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"I AM THE MARKET"
A CRITIQUE OF THE COMMODITY
IN SELECTED FICTION BY MARGARET ATWOOD

by

PENNY TANTAKIS, B.A.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

May 4, 1994

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*"I am the market: A Critique of the Commodity
In Selected Fiction by Margaret Atwood"*

submitted by Penny Tantakis, B.A.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Louise M. Gosselin

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May 25, 1994

Abstract

This thesis explores the nature and development of Margaret Atwood's materialist vision of culture. Drawing upon Marxist, poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories, my theoretical framework allows me to move beyond traditional historical materialism and extend the notion of the commodity to map out the materiality of sign systems operating in Atwood's work and culture. I suggest that my theoretical paradigm, when applied to *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Robber Bride*, engages issues of subjectivity and hegemony on a spectacular stage of late capitalism. Both my theoretical journey and Atwood's narrative movement chronicle the dynamics of contemporary culture and interrogate conditions of possibility for both political containment and social transgression.

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CRITICAL PREFACE

Margaret Atwood's Material World

In 1973, a brief but now infamous controversy erupted over Margaret Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. At the forefront was writer, literary critic and Canadian nationalist Robin Mathews, who charged that Atwood had ignored issues of community and struggle to set up an ideal of the "liberal individual anarchist" (120). He concluded that Atwood must be placed with a group of Canadian writers which passively accepts American-defined terms of democracy, humanity, liberty, the individual and, as a result, can only "preach surrender to or collaboration with the imperial forces" (121, 130). Other critics, including Frank Davey and James Steele, concurred with Mathews's judgements, often citing Atwood's fictional work and "poetic world vision" (Steele 80) -- in addition to her *Survival* -- as anti-materialist, bourgeois, and pro-Establishment, and implying that her Frygian approach could not offer a challenge to hegemonic cultural codes¹. In direct response to Mathews' attack on her alleged elitist idealism, Atwood defended herself and her victim-survival thesis, conceding the need for change but asserting her desire "to begin with where we are now," not with wishful distortions (*Second Words* 130).

I contend that this comment is a revealing indication

of Atwood's own brand of cultural materialism found in her fictional *oeuvre*, one which is highly concerned with questioning hegemonic operations of power. Rick Salutin has gone so far as to suggest that *Survival* can be read as "proto-Marxist," because "it grounds the cultural phenomenon (Canlit) in a material historical reality" (57). My own reading argues that her novels can be viewed as highly sensitive to the material factors producing and reproducing social relations and subjectivity in the historical moment of late capitalism. In virtually every one of her texts -- replete with brand names, glossy ads, shopping malls and Eaton's catalogues -- the world of advertising and marketing provides an insistent anchor point for her investigations into consumer culture. The unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing* is a commercial artist, as are Elaine in *Cat's Eye* and Jake in *Bodily Harm*. Marian McAlpin, the protagonist in *The Edible Woman*, is a market researcher, as was the Commander in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Atwood herself in 1963.

How do we reconcile early Marxist critiques of Atwood as non-materialist with her own relentless narrative preoccupation with the effects of commodity capitalism first introduced in a thematic binary of consumer/consumed in *The Edible Woman*? I suggest that her persistent concern with materiality requires a poststructuralist model that transcends a vulgar Marxist critique to move beyond a scrutiny of the circulation of consumer goods to consider

the circulation of *signs* in culture. Operating with this more complex model, the Atwoodian cultural vision reveals itself as deeply materialist and increasingly anti-idealist in both its repudiation of the stable individual and its convictions about "the awesome materiality of language" itself (Foucault, "Orders of Discourse" 8).

As I will attempt to outline in greater detail in Chapter One, the poststructuralist conception of the commodity system as a system of significations -- producing meanings -- has extended traditional notions of the commodity and materiality to an understanding of the materiality of the cultural sign. The marriage of semiotics, Marxism and psychoanalytic theory has also replaced the notion of the self-originating "individual" to emphasize the ways in which the subject is constructed in and through operations of power and meaning. Central to feminist theory and my own reading of Atwood's texts, a poststructuralist, semiological critique of the commodity allows the reader to discern that Atwood's critique of commodity culture is not only revealed in the pervasiveness of commercial products circulating as cultural signs, but is also evident in her sensitivity to the circulation of words and the body as a material sign.

