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Between Gazing and Witnessing: Feminism and Watching Women Suffer on Television

Abstract
The present article discusses ethical aspects of the representations of (sexual) violence and (predominantly women's) suffering in two recent television series, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Dietland*. It reflects on the uses and functions of violent imagery they contain and the manner in which this imagery contributes to the series' perception as feminist shows. The primary question posed is whether this violence occasions engagement or disengagement: whether the role they cast their audiences in consists in gazing or witnessing.

The Handmaid's Tale, feminism, dystopia, torture porn, violence, *Dietland*

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The debate about ethics of violent media representations remains prominent at the end of the 2010s — as the recent controversy concerning the movie *Joker* may attest (2019, dir. Todd Phillips). In *Over Her Dead Body* Elisabeth Bronfen wrote that "representations of death in art ... delight because we are confronted with death, yet it is the death of the other" (1992: x). Similarly, Mark Seltzer, in "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere," suggests that there is a "mass attraction to atrocity exhibition" through which the public sphere itself becomes "a culture of suffering, states of injury, and wounded attachments" (1997: 3–4). Bronfen and Seltzer acknowledge a gendered dimension of this violence; Julia Kristeva goes further in *Powers of Horror*, stating that "the feminine" is "that other sex ... synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed" (1982: 70): the woman remains "the other," and thus the designated object of violence. This is perhaps why it is the narrative of a suffering woman in particular that has long been an (increasingly graphic) staple of entertainment, across a plethora of texts ranging from Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) to digital game texts, such as the *Silent Hill* franchise (cf. e.g. Marak 2015: 136–138; 2019: 368).

Television in particular has its own share of stories focusing on physically and psychologically tortured and dying women, perhaps due to its visual character (privileging striking, memorable images, which violence can provide) combined with episodic structure (necessitating prevalence of cliff-hanger elements, placing characters in peril[1]). This can be seen plainly across numerous shows; some of the most commonly cited examples include *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999 — ongoing), one of the longest-running procedurals, whose focus is telegraphed by its title, or HBO's award-winning television series, *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), famous for its graphic displays of violence, largely targeting female characters of various importance in the series, and which at times seemed to be little more than a dynamic background for the actual plot (Heyman, Kim 2015). Moreover, as Susan Sontag notes in her germinal text, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, "the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked" (2003: 41): and television often does both at the same time, depicting sexual and sexualised violence, directly catering to the scopophilic pleasures of what Mulvey described as the "male gaze" (1999: 58–69).

[1] A recipe which of course pre-dates television, as the success of film serial *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) might attest.

However, while the aforementioned programmes have at times come under scrutiny for their voyeuristic preoccupation with women's suffering (cf. e.g. Nussbaum 2013), certain television series derive their credentials as specifically *feminist* texts from engaging with this very subject.[2] In my article, I aim to analyse the uses of violence, particularly sexual violence against women, in two recent television series, Hulu's celebrated prestige show *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017) and AMC's less well-known *Dietland* (2018), wondering whether they primarily serve to generate "a detachment from ethical consideration or an urgent mobilisation of care and concern" (Buchan, Gibson, and Howell 2018: 75): whether the role they engage their audiences in consists in gazing or witnessing.

Gazing and witnessing

Feminist attitudes to representations of suffering have often been marked by suspicion, and this is particularly true for photographic and filmed images of women's (aestheticised, eroticised) suffering. This may be due to fears that such representations are inherently objectifying; woman's inferior position as the object of male surveillance (cf. e.g. Berger 2008: 35–64) is only exacerbated when she is the object of "sadistic [voyeurism]" (Mulvey 1999: 65) focused on her humiliation and pain; as Sontag warns, "[t]here is something predatory in the act of taking a picture" (2005: 10).

