

Anna Veen talks to Margaret Atwood

Future Imperfect



The Handmaid's night out: Tall tales in the toilets

There are impeccable credentials behind the film of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Volker Schlöndorff, the director, is best known for his work in putting the final stamp on such arch dissenters as Heinrich Böll (*The Lost Honour Of Katharina Blum*) and Günter Grass (*The Tin Drum*). Margaret Atwood, who wrote the original novel, has a distinctive feminist flavour and following. Natasha Richardson, the lead actress, comes of Redgrave stock. And Harold Pinter, the adaptor, needs no introducing for British liberal audiences. Strange, then, that Atwood's subtle dystopia has emerged as such a flatly-coloured, slickly-moulded Hollywood product.

As the Euro-movie machinery whirred into action, it left little of Atwood's vision intact. Pinter bled dry the background of the novel, which depicts the movement of America into a highly plausible dystopia, assuming the victory of a fundamentalist Right. Atwood's method was to use the memory of

her heroine to show this social transformation as realistically as possible, since, as she says, 'the future is like death, nobody has ever been there. But I still wanted to make it convincing so I didn't use anything that isn't in the programme of the American fundamentalists today'.

These latter-day puritans are preaching everything from women-back-to-the-home to death-to-homosexuals. Atwood explains, 'I thought about it realistically: if I wanted to put you back in the home, how would I go about it? Probably, I'd make it impossible for you to have a job. I'd make it illegal for you to own property. I wanted to show the mechanics of divesting women of their power.'

But the problems of translating Atwood's idiosyncratic stream-of-consciousness style onto the screen means that most of this disappears. The process of social transformation is more or less lost, leaving the story to float as weightless as science fiction.

Unfortunately, the film was originally shot to hold lengthy voice-overs, which were cut at the final moment, leaving Natasha Richardson's face to struggle silently with the weight of expectation and interpretation. Without its verbal subtlety, much of the novel's charged symbolism is lost: 'Films are too literal', Atwood says shortly. 'It's too hard to film a metaphor.'

Overall, Atwood's tone tends to suggest that she is dissatisfied with the film. When we discuss the parallels between mothering and artistic creation that crop up in her work, she smiles a little bitterly: 'No it's not my baby. When your books go out into the world they're not yours any more.'

But she still believes in the film and its messages, and admires – if she does not entirely sympathise with – the visions of the men who were its foster-fathers. She admires producer Daniel Wilson: 'Of course his wife put him up to it. She persuaded him into it. It was difficult,

because nobody in America wants to touch a film that deals with an apocalypse masterminded by the fundamentalist Right. But he sweated blood to make that movie'.

The rifts created by the circumstances of an international co-production are obvious in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The touchstone of the novel is Atwood's female consciousness, raised by her 60s and 70s experiences. The North American context is vivid too. Where else in the West are fundamentalists confident enough to preach the return of women to traditional womanly roles, death to homosexuals, and the restructuring of society along puritan lines?

Taking a male adapter and director destroys the first of these contexts. Taking a British adapter and a German director the second. Atwood tends to downplay these differences, 'It doesn't do to be simple about gender,' she says and the Europeans know about totalitarianism

too'. Yet she cannot deny that certain results of this re-contextualising upset her.

The worst divergence occurred in the German publicity machine. *The Handmaid's Tale* was advertised there with posters showing a naked woman with a blood-streaked back, her hands chained behind her. 'The advertisement was extraordinary,' Atwood says. 'The slogan ran, "Every man's desire, every woman's dread". Then, I was angry about the methods men used to film my novels. I didn't want them marketed as soft porn.'

But although Atwood feels that an influx of women into film-making would make a difference, she feels pessimistic about her own ability to take such control. 'It's easy for women to write,' she says. 'You don't have to ask someone to have millions of dollars worth of confidence in you. But in Germany, there were a few women who tried to persuade me that I could direct. And I was tempted.'

Atwood is eager to emphasise that the few unfortunate circumstances that surround the film should not entirely damn it. Indeed, although it opened to mixed reviews in the States, and will probably seem even more alien here, where Christian fundamentalism is not an immediate social threat, there is a refreshing sense of enterprise about the project. The visual metaphors and individual performances are excellent, and its sense of responsibility remains.

Volker Schlöndorff sidesteps any opportunity for sexual voyeurism. The peculiar scenes in which the Commander (Robert Duval) makes love to the Handmaid (Natasha Richardson) in the presence of his wife (Faye Dunaway) are carefully untitillating; while the few moments of free sex between Natasha Richardson and her chosen lover carry a charged, erotic tenderness rarely seen on Hollywood screens.

'Whatever the problems of adapting a complex novel,' Atwood says, 'movies communicate on a scale that novels just don't, any more. And that makes it worth while.'●



Capital City

The Invisible City (19 October – 1 December) is the second exhibition in The Photographers' Gallery's ongoing London Project. In contrast to the first exhibition in 1988, which faced the visible signs of dramatic change in the capital, *The Invisible City* deals with qualities that are not so easily seen or defined.

The aim of this exhibition is to piece together, through the commissioned work of six young artists, a series of fragments towards a representation of the 'human condition' of London in 1990. People are reasserted as the focus of the city, but not in the familiar pattern of urban documentary surveys.

None of the artists in the exhibition is constrained by notions of documentary realism. In their work the real and the imaginary flow together, their city is one built around the physical and psychological terrains mapped out by its inhabitants.