Endnotes

1. For examples of such attacks see the following: Paul Cappon; Wilson J. Clark; Frank Davey; Robin Endres; Robin Mathews. "Survival and Struggle in Canadian Literature: A Review of Margaret Atwood's *Survival*" and his revised version in his *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution* which I am citing here; and James Steele.

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Commodity Culture and the Symbolic Economy

In the gradual disappearance of the physical marketplace ... and the tendential identification of the commodity with its image, ... boundaries are washed over ... and an indifferentiation of levels gradually takes the place of an older separation between thing and concept (or indeed, economics and culture, base and superstructure). (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 275)

I am the market. -- Elaine Risley (Atwood, *Cat's Eye* 119)

Although the following theoretical framework can provide, at best, a selective lens through which Margaret Atwood's narratives will be focused, it is useful in moving beyond traditional historical-materialist critique. By re-thinking Marxist theory through poststructuralism, material forces including language can be conceptualized within the symbolic order of late-capitalism. The approach I outline below enables a movement beyond the commodity proper to the cultural sign and commodified subject. Informed by post-Marxist theory and psychoanalysis, I will attempt to map out salient issues regarding the production and consumption of value and meaning. In order to link such concerns with Atwood's particular epistemic space, I draw heavily upon conceptions of postmodernity primarily articulated by Jean Baudrillard to follow the concept of materialism along a historical trajectory into contemporary consumer culture.

Beyond the "Vulgar" Marxist Paradigm

To say that social reality is pervasively commodified is to say that it is always already 'aesthetic' - textured, packaged, fetishized, libidinalized. (Eagleton, "Capitalism" 387)

In the products, the things themselves, there was no real difference. How did you choose then? Which detergent had the best power-symbol? Which tomato juice can had the sexiest-looking tomato on it, and did she care? Something in her must care; after all, she d^d choose eventually.
 -- Marian McAlpin (Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 176)

What is generally regarded as the "vulgar" Marxist materialist hermeneutic posits a two-tiered model, where the economic base -- the totality of productive relations -- determines the superstructure -- legal, political and social realities and relations, as well as intellectual life or consciousness. According to this conception of materialism, "the determining factor in history" is, in the final instance, the economic force of "production and reproduction of immediate life" (Engels 71). Under this model, all social relations are determined by the mode of production of a given society; under capitalism, these social relations are based on exploitative economic relations which are veiled by their very cultural manifestation.

Subsequent developments in Marxism have altered this paradigm to acknowledge a more fluid relation between the superstructure and economic base, largely due to Louis Althusser's conception that the social formation is

overdetermined to the extent that the superstructure has "relative autonomy" from the base over which it, in turn, exercises an effect (130). With this new model, the human subject is refigured as a site of inscription by multiple and contradictory operations of power proceeding from various sites. The human subject is then viewed as non-unitary, rather than as a coherent individual whose behaviour and thoughts are expressive of an essential core¹. Althusser's paradigm marks a significant point of departure for materialist approaches to culture and the subject, as he firmly establishes Lacanian psychoanalytic theory -- which posits the subject's construction in language -- under the rubric of materialism. According to the Lacanian conception, linguistic signs themselves can be considered as a materiality embodied by the signifier which operates in an unfixed relation to a provisional signified. Materialism, under a post-structuralist paradigm, then, has come to encompass Marxism, psychoanalysis and a post-Saussurian emphasis on language itself as a material force which informs and inscribes social relations, and does not simply "reflect" them².

The Commodity-Fetish

Karl Marx's critique of the commodity in *Capital* is central to understanding the basic Marxist notion that economic relations construct "false" meanings or values in the

production and circulation of objects. According to Marx, economic exchange relations veil the social character of labour and obfuscate the dynamics of exploitation and hegemony under capitalism. A definite relation between workers, Marx argues, "assumes ... the fantastic form of a relation between things" (72). Commodities travel through the "mist-enveloped" market as independent beings endowed with life of their own, "entering into relation both with one another and the human race" (72). All traces of production are effaced under this process where commodities become socially circulating fetishes rather than objects of production (Amariglio and Callari 196), and everything (including the worker) becomes subject to a process of substitution under a generalized law of equivalence (the money-standard). Commodity-fetishism is then, in Marx's view, a function of exchange value which maintains a circuit of specious meaning within capitalism.

