then given up at least a lot of his ghost, forming either an uneasy dystopian-utopian hybrid or morphing into the dystopian altogether. (2013, 9)

To Buell this is a pervading post-apocalyptic mindset “of entwined environmental, economic, technologic and social entanglements” (2013, 12). Rather than a post-modern phase, he discerns a more catastrophe-minded tendency, that, “[t]hough it represents the future, it does so for audiences unable and undisposed to imagine any actual future further than the news cycle” (Buell 2013, 12). This tendency finds its expression in an ever-larger amount of narratives (literature, film, non-fiction, television series) in mainstream culture that are set in post-apocalyptic times (Buell 2013, 9). The apocalypse is not the end of times, for it already occurred in these narratives, it is the end of time and life as we know it, propelling us into new and unfamiliar times. Gerry Canavan claims that “[b]ack when we were modern, we believed real change was possible; now that we are postmodern, we are certain it is not” (2004, 4). In the light of Buell's remarks we can change this to: 'now that we are *post-apocalyptic*, we are certain it is not.' The post-apocalyptic future exposes the underlying notion that something terrible must happen for us to radically change our course of action.

## ENJOYMENT IN NEO/LATE CAPITALISM

Showing a new world beyond “the catastrophe” (Atwood 1985, 128), *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel in which the 'old' society is overturned by the new society of Gilead that is arranged through puritan religion in its entirety. Though written in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a novel that is strikingly relevant now, as (in unison with George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*) sales have spiked since Trump's election. Obviously something in these novels moves beyond 'mere' speculation: “imagining such a world through art and storytelling is itself a critical

intervention” (Wagner 2013, 67). As one article puts it: “The Handmaid’s Tale is a handbook for surviving oppressive systems” (Grady 2017, n.p.), and it is not without reason we turn to speculative fiction in the current political climate.

It seems that neoliberalism as a political and neo-/late capitalism as an economic system, have created an order in which “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (Fisher 2009, 2). This phrase, attributed to both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, illustrates what Fisher intends to say with his notion of “capitalist realism,” namely “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it” (1991, 2). He even feels that dystopias can no longer do what they once did (Fisher 2009, 2) and create a critique that does not affirm this view of the capitalist system. Not only do such economic systems entail products, exchange and money, they demand a certain attitude. While speaking of the possibility of literary parody and satire, Korsten points out that capitalistic exclusivity is dependent on absolute sincerity to establish value and hierarchy (2007, 36). Laughter is excluded from the domain of money in order to reinforce, if not hold on to, this sincerity. He continues: “If we collectively interpret money as parody, the capitalistic system is dead. That is not, then, because we have found a true value, but because value itself has become unstable” (Korsten 2007, 36). *The Handmaid’s Tale’s* Republic of Gilead, has created a situation where value has in fact become unstable—but intentionally so. At the same time however, this unintentionally parodies money by showing how easily it can be undone, ignored and dematerialized. The real-life economic consequence of this is mentioned *en passant* next to all the other societal changes that have taken place: the use of money is replaced by the use of tokens. It is as though the society went back to the state that Graeber describes as preceding economic life, when it related to social currencies before money got involved (2011, 40). This type of economy is contrasted with exchange based on formal equality, reciprocity and hierarchy, while the hierarchies in turn tend to institutionalize inequalities in customs and castes (Graeber 2011, 44)—as is the case in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

In this context it is also true that “[t]he homogenizing force of capitalism is incompatible with any inherent structure of differentiation: sacred-profane, carnival-workday, nature-culture, machine-organism, and so on” (Crary 2013, 13). There is a very clear line between what is right-wrong, proper-blasphemy, and in this people are moved around like currencies, but the capitalist system cannot be supported by this structure and vice versa. In spite of the obvious parody of religion as the basis to the ways of a society, it is not the only point of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Jafari and Afrougheh point out that

[w]hat is being interrogated is the imposition of the Word upon words, of the illusion of truth on the power of imagination. The enemy is totalitarianism, the attempt to subject people to a perverse form of perfectionism. Significantly, the Handmaids are told that the slogan “From each according to her ability; to each according to his needs” [Atwood 1985, 127] comes from St. Paul, when it actually comes from Marx. The two grand narratives, the Marxist and the Biblical, are equally false when turned into absolute truth” (Coupe in Jafari and Afrougheh 2003, 390).

