

FORUM: *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

## Hook and Eye

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In her voiceover narration during episode 5, “Faithful,” *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s main character Offred (Elisabeth Moss) recalls a poem she once read: “You fit into me like a hook into an eye. / A fish hook. / An open eye.”<sup>1</sup> The poem’s first line reads like a declaration of love, using a simile to compare the design of a hook-and-eye closure to the compatibility of lover and speaker; we can read it as a sexual metaphor or, more figuratively, signaling comfortable companionship. As Jes Simmons (1993) points out, the most common use of such a closure is on the back of a bra, making it particularly familiar (and occasionally vexing) for women readers (p. 259). However, the next two lines abruptly reverse the meaning of the first, creating a repugnant image. Employing wordplay to link a romantic relation with a violent one, the poem mirrors the traumatic social transformation the characters in *The Handmaid’s Tale* endure, from a society that sanctions romantic love to one in which fertile surrogates are ritually raped by elite men. Like many successful works of art, the poem produces pleasure through the fresh and bracing way it plays on language; similarly, the series telegraphs its political meanings by way of its visual style.

I’d like to look more closely at the way *The Handmaid’s Tale* addresses the question of the eye and how it can be hooked, bearing in mind the poem’s jarring imbrication of romance with violence. In adapting the source novel to television, the series must find ways to “hook” the viewer, to draw her into the character’s world: it coerces viewers to watch its horrors and rewards them with its aesthetic accomplishments. *The Handmaid’s Tale* constructs an affective scenario in which we accompany Offred through the early stages of transition from contemporary U.S. society to the authoritarian theocracy of Gilead.

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Through a heady combination of visual pleasure and visceral dread, *The Handmaid's Tale* “dramatize[s] Offred’s claustrophobia through gorgeous tableaux of repression,” as Emily Nussbaum (2017) puts it, “making violence as beautiful as a nightmare.” Moss, series co-producer with Margaret Atwood, explains the strategy in an interview: “perhaps something horrible was happening in the image, but the image was so beautiful that you couldn’t look away” (Yuan, 2017). The striking cinematography sets the visual hook in the viewer’s eye, enticing her to witness Offred’s unsettling storyworld (Figure 1).

An enormous challenge in this adaptation was finding ways to preserve the intimacy of the intelligent, impressionistic first-person narration, which in Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel oscillates between flashbacks and internal monologues, grounded in the handmaid’s prison-like everyday. The series adds visual immediacy to the dystopia conjured in the source text, not only through painterly frame compositions of Gilead’s color-coded sumptuary laws and militarized tyranny, but also through prolific use of the close-up (in conjunction with voiceover) as a correlative to the privileged access granted by the novel’s first-person narrator (Figure 2).

Defined as a shot in which a face or other body part takes up most of the frame, the close-up is one of the features of cinema that sets it apart from other arts. The close-up allows the viewer to observe at an intimate proximity the spectacle of another human face as it registers the play of emotions with the subtlest expressions, while at the same time serving as a kind of mirror, encouraging identification by devoting close attention to the character’s face. Another aid to identification is *The Handmaid's Tale's* raw verisimilitude, including the fact that the handmaids’ faces are bare of makeup and shot in relatively unflattering ways, breaking with longstanding convention for female leads. The gendered violence of Gilead is not aestheticized for our pleasure; the beauty evoked in the images exists despite the regime, not because of it.

Shot using wide apertures, the close-ups of Moss portray only her features in focus, while other elements—backgrounds, other people—are blurry and indistinct, lending a



**Figure 1** Handmaids contemplate the victims of the regime displayed at the wall.



**Figure 2** Shallow-focus close-up of Offred (Elisabeth Moss) emphasizes her isolation.

dizzy, off-balance feeling to her scenes: a visual equivalent to her narrow, imperfect point of view and her silent struggle to maintain her sanity and sense of self. As video essayist Evan Puschak (2017) points out, the series uses shallow focus in conjunction with close-ups to simulate the sense of myopia that Offred experiences. Paired with the highly subjective close-ups of her docile face, Offred's voiceover provides access to the inner irreverence and outrage that she cannot express without fear of corporal punishment.

Sara Ahmed (2017) maintains that feminism is born of violence: "if becoming feminist cannot be separated from an experience of violence, of being wronged, then what brings us to feminism is what is potentially shattering" (location 471). *The Handmaid's Tale* tries to push viewers, through the visual and emotional experience of violent subjugation, to a point of potentially shattering. The austere visual style is one way the show keeps us watching despite this discomfort: it hooks our eye. This aesthetic pleasure comes punctuated with the reminder of the fish hook, as a flood of arresting images portray the systematic breaking of a human being into an object. This breaking hyperbolizes the socialization process Ahmed (2017) names "girling." "Girling is enacted not only through being explicitly addressed as a girl, but in the style or mode of address: because you are a girl, we can do this to you. Violence too is a mode of address" (loc. 555). The series employs close-ups and lush cinematography to draw viewers into Offred's experience of this violent mode of address, with Moss's face telegraphing what she cannot say aloud: mobilizing this combination to keep viewers hooked and attuned to its political meanings.

## Note

1 The poem was first published in Atwood's 1971 poetry volume *Power Politics*.

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