In Marx's paradigm, the fetish character of an object is obtained through a process of abstraction at the expense of use-value, which is based on an object's utility and the human labour used to produce the object. Marx notably disparages the social "meaning" associated with the commodity-fetish, because it is not rooted in its "real" value -- the underlying presence of use-value. Its authentic social meaning is therefore hidden. His conception of the dual force of dehumanized labour power and

animated, fetishized objects implies that the human subject is compelled to endlessly search for the lost, alienated labour in the commodity-fetish.

The Fetish as Sign

French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, noting the psychoanalytic establishment of fetishism within a constructed economy of desire¹, has revised the vulgar Marxist critique of the commodity-fetish to eschew its essentialist notions about the purported "existence, somewhere, of a non-alienated consciousness of an object in some 'true,' objective state: its use value" (*For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* 89)⁴. Just as Lacanian psychoanalysis declares that there never was a "thing itself" (Apter, Introduction 5), Baudrillard asserts that fetishism is not a process which "veils" substantial values or innate virtues. Rather, he argues, the root of fetishism is its "aspect of faking" (91). The fascination of an object resides in its position in the production of cultural signs, in the economy of the play of signifiers (91). It is not

a fetishism of substances and values ... which the fetish object would incarnate for the alienated subject it is a fetishism of the signifier. It is not the passion for substances that speaks in fetishism, it is the passion for the

code. (92)

Baudrillard argues that the "fundamental articulation of the ideological process" is not the projection of alienated consciousness into various superstructures," but "the generalization at all levels of a structural code" which is both generated by language and generative of fields of meaning (92).

The Commodity Fetish and the Linguistic Sign

A semiological critique of the fetish draws all cultural artifacts into a libidinally invested order as fetishes operating on a similar basis as the linguistic sign. The dual force of commodification and reification under capitalism not only equates all objects in the strictly economic sense according to the standard of exchange; it also organizes their worth in terms of a symbolic cultural economy which is a hierarchical system of difference. Terry Eagleton notes:

The allegorical stance toward objects is on the one hand abstract and arbitrary: since any one of them may be exchanged for another, all are indifferently levelled to relative insignificance. Yet if reality is thus devalued at a stroke, it is elevated in the same instant. For those objects selected as signifiers are invested ... with fetishistic force. (*Walter Benjamin* 25)

In theorizing cultural value and the hegemonic order, it is critical to note that the social meaning of an object is no more fixed or apparent in the physical properties than the value it may be assigned in exchange (Sahlins, "La Pensée Bourgeoise" 281). Cultural value is generated in a fluid relational system operating on much the same basis as economic exchange value described by Marx in *Capital*:

the relative expression of value is incomplete because the series of representing it is interminable. The chain, of which each equation of value is a link, is liable at any moment to be [altered] by each new ... commodity ... the material for a fresh expression of value. (69)

Functioning like the linguistic sign in Ferdinand de Saussure's conception, the commodity takes on value and meaning through its position in a syntagmatic chain. Thus, it is through differential play, and not substance or use-value that "objects exercise their fascination" (Baudrillard, *CPES* 91).

This conception of the commodity system, in its intricate connection between the semiological and psychoanalytic, has supported an extension of traditional notions of the commodity and materiality to an understanding of the materiality of the cultural sign⁵. At this theoretical juncture, the linguistic sign, the image and the object are conflated under a semiological matrix of a

libidinalized, abstract or symbolic economy, circulating and "interpellating" (Althusser) the subject-consumer. Here the sign can be understood as a free-floating signifier -- a "signal," in Baudrillard's terminology -- functioning as stimulus rather than as meaning or value rooted in a transcendental referent or signified. Money-capital, material goods and use-value are now subsumed under the triad of discursive cultural capital, signals or codes and exchange-value (provisional meaning).

The Technology of Simulacra

[S]imulation characterizes, beyond the signifier and the signified, the pure form of the political economy of the sign -- exactly as the floating of currency and its countable relations characterizes, beyond use and exchange value, beyond all substance of production, the pure form of value. (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 133)

In late capitalism we move into the age of the autonomy of the sign and the hyperreal. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes notes that parallel with, and analogous to, the replacement of gold with paper money, there is a substitution of the index (which has an origin) for the sign (which does not) which "creates the potential for a free-floating situation of endless simulacra, a meaning cut off from all bases" (Polan 174). In this age of "simulation" where technology allows a virtually all-encompassing ability to reproduce copies without originals, this potentiality is fully realized. Walter Benjamin theorized that the potentially infinite

reproducibility of art in the age of mechanical reproduction disables the notion that the value and meaning of art inheres in the object itself (226). A work of art, then, becomes abstracted, fetishized.