Atwood not only points out the destructive nature of a totalitarian regime based on religion, but also exposes the practical economic nature of this structure.

One of the other manners of critique of the capitalist system is analyzing the pathologies and ideologies at play, a tactic that Žižek employs throughout his work. In *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (1991), Žižek asserts that political philosophy has placed too little emphasis on communities’ cultural practices that revolve around what he calls “inherent transgression,” by which he means “the way we are allowed/expected to violate its [the community's] explicit rules” (lxi). These are practices that are authorized by a culture that allows subjects the experience of something is usually prohibited (or exceptional) in the everyday life they lead as supposedly civilized political subjects (Žižek 1991, lxi). The transgressions are the unwritten rules of a community (and by extension, a society). They are rarely ever spoken out loud, but following them is the marker of those that truly belong. These experiences involve *jouissance*, a term taken from Lacanian psychoanalysis. It can be described as the “ultimate transcendent guarantee” (Žižek 1997/2007, n.p), or “ideological surplus” (Žižek 2009, n.p.). *Jouissance* differs from 'pleasure', because it relates an enjoyment that exists at the limits of what subjects can experience or talk about in public and it does not even need to be pleasurable (Žižek 1991, lxi-i). *Jouissance* in this context is one of the great lacks (another Lacanian term) of modern society, because there no longer is a God or other absolute certainty (Žižek 1997/2007, n.p). Žižek describes three common ways of responding to this absence: utopian, democratic, and post-democratic. He continues:

The first one (totalitarianisms, fundamentalisms) tries to reoccupy the ground of absolute *jouissance* by attaining a utopian society of harmonious society which eliminates negativity. The second, democratic, one enacts a political equivalent of “traversing the fantasy”: it institutionalizes the lack itself by creating the space for political antagonisms. The third one, consumerist post-democracy, tries to neutralize negativity by transforming politics into apolitical administration: individuals pursue their consumerist fantasies in the space regulated by expert social administration. (Žižek 1997/2007, n.p)

By bringing back the religious foundation to everyday life, those that established Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* have effectively brought back absolute *jouissance* by creating their own utopia.

The fact that it comes after a consumerist, capitalist society however, makes for an interesting mix of these two reactions, as we shall see in the analysis.

### **THE HANDED-DOWN HANDMAID**

The narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale* is Offred, a handmaiden in the “Republic of Gilead.” Her sole purpose is to breed in a world where a mysterious sterility pervades the country. Through Offred's gaze we learn that Gilead was established in North America after the assassination of the president of the United States, after which chaos ensued: no-one could leave the country, and the constitution was suspended indefinitely. Through flashbacks we slowly see the past unfold in a world that is remarkably like our own. From one day to the next, women are no longer allowed to have possessions—money, property, even sexuality—and become subservient to men and the 'greater good' of the overall society (childbirth). As Wagner points out: “Atwood is [...] particularly concerned with the capitalist ideology of our own culture, in which 'absolutely everything is a consumer good’” (2013, 67). Women become reified, handed around like commodities. In her position as a handmaid, Offred is meant to produce children for the household she is assigned to. Within the genre of the dystopian novel, societies are often set up on the basis of our own cultures, employing tendencies that already exist in our current society. In the novel Gilead is still built upon on the Western protestant paradigm, but certain elements are driven to the extreme. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, “The Republic of Gilead” is a new societal order that has been established by the moral majority by overthrowing the previous government. This previous, 'old world,' is much like our own, where women could walk freely in the street, people could divorce, products were paid for by card instead of cash money, and so on. After the elimination of this order and its replacement by a totalitarian Christian theocracy that follows the Bible very closely on some peculiar accounts, most 'normal' things become deviant. What we see here is, in contradiction Fisher's words, an imagined society that does not create an end of the world in the traditional (Biblical) apocalyptic sense, where it concerns a total destruction of the world, but one that creates a new world where these economic and political systems have become obsolete.

For the moral majority, taking over was a revolution, a *coup d'état* that overturned the old system. But to Offred, the protagonist of the novel, and those close to her, the coming of the new order was a tidal wave that flushed away life as they knew it. To them, this was an apocalypse in many ways, a hinted-at “catastrophe” (Atwood 1985, 128), causing the destruction of societal structures on a catastrophic scale. For many others that we encounter in the novel (supporters of the new reign), “the catastrophe” is an apocalypse as it is often shown to be in speculative fiction: “a revelation, a cleaning which enables a new start” (Van Riet 2003, 5). Though purposefully facilitated by the new government and really more a disaster for women and not men, the new start has been so complete

and all-encompassing that 'apocalypse' seems the correct term here, rather than 'revolution.'