In *On Photography* (2005 [1997]) and later *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Sontag takes on the subject of ethical obligations and entanglements of photography, and while this is different from the role and status of a filmed fictional narrative — one which does not reproduce the real suffering of an actual person, but rather imitates it to evoke a response in a viewer who is aware of the fictionality of what is depicted — some of her points can be applied more generally. In her earlier text, Sontag warns against the "anesthetiz[ing]" power of "images"; she argues that "repeated exposure" to the "photographic catalogue of misery and injustice" renders what is depicted simultaneously "more" and "less real," due to "making the horrible seem more ordinary" (2005: 15). In her later collection of essays, Sontag develops this argument. She remarks that photography used to be perceived by some as a potential form of "shock therapy" against violence, because "if [its] horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war" (2003: 14); however, she notes that photographs are easily divorced from context and thus "may give rise to opposing responses" (2003: 13). In fact, towards the end of her collection, she once again expresses a negative attitude towards the effects of representing violence (this time referring to fiction as well):

> As everyone has observed, there is a mounting level of acceptable violence and sadism in mass culture: films, television, comics, computer games. Imagery that would have had an audience cringing and recoiling in disgust forty years ago is watched without so much as a blink by every teenager in the multiplex. Indeed, mayhem is entertaining rather than shocking to many people in most modern cultures. (Sontag 2003: 100–101)

The pervasiveness of imaginary and real representations of suffering is seen here as an element of a vicious circle, one with real consequences in the form of loss of capacity to be shocked. Nonetheless, Sontag in her final essays contradicts simple diagnoses that would directly link

[2] Though it should be noted that this does not prevent them from being criticised for this same aspect.

seeing mediated images of suffering in general with desensitization, and the latter — with ethical failure. She argues that remembering about atrocities (a process triggered by representations) should be accompanied by "thinking" (2003: 115) and that "it is not necessarily better to be moved" since it is not seeing these representations itself but "passivity" in the face of suffering that one sees "that dulls feeling" (Sontag 2003: 102). Ultimately, Sontag does not arrive at an ethical alternative to reproducing suffering in photographs, although she cautions about their power and limitations. She sees them as "perform[ing] a vital function" in preserving memory and exhorts to "[l]et the atrocious images haunt us" (2003: 115), even as she adds that "a narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image" in producing an active moral reaction instead of ambiguous responses (2003: 122).

Judith Butler comments on Sontag's text, pointing out the inherent problems in Sontag's privileging of verbal (or narrative) over visual and in presenting the two as somehow in contrast.[3] Butler states that even according to Sontag, "photographs are needed as evidence for war crimes" (2009: 69), and thus "photography is built into the case made for truth" (2009: 70); it is not merely a source of "haunting" but a means towards "understanding" (2009: 96). Butler sees photography as capable of acknowledging the inalienable precarity of life: "the photograph acts on us in part through outliving the life it documents; it establishes in advance the time in which that loss will be acknowledged as a loss" (2009: 98). However, such an effect of confronting the beholder with the future pastness of the photograph's subject cannot be associated in the same form with fictional images.

Another scholar concerned with looking at (the images of) suffering whose work might be relevant here is Mark Seltzer. In his aforementioned article, Seltzer states that "[t]here is [...] a long-standing association between death and reproduction, modernized in the tight association of death, or taking life, and photography (what Oliver Wendell Holmes described, early on, as "hunting and skinning" with a camera)" (1997: 23). Seltzer diagnoses contemporary culture as obsessively pre-occupied with the "wound" whose public displays are now "routin[ized]" and in fact, serve as a basis for "sociality" (1997: 23). However, it is a spectacle that is sentimental and trite, a sociality that is pathological, a witnessing that is voyeuristic that he describes — and remarkably, his description, which earlier focused primarily on serial killers and war, culminates in references to televised narratives of suffering reproduced for the pleasure of the viewing public. These are the game show *Queen for a Day* from television's early days (whose contestants were to describe their misery for the purpose of winning a live studio audience's approval and material prizes), and the (then-recent) medical drama *ER*; this juxtaposition of the exhibitionist narrative purporting to show real women's suffering with a completely fictional serial might be emblematic of the way pain serves to obviate differences between representations of fact and fiction where the viewership is concerned.

Perhaps a contrast could be tentatively construed here between the notions of gazing and witnessing. Seltzer seems wholly critical of gazing at suffering; even as he sees it as productive of a form of sociality, this is a sociality based in pathology, treating another's pain as a spectacle for the masses. In turn, a reading of Sontag and Butler suggests that photography can occasion either/both: witnessing, where beholders are haunted and disturbed, and see a call to action, and/or gazing, where beholders treat the subjects of the photographs as the objects

[3] Another interesting critique of Sontag is offered by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in *Staring: How We Look* (2009) which offers the counterpoint of the perspective of the object of the stare: "the staree," and discusses the ethical implications of looking away; she also delves into the notion of beauty.

of the looking, rendered passive and distanced, transformed into aesthetic commodities by the logic of "visual consumerism" (Butler 2009: 100; cf. also Buchan, Gibson, and Howell 2018: 77). Whether the same potential exists in television series as fictional and commercial works is one of the subjects of my analysis.

