



RED, WHITE AND BLUE: DISMANTLING DEMOCRACY IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

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One of the most striking artistic features of both *The Handmaid's Tale*¹ adaptations, the film directed by Volker Schlöndorff (1990) and the Hulu ongoing television series (2017–present), is the use of color as a signifier in the curation of both costumes and settings. They are, after all, a visual realization of the vivid descriptions characterizing the 1985 source novel by Margaret Atwood, in which colors divide characters along the lines of gender, class, and occupation. In her introduction to a later edition of the novel, Atwood states that “Many totalitarianisms have used clothing, both forbidden and enforced, to identify and control people – think of yellow stars and Roman purple – and many have ruled behind a religious front” (2017). Eriksen (Erikson & Jenkins, 2007, 3) states that flags are “rich in aesthetic and emotional connotations”. The colors chosen for a national flag are a powerful component of this aesthetic. According to the blog on Flags.com, the US flag’s “bold colors of red, white, and blue instantly evoke a sense of pride and loyalty to the United States of America.” In Madriaga’s research regarding the US flag, he noted that several respondents mentioned the significance of colors, with one equating red, white and blue to “blood, truth and purity” (Erikson & Jenkins, 2007, 65). I would argue that the use of color coding in *The Handmaid's Tale* is also representative of the dismantling of democracy, in that these patriotic colors are redeployed in the anti-democratic new society of Gilead. The colors red, white and blue are most prominently employed in the depiction of the Handmaids and wives of Gilead. A few other colors, including green, grey and black, also have thematic significance.

¹ The film version is a fairly faithful adaptation of the novel, ending with Offred (real name Kate) pregnant and having escaped Gilead. The Hulu series (with Offred’s real name given as June) has gone well beyond the book in its 5 seasons, with the 6th and final season likely to air in 2024.



Red on the US flag represents valor and bravery and is further identified as a “reminder of the sacrifice and bloodshed [...] to secure and maintain the freedoms that Americans enjoy today” (Flags.com 2023). In the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, it also represents bloodshed and sacrifice, but in this case, the women are shedding their blood and sacrificing their lives. In a line from Aunt Lydia, which is taken from the source novel and appears in the television series, the Handmaids are told, “There is more than one kind of freedom [...] 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” (Atwood [1985] 2017). However, the Handmaids don't appear to possess any level of freedom, they are enslaved. The significance of the color red for the Handmaids stems from its clear description in the source novel: “Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us” (Atwood 1985). The pure, deep shade of red used for their dresses and cloaks has a number of clearly identifiable culturally significant and symbolic meanings, including the blood of both childbirth and menstruation. Offred states in the novel “Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own” (Atwood [1985] 2017). Red is also aligned with the “scarlet letter” for a fallen or disgraced woman and the passion of sexual sin (Vanity Fair 2017) which is exemplified by the Handmaids regularly being described as sluts, tramps and whores by Aunts and Wives. There are some key scenes in both the film and series where the red of the Handmaids is particularly visually striking as it is manipulated by other cinematic elements, such as camera angles and *mise en scène*, in juxtaposition with the blue of the Wives' costumes and white of other costume and scenic elements, particularly snow.

In Schlöndorff's 1990 film, the first fully robed Handmaid the audience (and Offred) sees is a dead one: a hanged figure swinging ominously outside the Red Center as Offred and the other newly captured Handmaids arrive, red bands of fabric tied around their arms. This is a stark reminder that their fertility is owned by the state; their bodies are not their own, and resistance will be met with death or severe punishment. Several examples of this also appear in the series, including disfigurement and beatings. Harsh punishment for those who resist the system is of course not restricted to the Handmaids, and they are forced to participate in Gilead's rough justice. There is no democratically prescribed judicial process for punishment and executions in the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*. All such processes have been dismantled and replaced by fear-based barbaric rituals handed down by Gilead's theocratic rulers. “Particutions”, public outdoor executions in which the Handmaids are forced to take part, appear in both the film and series but are depicted differently in each in terms of visual style. In the film, such events are attended by all, with Wives, Commanders, Guardians, Econowives, Marthas and Handmaids visually arranged in blocks of color, with Handmaids in the center. For the hanging of a Handmaid, the

other assembled Handmaids are in straight lines in front of the scaffold. When they are commanded to rip apart a man for rape, they are asked to form a circle, and after this “salvaging” begins, the surrounding crowd surges forward, creating concentric circles of red, white, blue, black and grey (Schlöndorff 1990).