The establishment of the Gileadian symbolic and structural order is based on the power that theocracy has on its subjects (Jafari and Afrougheh 2003, 388), and this power is made to be felt in all aspects of life. Biblical references shape the new order in ways ranging from the seemingly innocent form of names,<sup>3</sup> to the vital matter of reproduction. As the Bible is explained in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Jacob married the two sisters Leah and Rachel, and as Leah became a mother of three sons, Rachel remained childless (an act of God, “who realized that Leah was not loved and, therefore, opened her womb but in the process made Rachel barren” [Jafari and Afrougheh 2003, 388]). A jealous Rachel offered her maidservant, Bilhah, to Jacob as a surrogate for her own body. Through the surrogate, Rachel 'birthed' two sons (Jafari and Afrougheh 2003, 388). The role of the Handmaids is that of Bilhah the maidservant. They facilitate reproduction of two people by means of a third that is only possible because the ownership of the third person lies with the first two. Offred has proved to be fertile in the past and due to a mysterious sterility that has pervaded the upper ranks of Gilead, she is to bear the children of one of the commanders. Her position as a possession in this situation is represented in her name: Offred. Of-Fred. Offred belongs to Fred, and as such has become a commodity with an owner and a certain use-value.

Encountering the characters a short time after the establishment of the new regime gives us an insight into both the new and old world, and the way they overlap. Newer generations that are born into Gilead will not likely debate the truth of the system that they are in. As is pointed out in the novel, the women that can still remember and long for the life 'before' have a harder time than the generations that follow them, who will know no other reality. What we see in Gilead is what Žižek calls 'unconditional enjoyment.' It is not a type of enjoyment that exceeds and transgresses all bounds, but one that exists “within the limits of reason alone” (Žižek 1991, xci). He continues:

Contrary to the common notion according to which reason imposes upon enjoyment the logic of moderation, preventing us from enjoying excessively, it is only when enjoyment is affected by the infinity of Reason that it surpasses the pragmatic limitations of pleasure, and asserts itself as pleasure-in-pain” (1991, xci).

This means that things can be a transgression in one context, but perfectly normal in another. Enjoyment then potentially becomes a transgression of itself, manifesting as this “pleasure-in-pain”. Such “inherent transgression” in *The Handmaid's Tale* this can be found on several levels of Gilead society. It is overtly present in their manner of punishing crimes. Accused criminals and transgressors of the new laws are sent to a certain death by cleaning up radioactive waste in the

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the state has been named after the place where the patriarch Jacob set up his “heap of stones” and established his household (Jafari and Afrougheh 2003, 388).

Colonies (and in a female's case, labelled as an “Unwoman”) or brought to 'trial.' These staged courts are important expressions of inherent transgression. “The Salvagings”, where Handmaids are hanged for their supposed crimes, and the “Particutions”, where Handmaids get a state-sanctioned chance to violently lash out and impose 'justice' by lynching the accused:

“This man,” says aunt Lydia, “has been convicted of rape.” Her voice trembles with rage, and a kind of triumph. [...] The penalty for rape, as you know, is death. Deuteronomy 22:23-29. I might add that this crime involved two of you and took place at gunpoint. It was also brutal. I will not offend your ears with any details, except to say that one woman was pregnant and the baby died.

A sigh goes up from us; despite myself I feel my hands clench. It is too much, this violation. The baby too, after what we go through. It's true, there is a bloodlust; I want to tear, gouge, rend. (...) There's a surge forward, like a crowd at a rock concert in the former time, when the doors opened, that urgency coming like a wave through us. The air is bright with adrenalin, we are permitted anything and this is freedom, in my body also, I'm reeling, red spreads everywhere, [...]. Now there are sounds, gasps, a low noise like growling, yells and the red bodies tumble forward and I can no longer see, he's obscured by arms, fists, feet. A high scream comes from somewhere, like a horse in terror.” (Atwood 1985, 291-3)

While the “Particutions” are there to fortify the ruling ideology of purity and the “freedom from” rapists and other everyday violence against women (Atwood 1985, 34),<sup>4</sup> in its violence and intensity, the public lynching is a legitimized form of excess that the Handmaids are otherwise barred from. The system of Gilead is strictly regulated, with the only loopholes existing for the upper ranks of commanders and the built-in reckonings where the Handmaids get the chance to condemn and execute transgressors of the rules.