Feminist/dystopian aesthetics of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Dietland*

The choice of two series I want to discuss is not accidental. While *The Handmaid's Tale* is doubtlessly more critically acclaimed and may aspire to the status of a cultural touchstone, it can be productively compared with the one-season-long cancelled *Dietland*, with which it shares a number of features. Not only are they both televisual adaptations of novels, but also both shows are preoccupied with the subjugation of their female characters and the psychological and physical trauma they suffer. The most striking images highlighted by *The Handmaid's Tale* and, to an extent, by *Dietland*, are of women's pain. These shows are also both explicitly engaged in a dialogue with feminism. My goal is to discuss how these shows' putative feminism is informed or de-formed by their violent and graphic content, and how they can be read in light of contemporary debates about feminism, sexism and sexual violence on screen.

Based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel and adapted for Hulu[4] by Bruce Miller, and starring Elisabeth Moss as its central character, June/Offred, *The Handmaid's Tale* premiered in 2017. It quickly garnered primarily positive reviews[5], and a number of awards including the Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series and the Golden Globe Award for Best Television Series — Drama. It was also singled out in reviews and critical texts precisely for its feminist resonance, particularly for the time of the Trump/Pence presidency (e.g. Nussbaum 2017; Yuan 2017; cf. Leyda 2018, Maher 2018). Critics noted that while the novel commented on "the Reagan era, a mightily perverse period for sexual politics" marked by a curious semi-alliance between anti-porn feminist activism and "anti-abortion New Christian Right ... intent on restoring traditional marriage," the series engages directly with current American politics, as its "Trumpian parallels are hard to miss," including for instance "a scene that ... directly evoked the Women's March" (Nussbaum 2017). The plot of the series, centring around an imperilled heroine, separated from her children and facing repeated acts of sexual violence, as sanctioned by a Christian theocratic autocracy, continues to unfold over several seasons now, each of them escalating the threats and the revolutionary zeal of its protagonist, while also delving into the inner lives of other victims of the Gilead regime as well as of some of its architects.

Dietland, by comparison, found very limited viewership and far less critical acclaim. Although its reviews were also largely favourable[6], the show, based on a 2015 novel by Sarai Walker and adapted by television veteran Marti Noxon[7], for AMC (a television station best known for prestige shows like *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* as well as the ratings hit *The Walk-*

4 A streaming service for which it represented its first critical hit where original content is concerned.

5 As evidenced, for instance, by its very high Rotten Tomatoes score https://www.rottentomatoes.com /tv/the_handmaid_s_tale/s01, DOA October 4, 2019.

6 As evidenced by Rotten Tomatoes score above 80; https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/dietland/s01 [access: 2.10.2019].

7 Known, among others, for the television series *unReal* and the award-winning adaptation of *Sharp Objects*, as well as the "divisive sixth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" (Nussbaum 2018; cf. also Gilbert 2018).

ing Dead) was cancelled after one season, ending without a full narrative resolution. *Dietland* stars Joy Nash as Alicia Kettle, going by the nickname Plum. Plum is under-employed by a teen beauty and lifestyle magazine, working as a ghostwriter responsible for responding to emails addressed to its editor, Kitty Montgomery (Julianna Margulies). She struggles with her body image, and pursues a gastric bypass surgery to facilitate weight loss. The storyline centres on Plum's/Alicia's gradual turn from self-hate to acceptance with the help of a feminist self-help group helmed by Verena Baptist (Robin Weigert), who promises Plum money for her surgery in exchange for going through a series of tasks (including undergoing a makeover and dating — an activity Plum refused to consider before losing weight) and counselling. Simultaneously, a feminist paramilitary organisation, named Jennifer, is targeting men guilty of violence against women (such as rapists) and those accused of being their enablers (including purveyors of pornography) for violent punishment; the two subplots are gradually revealed to be connected. The series' (and earlier, the novel's) secondary plots about rape victims and perpetrators of misogynist abuse resemble topical, contemporary stories about abuse from the headlines (Nussbaum 2018). The world is presented in a satirical manner, simultaneously "giddy and bleak," whereas the "narrative [is] propelled by dream sequences, waking nightmares, and lavish hallucinations" (Patterson 2018), taking place in a "landscape of unreality," resulting in the rendering of "femininity itself as the dystopian environment" (Nussbaum 2018).