If, as Benjamin argues, "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (220), no object or sign can be invested any longer with a fixed status of truth. With the loss of the sense of authenticity and permanence there is the possibility for an "artificial resurrection of referents in systems of signs, a substitution of signs of the real for the real itself" (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 4). Within contemporary culture, microelectronics has become the new technical basis for simulacra, effectively dislodging "the boundary maintaining images of base and superstructure, public and private, or material and ideal" (Haraway 84). We here enter into the unlimited process of equivalences, of representations that cannot be oriented, rooted or fixed. From medium to medium the real is volatilized, destroying authenticity, truth or depth. In fact, Baudrillard concludes:

technique as medium dominates not only the "message" of the product (its use-value) but also the force-of-work that Marx wished to make the revolutionary message of production ... And that production no longer has any sense; its social finality is lost in the series. The simulacra win

out over history. (*Simulations* 100, *emph. added*)

This "third stage" of capitalist culture, characterized by Baudrillard as the "cool universe of digitality" (*Simulations* 152), and by Fredric Jameson as a "pure and random play of signifiers" (*Postmodernism* 96) is the moment of post-modernism. For Baudrillard we here reach the limit of the process of reproducibility, where the real is not only what can be reproduced," but that "*which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction,*" and "*that which is always already reproduced. The hyperreal*" (*Simulations* 146). Not only do we witness here the absolute fulfilment of Marx's principle that commodity fetishism creates a society dominated by both tangible and intangible things, but also the replacement of the tangible world by a selection of images and signals which "impose themselves as the tangible *par excellence*" (Debord 36).

Lauren Langman suggests that Marx, in his belief in the impending demise of capitalism, could not envision "bureaucratic mass production, consumption and a global media of visual images that would converge in the fantasy realms" of contemporary consumer society such as the shopping complex. It is such sites of hyperreality, Langman argues, and not the factories, where society would reproduce itself (73). Moreover, Langman notes, the transformation of the worker to modern consumer makes goods, rather than work, the dominant aspect of self-realization and expression in

the modern global marketplace (61).

To further complicate Marx's original materialist critique, both the consumer and the market have become more abstract, partly due to technology and the late-twentieth century development of the service sector. The domain and production of things which are "intangible, invisible, or arbitrarily valued" is rapidly expanding, including service, education, advice, security, information, protection, psychoanalysis, advertising and public relations (Nye and Pedersen 3). The trade in material things is now "mediated by electronic impulses centred in banks and exchanges, and we who live in the resulting 'culture of consumption' often feel that we exchange only symbols and never touch any tangible object" (Nye and Pedersen 3). Thus, the repetitive structure of the technological simulacrum "characterizes the commodity production of consumer capitalism and marks our object world with an unreality and a free-floating absence of 'the referent' ... unlike anything experienced in any earlier social formation" (Jameson, *Signatures* 17). Jameson points out that this is concurrent with the "ever swifter temporality of consumer society" with its "geometrically increasing pressure to 'make it new,' to produce something which resists and breaks through the force of gravity of repetition as a universal feature of commodity equivalence" (*Signatures* 17).

The Hyperreal Spectacle

Today, when the real and the imaginary are confused in the same operational totality, the aesthetic fascination is everywhere. It is a subliminal perception ... of deception, montage, scenaria ... no longer a production space, but a reading strip, strip of coding and decoding, magnetized by the signs. (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 150)

[T]here's something about a flat surface. -- Duncan
(Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 144)

This "society of the spectacle" (Debord) is a dynamic cultural montage, somewhat like an interactive television circuit, which belies traditional divisions and distinctions between truth/falsehood, form/substance or surface/depth. There is no longer, Baudrillard argues, a Gordian knot of contradictions and falsehoods to cut through. Instead, he suggests, there is an endless Möbius strip of cultural codes -- a syntagmatic chain without end -- and no possibility of resolving its surfaces, or fixing meaning or value⁶. Every rupture or split simply "results in an additional spiral" (*Simulations* 34). "Facts" arise at the intersection of models "of a real without origin or reality" generated through the metaphysics of the code which posits an idealized referent outside of language (*Simulations* 32;2). The models are, as Baudrillard notes, like maps which engender territory -- the territory of culture or identity itself neither preceding nor surviving the map (*Simulations* 2).