Figure 1. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Dir. Volker Schlöndorff, 1990.



Figure 2. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Dir. Volker Schlöndorff, 1990.

In the series, the Handmaids are similarly arranged, knelt in straight lines, but only Guardians and Aunt Lydia are present. They are asked to remove their white-winged bonnets and form a circle to enact the salvaging. A similar frenzy follows, but the cinematography uses a shot from directly overhead, a signature of the series, with a sea of red engulfing the man, obscuring the green grass. Blood spurts from his mouth in slow motion from Offred/June’s kick (ep. 1, season 1).

The series’ location in what was formerly Boston allows for several outdoor scenes blanketed in snow, which offers a great opportunity to visually showcase the use of color, in particular, the red of the Handmaids against the white snow. In another participation scene (ep. 10, season 1), in which the Handmaids are instructed to stone

one of their own to death, they are arranged as before, but this time it is snowing and the circle does not close. As a Handmaid defies Aunt Lydia's directions, she is struck in the face by a Guardian, a slow-motion shot highlights blood spurting from her mouth as she falls, echoing the salvaging scene described previously. After June refuses to throw a stone, there is a long shot from above showing that the ground is now blanketed almost completely in snow, obscuring the green of the grass and accentuating the red of the Handmaids. After their defiance, the Handmaids are seen walking home, their red robes stark against the snowy sidewalks and grey scenery like a river of blood. Bellantoni (2005, 2) identifies the visual illusion red creates on screen as "advancing towards us". Series costume designer Ane Crabtree describes the collective Handmaids as a "fertile women's tribe [...] to flow down the streets of Gilead" (in Vanity Fair 2017).



Figure 3. *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller 2017–present, ep. 10, season 1).

The blue of the American flag signifies "vigilance, perseverance and justice" (USA.gov 2023). Gilead certainly appears to have its own interpretation of these values, and the privileged Commanders' Wives play a key role in enforcing them. A Commander's home resembles a military dictatorship, with everyone assigned their rank, including the Wife as second-in-command. Despite the power wielded by the Wives, the Handmaids possess the all-important fertility, so there's a constant undercurrent of resentment and suspicion in the home. When Offred first meets Commander Waterford's wife Serena Joy in the novel, her cloak is described as powder blue (Atwood 1985). In her introduction to the 2017 edition, Atwood outlines that the choice of blue for the Wives comes from Western religious iconography, namely "the blue of purity, from the Virgin Mary" (Atwood 2017). Interestingly, the film and TV series interpret blue a little differently. Bellantoni (2005, 86) also notes that royal blue is a shade that evokes power, and this is the shade worn by Wives in the film, which

reflects their status and is visually aligned with the blue of the American flag. The Wives enjoy a garden party during the scene in which a Handmaid gives birth, dressed identically in suits with pillbox hats and gloves, flanked by white-clad children, the fresh, innocent stars of Gilead, mingling excitedly in a sea of blue and white. Once 'her' child is born and the Handmaid is no longer required, a Wife can triumphantly rejoice that her vigilance and perseverance in enduring the presence and associated rituals of a Handmaid has been rewarded. Meanwhile, the Handmaid will be reassigned to another family to repeat the process, her bloodshed again benefiting someone other than herself.



Figure 4. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Dir. Volker Schlöndorff, 1990.

In the TV series, Wives wear teal, and designer Crabtree points out that darker shades are used for those Wives in more powerful positions (Jung 2017). Although this is not the royal blue of the flag, there are still some interesting visuals which make use of the color. In the series' version of the birth scene (ep. 2, season 1), wife Mrs. Putnam is seen dressed in a white gown, feigning labor surrounded by her encouraging teal-clad friends. In another room, the real birth is taking place, with the Handmaid Janine also in white, surrounded by red-clad Handmaids coaching her. Having the two 'mothers' dressed in white symbolizes not only the purity of the act of birth, but temporarily gives them the same status. As the baby comes, the Wives enter the room so Mrs. Putnam can symbolically give birth to her daughter, creating a red, white and (teal) blue palette. After the birth there is an overhead shot of the Handmaids clumped around her, a sea of red with white caps depicting both the triumph and sorrow of the moment. In both depictions, royal blue or teal provides a strong visual contrast with the red of the Handmaids' garb and white in the background and other costumes.