Both series are thus rendered in the language of a dystopia whose character is explicitly gendered, albeit *The Handmaid's Tale* locates its dystopian origins in the rise of the fascist theocracy explicitly opposed to late capitalist modernity (with its social liberties and environmental devastation), whereas for *Dietland*, as the title suggests, the dystopia is found in the capitalist state itself, in everyday oppression faced by women: beauty myth, rape culture, and what the series describes as the "global dissatisfaction industrial complex" (quoted in Nussbaum 2018). One distinct difference between the shows is that while both are highly stylised when depicting oppression and violence, *The Handmaid's Tale* uses (hyper)realist naturalist aesthetics to depict heightened stakes of extreme forms of violence (most centrally institutional pervasive state-sanctioned procreative rape). Although "none of the atrocities depicted on screen exist without historical precedent" (Weber 2018: 193), they are (as they were in the novel) displaced from their actual sufferers (primarily women of colour) onto fictional characters who belong to a more privileged group; they also take place distinctly *not* in the present day of the United States but in what seems to be its fictionalised retro-future, even as the series draws parallels to current events. In turn, *Dietland* uses surrealism, offering the viewers a veritable "carnival of distortion" (Nussbaum 2018) that is nonetheless recognisable as taking place in the real world of 2010s America, with its own version of a #MeToo movement (which its creation predated and anticipated; cf. Gilbert 2018: 44) and hacktivism. The dystopia does not require fictionalising, even if it happens to fictional characters: it is only women's reactions, the feminist terrorism it occasioned, that is imagined.

Uses and aesthetics of violence

In this section, I focus specifically on violent images employed by *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Dietland*. Violence is central to the plotlines and aesthetics of both series under discussion, and it can be argued that in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, it has perhaps dominated the

conversation that surrounds it. I contend that, albeit its representations and victims differ to a considerable extent, some of the functions of violent images used by the series converge; nonetheless, the remaining discrepancies deserve analysis.

The violence in *The Handmaid's Tale* is omnipresent and remains a constant threat; it is instrumental to both the background against which the action takes place and the primary storylines. One of the possible ways to organise these representations is by dividing them into two types: the first is impersonal and state-sanctioned — resulting from Gilead's laws; the second includes acts that are personal/individual — when characters commit violent acts against one another that are against the extant law or that are motivated by private animosity. State-mandated violence takes on the form of regular corporal punishment experienced by the handmaids at the hands of representatives of the state, be it Aunt Lydia or the families they are assigned to (some handmaids lose eyes or limbs to it), and the occasional corporal punishment that happens to those in power (including amputations as well, as in the case of Serena Joy Waterford in Season Two final episode). Many scenes take place against the backdrop of "the Wall," where dead bodies of those the state considers criminals are left to rot as a means of societal control through fear. The Colonies are another space of mass violence (in fact, genocide), where those convicted e.g. for gender-related crimes (i.e. LGBT people) are sentenced to hard labour in hazardous conditions that impact their health ultimately leading to death. However, the most prominent images of violence are connected to the central function of the handmaids. Handmaids must submit to reproductive and sexual violence: they are regularly raped for the purpose of impregnation, in accordance with Gilead's laws.

Significantly, while reproductive violence is systemic and institutionalised, the most drastic images thereof present sexual violence as personalised: June is raped a number of times in Season One, but the scene designed to evoke particular horror in the audience takes place once she is already pregnant and overdue in Season Two, in Episode 10, "The Last Ceremony." Serena grows impatient with waiting for June's child to be born, and convinces her husband, Commander Fred Waterford, to rape June/Offred, ostensibly for the purposes of inducing labour. Though Fred and Serena's power over June is almost absolute, this act is not sanctioned by Gilead or part of June's servitude; instead, for Fred it serves to satisfy his possessiveness towards June in the aftermath of her "affair" with their driver (who is her child's biological father). Serena's motivation is more complex; in addition to trying to separate June from the child she still carries, it is a way to wield the limited power she possesses, to act out her rage for Fred's physical and emotional acts of infidelity and, perhaps, to further guarantee June's animosity towards him.

