

IB Film: Textual Analysis

The Handmaid's Tale: "Offred" and "Birth Day" (Reed Morano, 2017)

Sequence Chosen: 17:30-21:24 of Season One, Episode Two, "Birth Day"

Word Count: 1702

A daunting portrait of the past, present, and future, Reed Morano's adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* brings Margaret Atwood's original 1985 novel into the context and fears of post-2010s America. Beyond Atwood's original timeline, uncertainties over a rising environmental crisis and rise of highly controversial presidential candidate Donald Trump in late 2016 shaped the detail-oriented adaptational choices of Morano's work, ultimately forming *the Handmaid's Tale* into a cautionary yet documentative tale (Dray). In the nation of Gilead, plagued by a sweeping wave of infertility, progressions reverse by the hand of a newfound authoritarian government. Women lose their rights to property, choice, and basic human rights, while men serve to uphold religious conducts to the highest standard in their regime of desperation. Handmaids serve as the involuntary surrogates of the regime's highest members, facing life and death through interactions with their oppressors (Morano). To communicate these dynamics of power, Morano utilizes various techniques involving lighting, mise-en-scene, color, sound, and editing to fully induct her audience into Gilead and the struggles between her levels of hierarchy, not only examining the interactions between men and women, but women among other women. Such techniques have adapted to the connotations of modern society, to bring our most pressing concerns and feminist demands to light in this post-apocalyptic yet unignorable possibility of our reality.

This investigation examines a sequence from “Birth Day”, just before Ofwarren delivers her child. Protagonist Offred attends to housechores while the wives wait for Ofwarren’s delivery. This scene hints at the unspoken prejudices and harms of intersectional feminism, or lack thereof, and Morano’s techniques highlight Offred’s navigation across the powers around her and her innate desire to persevere through each strike her new society brings to her.



*Figure 1 and 2: Offred looks into the sitting room, carrying a tray of the mistress’ amenities  
(Morano)*

The mise-en-scene places Offred at the audience’s central view, but in context to her surroundings, as revealed by a slow pull-back dolly shot, she is restricted from entering the foreground ahead of her: the wives’ den. The camera does not enter her point of view, but sound allows audiences to infer the occurring scene. The repeated chanting of “breathe” is audible from the background as the mistress winches to her manifested labor pains.

While Offred’s positioning is subtle, it distinguishes clear boundaries to her freedoms as a handmaid in the presence of highly respected wives. Such dynamics are reminiscent of those during Second-Wave feminism in America, where the concerns of middle to upper-middle class white women trumped the concerns of women in differing socioeconomic standings, often targeting communities for their “inferiority” in the overarching battle to achieve human rights (Cavanaugh). This idea continues to develop for the duration of this scene, and the physical

staging of these women echo this concept of women putting other women down when given such comfortability and authority (Fuller).

Entering the kitchen, Offred encounters her confidant, Ofglen. Ofglen replaces the typical greeting “Blessed be the fruit” with “At least someone spiked the juice”. Her tone invites a more vocal Offred. She trusts and confides in Ofglen, but for the sake of Ofglen’s safety and her own, Offred keeps close to establish a barrier between Gilead’s all-seeing eyes and their exchange.



*Figure 3 and 4: Offred and Ofglen share a hushed conversation (Morano)*

Offred occupies the left-hand side of the frame while Ofglen remains off-screen. In turn, Ofglen occupies the right-hand side when Offred is offscreen, consistent with the 180-degree rule of conversational filmmaking (Ferrari). While both frames contain a pale and gentle palette of light and bright colors in the background, each character occupying the foreground has a darkened tone and sits close to the camera, conveying a sense of restriction and reservation.

The heavily contrasting tones reference their sickeningly idyllic environment, where oppression and fear wreak havoc under this pristine facade. Though Morano’s staging and color grading, the audience anticipates the atmosphere of fear. Although the characters confide in one another for their shared experiences and shared trauma, they keep alert of their dialogue within the Gileadean house. This practice pays homage to the “consciousness raising” meetings

in Second-Wave feminism, where women shared a safe space to voice their experiences within their physical and social walls (Grady).

Ofglen leaves the kitchen as Serena Joy, Commander Waterford's wife, enters the room. Serena questions Offred and commands her to enter the dining room.



*Figure 5: Serena enters the kitchen, calling for Offred (Morano)*

Serena's introduction is one of established power. Emerging from the blue-tinged corridor, her presence and tonality is one of command, in high contrast to Offred's presence with no established area or sense of belonging in the house. The blue corridor implies its possession under the blue-dressed wives (Jung). For Offred, there is no room nor environment that matches her prescribed dress. Serena returns under the blue shadows as Offred follows her into the wives' domain.