Of course, simulacra are not simply games played with signs; "they imply social rapports and social power" (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 88). In a carnivalesque world of multiple images, hegemony is effected through overdetermination of certain codes and the maintenance of a "retrospective hallucination" (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 22) which supports and insists on certain readings of the cultural code in the present. A relentless power struggle is waged at various cultural sites to simulate transcendental referents and thereby define "normalcy" and the Real. This competition between cultural *bricoleurs* fighting over bodies, words and images is fundamentally a contest over the discourse of the present and the ability to resurrect a History, "to stockpile a past in plain view" which can restore some "visible order," some "visible myth of origin and continuum which can affirm a foundation which will fix us in some present and reassure us toward our ends" (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 19)¹. Yet, while hegemonic forces of signification, as Mikhail Bakhtin has theorized, push toward monologism and homogenization, working to fix certain meanings and values, this decentralized power operates on an ever-shifting field of "specular mimesis, an ambiguous state that demystifies and falsifies at the same time, or that reveals its own techniques of masquerade while putting into doubt any fixed referent" or truth (Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish* 14).

Discourse as Cultural Capital

The global, mass-mediated production of image reality foregrounds the totalizing technology of reproduction or simulation, implicating aesthetic form and narrative. This all-encompassing process, in which discourse plays a central role, blurs the lines between the rational/irrational and the factual/fictional, distinctions which are no longer tenable. In the realm of image reality the fictional and factual intersect (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 277). In terms of the "substance" of narrative, the "mythopoeic" and the "realistic" are no longer antagonistic. There is a curious paradox of materiality; as no object is simply a concrete phenomenon and every value or meaning is derived from a symbolic economy, the "true-real" and the imaginary no longer function as discrete categories. The operations of truth, as Foucault has noted, are materially informed by sign systems functioning within regimes of knowledge at a given time. All cultural value including truth value is produced and consumed at the level of the hyperreal where all cultural commodities -- including language itself -- have been transformed into fetishes and objects of psychic consumption. As a further complication, there are reinvestments in narratives and discourses of "the most mythic sort" (Polan 184) in an attempt to impose some order and structure on the evanescent hyperreal. We therefore

face the paradox where dominant regimes of "narrative, representation and industrial or institutional standardization " exist within a "larger general economy of free-floating signifiers where virtually anything is possible -- where the uniformity of mass culture can find itself relativized by endless *différance*, an undoing of all narrative and representational fixities" (Polan 185).

Under the post-structuralist model, language no longer figures as a transparent window on the world or vehicle for the expression of *a priori* truths or essences. It can, instead, be conceptualized as a material force -- a producer of signs, images, and cultural codes which inscribe the subject -- who, in turn, (re)produces language. Discourse becomes to cultural value what capital is to economic value; a self-referential material through which currency flows and meaning is imbued. In fact, through Foucault's conception of discourse, the symbolic order of "reality" can be seen as an exclusionary, hierarchical system where the unspeakable, un-doable and unnamed are themselves effects of power ("Orders of Discourse"). This structural "censorship" is systemic and, while sometimes overt, is fundamentally masked. Yet, as Peter Hitchcock notes, "the inequalities of symbolic exchange always already prescribe a vertical axis of struggles over the sign" (6)⁸. Since, as Hitchcock argues, the complete orchestration of conditions on which any ideology may be founded is impossible, the consolidation

of any group of cultural codes as a finished product is untenable. Because multiple and contradictory discourses operate at any given time, language becomes a critical tool of political struggle and resistance to naturalized dominant codes.