The depiction of violence in *The Handmaid's Tale* serves a number of functions. The state-sanctioned violence in *The Handmaid's Tale* constructs the diegetic world and determines the show's aesthetics — the series depicts an oppressive regime whose power operates in corporeal terms. In addition, both the general, impersonal violence of the background and the more private violent acts of the state's operatives serve to determine the moral tones of the story: to remind the viewers that characters shown as occasionally sympathetic (like Serena or even Aunt Lydia may seem in episodes that focus on their inner lives) are still morally repugnant and capable of personal cruelty and viciousness. In addition, the personal violence heightens the stakes, as it escalates over time. June's peril increases when other characters develop animosity towards her, and this creates narrative tension, necessary to maintain engage-

ment in multiple-seasons-spanning television (Nussbaum 2018). Furthermore, the violence experienced by June and other handmaids, like Emily or Janine, serves to motivate and justify the violence they ultimately commit as part of their struggle to survive or simply to avenge wrongs done to them; some of the most obvious examples would be June killing Commander George Winslow in self-defense in the third season episode "Liars," or Emily attempting to kill Aunt Lydia in season two finale, "The Word." Another function that is served by the violent scenes, however, is that of shocking and horrifying the viewers. *The Handmaid's Tale* has been described as particularly difficult and even harrowing to watch (e.g. Sturges 2018; Weber 2018), and this undoubtedly contributes to its perception among viewers; the gruelling experience it provides may be treated as a badge of honour, a claim to maturity on the part of the viewer. The often-emphasised verisimilitude of the series, the fact that it follows "one of the axioms of the novel: no event [being] allowed into it that does not have a precedent in human history" (Atwood 2019: 418), combined with the "unrelentingly bleak" (Sturges 2018) imagery of torture and suffering contributes to the supposition that to watch may be to witness *true* horrors, albeit concentrated for the televisual experience. At the same time, however, *The Handmaid's Tale* television series is a transmedia property whose reach exceeds the footage shown on television, and while this has been discussed in connection to its impact on activism (e.g. Howell 2019), other uses of handmaids-related imagery, including a viral wedding photograph including the couple against the background of the Wall and red-clad handmaids (cf. Kircher 2019), suggest that it is being consumed as an aesthetic as well, and in ways that may certainly occasion critical reflection.[8]

The violence in *Dietland* can also be divided into certain types and it similarly appears to escalate over the course of the series. The show takes place in a world that is defined by background violence of varying degrees of horror, happening to women and girls around the world all the time; this is emphasised by emails read by Plum, a number of which mention or allude to sexual abuse. Furthermore, viewers continue to learn about other instances of murder, rape and harassment, the latter of which at times lead to women's suicides. Notably, this background is barely depicted on-screen for the better part of the season; the awareness of the prevalence of sexual abuse may be a constant presence in the characters' life, and it is one that they share with viewers, but this awareness can be somewhat abstract. The second type of violence is arguably more graphic: it is the acts of revenge (including torture and gruesome murders) that members of Jennifer exact on men "who've been accused of crimes against women, ranging from institutionalized misogyny to violent sexual assault" (Gilbert 2018: 44), or on others they deem guilty of enabling and furthering their abuse (like a prominent adult film actress famous for filming rape-themed pornographic materials). In these cases, footage of their suffering (intradiegetic recordings) or the images of their mutilated dead bodies are shown in the series more prominently.