The above picture is part of a series by Simon Crump. Crump's images register a familiar ambivalence to the city, one which has cut through all representations of the metropolis since the first stirrings of modernism. On one hand, the city is perceived as life-giving, energising body and soul, creating possibilities, expanding and extending experience. On the other, the city is a predator

that either denies or corrupts all levels of personal contact.

The image of London formed in this exhibition is often dark and oppressive, a city of indistinct locations, and few, if any, recognisable landmarks. There is a sense of confinement here at odds with what, in recent years, has come to signify 'the new London' — the soaring atriums, the shopping malls and arcades — places where history has been reconstituted and commodified.

The pace and colour of public life, so much in evidence in recent independent photography, is ignored here in favour of more hidden territories, dense and layered spaces where history is not sold but hangs heavily, creating a sense of unease.●

David Chandler

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Suzanne Moore



The end of nuclear power in the home
Family Fortunes

As working mothers now scabble for part-time nursery care, it seems scarcely believable that one of the earliest demands of the feminist movement was 24-hour creches. Or that Shulamith Firestone called for a 'cybernetic communism' in which 'child-bearing could be taken over by technology'. Twenty years later, the Tories gather under the slogan 'Keeping The Family Together', while in the States conservatives methodically hack away at abortion rights and freedom of speech all in the name of the family.

Thatcher warns us of the danger of a 'creche generation' conveniently ignoring the fact that the only successfully established 24-hour creches – public schools – actually produced most of her government. While she may be dangerously out of touch with her call for mothers to stay at home, Labour, with its air-brushed images of decidedly *unclear* families, is still playing safe with its insipid demands for men to spend more time with their children.

Nobody wants to be seen as 'anti-family', least of all the desperately heterosexual Kinnocks. And as *The Family Way: A New Approach To Policy Making* by Anna Coote, Harriet Harman and Patricia Hewitt suggests, changing demographics have refreshed the parts that mere feminism couldn't reach. It is now fully legitimate and indeed sensible to demand more childcare, support for the increasing number of lone parents and parental leave for men as well as women. All of this would be very nice as well as freeing up the women needed by the labour market.

Many would see this pragmatic approach, beating the Tories on their own moral high-ground, as a far more positive one. But in the rush to be more pro-family-than-thou, we stand to lose as much as we gain. It is not that the family is the root of all evil and that we should all go and live in communes. It's rather that, although we are finally in a situation where we can talk about the rights of fathers as well as what's best for the children, we can

still only discuss women's position in the family if we sneak it in through the back door.

Although the critique of the family as the key locus of female oppression remains one of the central insights of feminism, there has been a lot of back-tracking by feminists themselves on this issue. Feminists have families too. Trying to resolve the tension between coming from a family and having a family with an understanding of just how bloody awful it is a lot of the time for a lot of women, has produced some bizarre strategies. Everything from a bovine celebration of motherhood to Germaine Greer's romanticisation of the extended peasant family to the currently fashionable neutered language in which we discuss family policy.

We now talk euphemistically of 'parenting' instead of mothering and fathering as though the two were interchangeable. In the wonderful world of *Parenthood*, *The Movie* and *The Policy*, men magically want to take equal responsibility for their offspring. Maybe they really do say that they want to, but the fact is they don't do it in practice – I won't bore you with statistics.

Yet, as Anna Coote writes, in contrast to the Right's stress on financial responsibility and discipline, the Left stresses men's changing role within the family as a caring, sharing one. Very cosy I'm sure. I hate to be bitter and twisted about it, but how is this to come about? And isn't it just shoring up an already crumbling structure anyway?

If anything, men's role in the family is becoming more and more marginalised. A common pattern is the women and children as the stable unit with men drifting in and out. As the divorce rate soars and women remarry or go into other relationships the children go with her. It is not that the children of single mothers are more likely to be emotionally deprived, the problem is that they are more likely to be financially deprived. Yet the Left was decidedly uneasy at the Tory initiative for increased legislation to make men pay for

their kids.

Labour attacked the policy on the grounds that it was unworkable and not enough anyway. The issue of whether we want men to be financially responsible was dodged, although the image of the man who has to be hunted down and persuaded by law to hand over 11 quid a week is a different one from the nice Labour Party man who would take paternity leave if only he could get it.

All of this leaves women with the worst of both worlds. At the moment they have all the disadvantages of the nuclear family without any guarantee of the supposed 'advantages'. Except for an increasingly narrow class of people, they are neither kept nor protected. Child abuse – the standard or satanic version – rape and domestic violence all occur within the haven of the family.

Although the feminist family may be more flexibly defined, undermining the traditional family is no longer the business of feminism. Realisation has replaced idealism and there is little to choose between left and right pronouncements on the perceived crisis. As more marriages break down under the strain of women's demands it seems to me entirely appropriate that there should be a crisis and that we should once again be pushing to talk about women's position *within* the family as well as outside it. We should be able to demand childcare, not because employers need more female workers nor because it's better for the kids, but because it is better for *us*.

As the authentic family dies its natural death, economically and ideologically, and the family is increasingly defined as being 'whatever you come home to', we should take our cues from the infamous Clause 28. Instead of 'the family way', surely it is our business to promote 'pretended family relationships' because we know that the real thing sucks.●

Suzanne Moore will be writing a regular monthly column.