On an illicit level, and on a different level of the hierarchy, there is the enjoyment of those in power, and the small transgressions Offred is allowed through them. The commander soon turns out to want more from Offred, not necessarily sexually, but emotionally, claiming to want sincerity as he plays scrabble with her—a forbidden activity because women are not allowed to read or write—and takes her to an old-world nightclub. These are spaces that 'officially' do not exist within Gilead. It should not exist because it is officially outside of the system, but it has the characteristics of the “inherent transgressions” Žižek describes. The sense we are dealing with an inherent transgression is heightened because of Offred's suspicions that the wife is aware of the affair: “Sometimes I think she knows. Sometimes I think they're in collusion” (Atwood 1985, 172). As Offred steps outside of the marked spaces of a handmaid's life as woman beyond wife or womb, she becomes a subject of enjoyment to the commander. For the commander there is the inherent transgression—and thus

<sup>4</sup> “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it.”

enjoyment—of going to 'illicit,' old-world places. This is an example of inherent transgression because it shows that even within the strict society of Gilead there are manners of conduct that are unwritten and thus 'officially' not part of the social structure. However, they seem to be agreed upon and happening repeatedly and all around. Such “inherent transgressions” are always on the darker side in Atwood's novel, and often involve sex, death, and/or violence. In the household she resides in, becoming the mistress and not just the Handmaid seems to be such an inevitable rule.

## CONCLUSION

In the impotence of the position of women such as the protagonist, lies the impossibility of enjoyment: it is entirely forbidden to her as an individual (Žižek 1991, 9), even in its transgressions. For Offred herself, enjoyment is eliminated, not to be had, because it is that which is outside the new system. But even the inaction of the handmaids might serve a purpose for the men handling them. As Offred muses: “But maybe boredom is erotic, when women do it, for men” (Atwood 1985, 79). Even when there is a moment of enjoyment, of joy, it cannot be expressed, because as a handmaid, these things are forbidden and extremely dangerous to her already uncertain position;

Noise is coming up, coming out, of the broken place, in my face. Without warning: I wasn't thinking about here or there or anything. If I let the noise out into the air it will be laughter, too loud, too much of it, someone is bound to hear and then there will be hurrying footsteps and commands and who knows? Judgement: emotion inappropriate to the occasion. The wandering womb, they used to think. Hysteria. And then a needle, a pill. It could be fatal. (Atwood 1985, 156)

The 'utopian' solution to the lack of *jouissance* that Gilead brings, sets conditions for enjoyment. Instead duty takes the position of enjoyment and led by Bible verses every person knows their exact position in the interactions that establish this new daily life.

In the official events of Salvagings, Particutions and the ceremony where Handmaids are to be impregnated, these spaces are decidedly separated from the old-world forms of enjoyment. Enjoyment then only exists in specific, marked-out spaces, where it serves to fortify the existing societal structures and ideology. It reinforces these structures at the margins by excluding it from official everyday life (enjoyment is pointless, and in Gilead, without any useful consequences), but allowing it in spaces of inherent transgression. This also shapes the structures of exchange, since the new hierarchical structure between people supersedes all other forms of exchange and value that existed before. In its movement away from a capitalist structure into an extremely religious one, we get a dystopian, post-apocalyptic image of the (Western) world. Fisher stated that even in our imaginings we are convinced to think of (neo)capitalism as the truthful system that does not impose ideology on our lives like religion does and has done, or in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, might do. However, it does illustrate once again that speculative fiction creates a space for

critical speculations and experimentations on the perceived lack of alternatives for the (neo)capitalist system (Fisher 2009, 2), even if the speculated-on consequences are disadvantageous. Works of speculative fiction bring the realities of the leading systems back to the fore. Wagner states that “the deployment of narrative strategies that resist ‘the pleasurable illusion of stasis’” create the idea of opportunity beyond the present by insisting on these possible futures so that the illusion that “choice is over” might be disrupted (2013, 1). Or, as Science Fiction author Ursula LeGuin puts it: “We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings” (2014, n.p.)”

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