It can be argued that medical and cosmetic interventions shown in *Dietland* constitute another type of violence. Though they are initially Plum's wish, they are also depicted as oppressive, invasive and painful; during consultations, Plum is objectified and humiliated

8 Cf. also Seltzer 1997, where he emphasises the connection between fashion and violence: he argues that "the fashion model on the runway" is often characterised by her "traumatized look" (1997: 21), and that fashion photography plays on the connection between death and eroticism, and evokes scopophilic pleasures of looking at the dead — and particularly female — body (1997: 21–22). The issue of commodification of trauma and women's suffering could certainly bear a more detailed discussion, impossible here due to space constraints.

as well as subjected to expected physical discomfort, and the series draws a parallel between this treatment and more obvious forms of violence against women that it criticises. The procedure Plum pursues and ultimately rejects, a gastric bypass, is in particular shown as a potential form of self-harm perpetuated by the beauty and fashion industry for which Plum works. The camera lingers on Plum's body as it is drawn upon in permanent marker by a surgeon explaining that a gastric bypass will need to be followed by surgeries to reduce her skin surface; cosmetic procedures to make Plum more attractive — "fuckable," in the show's parlance ("F... This", Episode 4) — require suffering and cause discomfort. They are also explicitly linked with victimhood, as ways of becoming not only more sexually attractive to predatory men but also of becoming more defenceless and communicating said lack of defences to those who may wish a woman harm: they are ways in which she can "turn [her] self into better prey," Plum announces in Episode 7, "Monster High," echoing to an extent Seltzer's indictment that "[t]he fashion victim has [...] emerged as something of a model trauma victim" (1997: 23).

Finally, a central instance of violence featured in the series is the sexual violence that occurs not as the background fact of everyday life or in the discussed but not shown backstory connected to Jennifer's vengeance, but to the protagonist. While Plum goes through the tasks assigned to her by Verena, she meets a man who fetishises her and who later sexually assaults her; the violence is shown on screen in Episode 8, in a particularly "brutal scene" (Ariano 2018), which requires the audience to witness the character's rape in excruciating detail. This act serves as a catalyst for Plum's further radicalisation, and its depiction: perhaps as a potential justification of her later (illegal) actions in the eyes of the viewers.

Both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Dietland* thus centre around a particularly gruesome scene of sexual violation experienced by their protagonists; in both cases, these particular scenes (of pregnant June being raped by Fred on Serena's behest; of Plum being raped by an acquaintance fetishising her weight) do not occur in the source texts. While they are plausible and in keeping with the dystopian worlds imagined by the novels, the television shows are elected by their creators to show more intense, horrific violence or at least to make it personally-experienced by the protagonist and, accordingly, shown explicitly to the viewer. In both cases, these instances of violence take place at a similarly late point in the season, serving as the character's moments of particular peril and suffering before eventual triumph or its approximation (June saves her child by delivering her out of Gilead; Plum regains her dignity and self-respect by temporarily allying herself with Jennifer). These scenes of rape may not be entirely gratuitous as they perform certain narrative functions; nevertheless, it could be argued that their omission would change relatively little in the characters' journey. June's motivation or her attitude to Gilead, Serena or Fred undergoes no alteration and is not articulated in a substantially different way after this (additional) rape; Plum has already been humiliated and degraded by patriarchal rape culture that surrounds her and is already partly supporting Jennifer's goals if not their means. Perhaps the central goal these scenes perform is, therefore, as a form of statement for the series they exist in. In *Dietland*, the voiceover suggests that oppression is a universal part of female experience; making Plum go through rape (and not "merely" other forms of violence as discussed here) serves to underscore that claim for the watching audience. As Emily Nussbaum says in her review of *The Handmaid's Tale*, "[a] television show, especially one that intends to run many seasons, can't bore ... so, inevitably, the stakes are raised" (Nussbaum 2017): this also extends to how June's suffering

and the way it is shown must always exceed previously shown acts, since, as mentioned before, violent images lose their power to shock otherwise (Sontag 2005: 15). In addition, the series under discussion do not air in a media vacuum; on the contrary, their broadcasting takes place in a landscape dominated by series like the aforementioned *Game of Thrones*, where sexual abuse is both a plot point and a constant presence in the background and sexual and physical violence are shown in a remarkably graphic manner. The question here might be whether the scenes in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Dietland* serve as a point of similarity with a series that, while divisive, has resulted in high ratings and a number of awards — to show rape is to generate interest; or perhaps as a point of distinction, as particularly difficult (and thus more desirable) to watch — on purpose.