Figure 5. *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller 2017–present, ep. 2, season 1).

The series' episode set in Washington DC (ep. 6, season 3) presents the strongest narrative and visual representation of the extent to which the former USA has been dismantled to create Gilead, employing a reimagining of well-known landmarks. An outdoor scene depicting lines formed by hundreds of Handmaids against the pale background of the pavement utilizes a dramatic overhead wide shot, looking towards the former Washington Monument, now replaced by a cross. The placement of Handmaids makes the lines appear as vertical, a skewering of the red and white horizontal stripes of the American flag.



Figure 6. *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller 2017–present, ep. 6, season 3).

Another striking shot is of June and Serena with a giant white wing sculpture behind them, the wings directly behind June. We're given a closer shot of June alone with the wings rising from her back, in another signature visual of the series with the actress looking up directly at the camera, a defiant avenging angel. The predominance of white in the background and of the angel's wings underscore the purity of June as a symbol of true democracy in a locale that no longer belongs to the ideals of the former USA. Although teal and not royal blue, Serena's costume is now darker teal due to her status, reading closer to blue than green on screen.



Figure 7. *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller 2017–present, ep. 6, season 3).



Figure 8. *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller 2017–present, ep. 6, season 3).

The dramatic red, white and blue of the scene above is mirrored in another depicting June and Serena meeting at the Lincoln Monument. Again, we get a shot of June alone in front of the monument, red against white framing her grief at the loss of her country.

The crumbling, defaced statue exemplifies the crumbling of democracy in a country where the blood of enemies is now so often the blood of women. The scale of the monument against the small, red figure of June also reminds us of the scale of the task ahead of her in bringing down Gilead.



Figure 9. *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller 2017–present, ep. 6, season 3).



Figure 10. *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller 2017–present, ep. 6, season 3).

As well as these three significant colors, others are employed in *The Handmaid's Tale* to categorize groups and undermine democracy. In Schlöndorff 's 1990 film, the Aunts wear brown suits with white blouses and pearls which a reviewer described as “just right for office jobs in the days when women were still allowed to hold them” (Maslin 1990) - the shoulder-padded 80s office manager of your nightmares, perhaps. The

series sees them clad more modestly, neck to ankle in a shade of brown that is closer to khaki. Author Atwood calls the color of their uniforms in the series as “vaguely Nazi brown” (in *Vanity Fair* 2017, n.p.). Costume designer Crabtree describes the color as olive brown and cites as her inspiration “World War I British military brownish-green” (in Jung 2017). These militaristic connotations color code the Aunts as the other soldiers of Gilead. Although the Handmaids often encounter the black-clad, gun-toting Guardians, it is the Aunts who are their first introduction to their harsh new reality. Although they don’t have guns, Aunts frequently use physical punishment including hitting, whipping and tasing. The women are trained to be Handmaids in the Red Centre under their harsh tutelage and eat and sleep in boot-camp style. In the novel Aunt Lydia says to the girls, “Think of it as being in the army” (Atwood 1985).



Figure 11. *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller 2017–present).



Figure 12. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Dir. Volker Schlöndorff, 1990.

Gilead’s ‘Marthas’, the housekeepers to wealthy families, wear a pale, washed-out green. The novel describes the shade as “dull green, like a surgeon’s gown of the time before” and “dumpy green” (Atwood 1985). The series uses a more washed-out green, with costume designer Crabtree describing it as “faded like it had lost its color” with the effect that these women “wither into their environment” (in Jung 2017). This color is a blessing in disguise as it allows the Marthas to become the key to the resistance, moving through society largely unnoticed. This is underscored by the connotations of green as a duplicitous color, able to signify both life (as in fresh vegetation) or death (illness, poison) (Bellantoni 2005, 160). In the novel, Atwood says “The Marthas know

things” (1985) and this is extended in the series as the network of Marthas works quietly against Gilead. Their garb rejects both the colors of old America and new Gilead: there's no political rhetoric to be heard, they do what they do not for patriotism or democracy but to free women and children. When June runs an errand for the Marthas to prove herself worthy of their trust, she is given one of their cloaks and headscarves to wear (ep. 2, season 3). Her voiceover in the scene includes a reflection on the power of changing color, “Strange to finally be invisible. One of the reasons they chose red was the opposite. We’re easy to catch because we’re easy to see. Like blood on snow.”