In the dining room, Offred meets two more wives who ask about the progress of Ofwarren's delivery, having not yet entered the delivery room themselves. Once more, the

social hierarchy between the wives and handmaids is reinforced through Morano's angles and directorial choices.



*Figure 6: Two wives ask Offred about Ofwarren's delivery (Morano)*

In this shot, the camera sits at a low angle, representative of Offred's literal and implied position among the women. Offred is shorter, but the angle aiming up to the taller and more prominent figures of the scene establishes their superiority over Offred's character in this society. Likewise, when Offred is addressed, the editing of the scene cuts to these shots of her correspondents, associating Offred's point of view as the audience's. Offred is the smaller, more submissive woman of this scene, and the wives continue to assert themselves through their language.

When referring to Offred, the wife in the foreground refers to her as something other than a person at all. When the other wife offers Offred a cookie, the wife in the foreground replies "You shouldn't spoil them, sugar is bad for them." This tone strips Offred of her

personhood, comparable to the language one would use with their pet, or something else that is unhuman or in possession or control of another being (Morano).



*Figure 7: Offred reacts to the wife's remarks (Morano)*

The camera is fixed on Offred's face with just a glint of blue in her eyes. This shot examines Offred's reaction to the dehumanizing comment while revealing details of these wives literally and figuratively reflected within Offred. The color grading of this scene accentuates the hues of deep red and deep blue, the colors reflected by the handmaids and the wives of Gilead (Jung). As complementary colors on the color wheel, by definition, they contrast each other to the greatest extent for the two individual hues. In Offred's eyes, the hues of blue from the surrounding wives and the natural blue of her own eye color hint at the power she holds within her red-dressed shell. She recognizes the wives' power over her yet recognizes the power within herself as well. There is an untapped rebellion that she does not display, yet the small details of her blue eyes and reactions to the women around her demonstrate her awakening potential.



*Figure 8: Serena considers the wife's offer (Morano)*

With hesitation, Serena extends the offer and plucks a macaron from the table. Serena's positioning is as solidified as the other wives. Once more, the camera captures Serena from a slightly low angle to reinforce that she is the final say in Offred's allowances, despite the wishes of the other wives or the wishes of Offred herself.



*Figure 9: Serena hands Offred a macaron (Morano)*

The wives observe the exchange silently and the camera quickly cuts away to a high angle shot of Offred as she approaches the macaron, an example in which Morano's editing allows audiences to embody an observational role when examining the dynamics between these women.

The focus on Serena and Offred's exchange develops an atmosphere of pressure on both parties and is further implied by the circular and enclosed nature of the characters' positioning. Offred is pressured to comply with her captors, accepting the macaron from the woman who despises her and believes she deserves no reward. In Serena's position, the second wife's sympathy is one that she does not share, but in an effort to appear sympathetic to her handmaid, she offers the macaron with hesitance and suppressed agitation.

Serena tells Offred to leave after she takes a bite of the macaron, and Offred backs away from the dining room as the first wife continues to speak ill of her and the other handmaids.



*Figure 10 and 11: Offred leaves the dining room and stumbles into the bathroom (Morano)*

As Offred flees the scene, the camera steadily tracks her face as she approaches another door, then drastically shifts to a fumbled, hand-held, and out-of-focus shot of the back of her head as she enters the bathroom. The smooth tracking implies serenity and composure with miniscule clues of physical disgust. However, the moment Offred enters the private bathroom,

the clumsy nature of the camera mimicking Offred's sporadic movements to the sink imply extreme discomfort and her unrestricted expression.



*Figure 12 and 13: Offred spits the macaron out and cleans the sink and her mouth (Morano)*

Offred, free from the eyes of other handmaids and wives, spits the macaron into the sink. The camera cuts to the sink as Offred cleans the surrounding drain, then cuts back to Offred's face as she wipes her mouth clean. Perfectly at eye-level with Offred, the audience sees what Offred sees in the mirror. In her quiet rebellion, audiences witness her intent to give up simple indulgences rather than accept a reward from her oppressors. She takes this small victory for herself in her own domain. She destroys evidence of compliance. She pretends under their eyes only to rebel when they are closed. Recognizing her place and power in such an authoritative and all-seeing government, she knows that rebellion must start small, then one day grow into the full-fledged movement she recognizes within herself and her peers.

In this sequence, Morano's directorial choices for mise-en-scene, lighting, tonality, color, and editing reflect those demands of power and superiority in oppressive environments. Morano addresses the intersectional components of oppressive societies, a recognition of two parties who are labelled as "the oppressed" by definition, yet one holds superiority over the other in ways unmatched and severely damaging to the lesser. By bringing such interactions and power plays to light with such techniques, Morano ensures her audience's awareness to

the ordeals of power among others of your kind, serving as a cautionary tale to what our own society could become if people failed to be empathetic, and a documentative tale for those societies where this oppression is their true and untouched reality.

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