Conclusions

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag discusses images dedicated to mythological (and thus conspicuously fictional) suffering:

> [C]ruelties from classical antiquity ... offer something for every taste. No moral charge attaches to the representation of these cruelties. Just the provocation: can you look at this? There is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching. There is the pleasure of flinching. (Sontag 2004: 41)

The same may be said about the suffering that is caused to June and Plum (and a number of other characters on their respective series). The audience is challenged to watch without blinking as they are raped and humiliated, as their oppression is enacted in bodily and distinctly graphically rendered terms. The two series use the scenes I described before to build reputations of being harrowing or at least challenging to watch, establishing it as a part of their credentials, an element of their claim to prestige, quality genres (since other prestige shows do not shy away from difficult and brutal subject matter) as well as to feminism (as they thematise the suffering of women, a timely feminist concern). The viewing experience of atrocities is implied to constitute a form of witnessing, because the fictional events are linked to real ones: historical atrocities in *The Handmaid's Tale* and everyday violence publicised in the media during the #MeToo movement in *Dietland*. Nonetheless, the fact that the suffering that viewers are invited to linger on is not only fictional but also personal for the protagonists may seem to divorce it at least somewhat from its purported universality. What is more, if passivity is what Sontag warns against in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, and if she sees "sentimentality" (2003: 102) as potentially divorced from ethical action, then it may seem that reproducing imaginary suffering on television runs counter to feminist goals. She makes a significant point about the manner in which gazing can produce the illusion of agency, an alibi to inaction. She states that "imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by images suggests a link between the faraway sufferers — seen close-up on the television screen — and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet one more mystification of our real relations to power" (Sontag 2003: 102). Seltzer comes to similar conclusions: a satisfaction offered by looking at suffering arises from being part of the looking crowd, which both allows the viewers to experience sociality and creates "an identification with the world insofar as it is a hostile place" (Seltzer 1997: 23). Arguably, these may be some of the perverse pleasures offered by watching women's suffering in ostensibly

feminist narratives: pleasures that bear interrogating and challenging, as they may serve not as a catalyst to action but its substitute.[9]

It may be impossible to escape this paradox. While thematising violence against women in works of fiction or near-fiction can have a certain value in raising awareness and contributing to the conversation about it, such images will always entail the possibility of being divorced from their frame (as when the costumes of handmaids become not only the tools of real-life feminist protest but also quirky wedding photoshoot props, or at least are perceived as such). This becomes even more of a risk when images of violence are simultaneously horrific and intentionally aestheticised, as can be seen in particular in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which constructs its language out of violent acts and which colour-codes the participants in violence, resulting in images that shock but also inspire reproduction. Notably, other filmmakers have tried to find ways to avoid making the violence they depict visually appealing — for instance in the case of Jennifer Fox's *The Tale* (2018), which deals with sexual abuse of a minor, by centring the child's perspective in claustrophobic close cuts, and using special effects to accommodate the child actor (Cohen 2018). Another, more recent example is the Netflix miniseries *Unbelievable*, which focuses large parts of its narrative on the life of the rape survivor after the assault and uses flashbacks to the rape act in a very limited way, as brief, disturbing snapshots that retain the point of view of the victim.[10] In contrast, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Dietland* place the viewer only partly in the perspective of the violated women; the audience is also invited to observe them from a distance, and later, to forget about the violence that has served its purpose and is consigned to the characters' past as just one more atrocity. Ultimately, the two series can be interpreted by the viewers in both empowering and disempowering ways; they occasion disparate readings and can be used to start meaningful conversations. Perhaps the same conversations, however, could be started without continually escalating the violence that women characters are subjected to, as though previous horrors were insufficiently engaging and had become narratively forgettable in their aftermath.

[9] It bears noting that *Dietland* was also much more prone to showing violation of male bodies enacted by women: while such images exist in *The Handmaid's Tale* as well (e.g. June killing Commander Winslow), they are far less prominent than its images of women's suffering. Considering the fact that texts following such a pattern (as the aforementioned *Law & Order SVU* or *Game of Thrones*) flourish while those that depict women harming men (for instance *Sweet/Vicious*, about college-aged women vigilantes) are cancelled, a conclusion may be drawn that watching men suffer does not involve a similar pleasure and thus, generate audience engagement.

[10] It bears noting that the two narratives that refrain from sensationalising the suffering of their subjects, retain the women's perspectives and depict sexual assault in a way that does not encourage aestheticisation are both based on true stories, which is perhaps why their creators' attention to ethical concerns seems more pronounced.

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