Figure 12. *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller 2017–present, ep. 5, season 2).



Figure 13. *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller 2017–present, ep. 5, season 2).

A few other mentions of color worth noting include the use of grey and black. In the novel’s *Econowives*, women of more meagre economic means, wear stripes of the red, green and blue of the 3 categories of Gilead women, as they are “...not divided into



functions. They have to do everything” (Atwood 1985). In the film and series, they wear grey. Like the Marthas, this gives them a type of invisibility, but it is also demeaning, a shade we could view as an “uncolor”. (The term “unwomen” is used to describe the lowest class of women in Gilead, which includes those sent to the environmentally-poisoned colonies.) In the series, Waterford’s driver Nick is given an Econowife in an arranged marriage (Miller 2017–present, ep. 5, season 2). She is dressed neck to ankle shades of grey with her hair tied back and covered. The combination of this role and her young age affords her low status in the household, as she is regularly bossed around by the Martha, reminded of her great fortune at being given a husband, and reveres the status of handmaid Offred. Although the Econowives enjoy a status above unwomen, and are allowed to have a husband and bear and keep their children, their lives are also strictly monitored and controlled. When Nick’s wife falls in love with a Guardian, the punishment is swift and brutal (ep. 12, season 2). The two are publicly drowned and the dominant color of the scene is grey, seen not only in her clothing but that of her parents and the other Econo-husbands and Wives bearing witness to the horrifying spectacle. Even Serena’s teal dress and June’s red dress are muted by the dank tones of the scene.

The Commanders and Guardians of Gilead are dressed predominantly in black, both in the film and series. Atwood chose black as a “color of prestige” (Atwood 2017) and series costume designer Crabtree states that she sees black as “the color that absorbs all other color” (in Jung 2017). In scenes such as the salvaging/stoning scenes previously mentioned, the black-uniformed

Guardians surround the Handmaids like a border drawn with a black marker, creating an impenetrable ring of power (Miller 2017–present). The Commanders wear black suits with crisp, white shirts, and in the series, they have a more militaristic version, as worn by Waterford in the Washington episode (ep. 6, season 3), which also includes white embellishment and a single white star. There are no united states in Gilead, it is a single state. If the stars-and-stripes flag is indeed the “most recognizable and holist of all American national symbols” (Madriaga 2007, 54), then its replacement by a totalitarian regime is a powerful blow to the democracy it stands for. On the American flag, there is no black, its red, white and blue blocks of color are unbordered. Gilead’s flag strongly features black along with (a darker) red. The gold bird holding a branch is ironic in a regime whose outward image of peace is enforced by hardline extremism and swift old-testament justice.



Figure 145. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Dir. Volker Schlöndorff, 1990.



Figure 15. *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller 2017–present, ep. 6, season 3).

As *The Handmaid's Tale* series moves towards its sixth season, we can look forward to the continued march towards the downfall of Gilead, led by those given the least power in this “un-democracy”. At the end of season five, we were introduced to a new Gilead color, in the violet of Hannah’s costume. Although still a child by most standards, this codes her as being on the brink of womanhood, ready to be a teal-blue Wife. Purple is a mixture of red and blue but although the blue of the Wives affords



them some prestige, they are as enslaved and controlled as the red-clad Handmaids. With purple also symbolic of mystical or spiritual qualities (Bellantoni 2005, xxiv) this may also signify Hannah as “the chosen one”, a future leader to subvert the tyranny of Gilead and return its former US citizens to true democracy. It will be interesting to see how the costumes, production design and cinematography continue to shape how we see color.

The most powerful color will no doubt continue to be the red of the Handmaids: it is now the fire of rebellion and the color of June’s rage. As Bellantoni states, the color red can also represent power and elicit anger (2005, 2). Beyond the fiction depicted on screen, the Handmaids’ red robes have been appropriated by protesters throughout the United States at events regarding the rights of women (Sharp 2019). In an iconic line from the series, June’s voiceover says, “They should have never given us uniforms if they didn’t want us to be an army” (ep. 2, season 1). The sea of red is no longer simply a river of blood, it is a quietly powerful army of women willing to fight to restore democracy.

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