The Commodified, Performative Subject

To dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't. One implies a presence, the other an absence. (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 5)

Rump on a packsack, harem cushion, pink on the cheeks and black discreetly around the eyes, as red as blood as black as ebony, a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere. (Atwood, *Surfacing* 177)

In the postmodern cultural montage, subjects are bombarded with, and constituted by, a fluid symbolic economy of conflicting meanings and values. As Langman notes, the "postmodern consumer culture has witnessed a pluralization of life worlds and ever greater multiplicities of feelings, gratifications and self-images provided by mass-mediated imagery" (66). The ability of certain fetishized commodities or images to hail the subject can nevertheless still be read as an extension of Marx's notion that the fetish attains anthropomorphic qualities: it can speak to, persuade, or seduce -- in Althusser's terminology, "interpellate" -- the consumer. It gains the subject's

admiration, and his or her "belief" in the object/image. It is important to re-assert here that consumption in consumer society does not strictly denote economic purchase or use of a commodity. Rather, it speaks of the perpetual psychic consumption of *meanings* projected by reified images circulating in society.

According to this reading, decentred codes constitute the fragmented subject caught up in the endless play of signs and the search for the lost but promised fetish -- the truth, the transcendental referent, the Self. The commodified subject -- itself constituted as a sign of a consumption-based ideology (Langman 74) -- reads the cultural codes, and performs identity based on the multitude of models which themselves inscribe bodies. People operate through the metaphysics of the code, simulating the (gendered) models, like reproductions of images with no single origin. They are themselves a series of simulacra, performing particular and diverse social roles through clothing, gestures and language.

Yet meanings and pleasures in culture cannot simply be viewed as emanating from the economic base or unproblematically defined by social forms alone. As Judith Butler argues, the subject, while constructed, is not *determined*. Fundamentally, the constitution of the subject through cultural codes cannot be seen as a simple, unilinear imposition from society onto individuals, as "meaning"

itself proceeds from multiple and contradictory sites, and does not exist prior to the interpellation by/interpretation of the code. The importance of cultural production alone, then, cannot take priority over consumption as a productive act, as "the subject's very consumption of signs constructs for them meanings of self, of social identity and social relations" (Fiske 11). Since realms of negotiation exist in the consumption and interpretations of the goods and cultural productions (Langman 42), the ways people use the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system is important. This, of course, raises the critical question of agency, and whether a subject, constituted by material realities of culture and language can, in fact, construct transgressive spaces within the cultural matrix.

The Feminine (as) Simulacrum

In the masquerade the woman mimics an authentic-genuine-womanliness but then authentic womanliness is such a mimicry, it *is* the masquerade. (Heath 49)

Her attempts at conversation ... are a performance, an imitation ... She's mimicking something, something in her head, some role or image that only she can see. (Atwood, *Cat's Eye* 262)

Butler's theory of performative gender provides a critical intersection with the above epistemology at the site of the gendered subject, providing a means of viewing the commodified subject as a *process* rather than as a finished

product. It is also important in mapping a feminist reading of Baudrillard and Atwood's own characters. The body itself, Butler asserts,

is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the matter of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic. By dramatic I mean only that the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities.

("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 272)⁹

Like the consumer commodity, the subject becomes a cultural sign which, as Butler points out, embodies "possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention" (272). The meaning of sex, gender and heterosexuality are, then, understood as "historical products which have become conjoined and reified" (276). Identity is, like the commodity, understood as an "object of *belief*," a fetish or "compelling illusion" (271) with similar spectacular and unfixed operations and meanings. Butler suggests that since it remains "permanently unclear" what any sign signifies ("Imitation and Gender Insubordination" 14)¹⁰, what the sign "woman" denotes remains unfixed, resisting any essentialist definitions of gender. Meaning only inheres in the performance¹¹ of one's gender. There is, as a result, a possibility of "contesting its reified status" in the hegemonic gender code ("PA" 271).

The space for this resistance is implicit in the conception of gender as "an incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization" ("Imitation" 23). As Butler points out, a "naturalized gender mime" (23) -- which operates on compulsion of the "stylized repetition of acts through time" -- disavows the fact that there is no "real" gender or essential identity ("PA" 271). The semblance of the coherent "natural" self is achieved, she asserts, through the repetition of gender's own *ideality*, implying that it is "perpetually at risk" ("Imitation" 23, *emph. added*). As a result, gender becomes "a kind of imitation for which there is no original" -- no true or prior gender - - "in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself" ("Imitation" 21). This concept of performance as generative of "reality" through an imitation that establishes its own phantasmagoric origin is complementary to Baudrillard's notion that cultural reality in general is generated "by models of a real without origin or territory," and that it is, in fact "the map that engenders the territory" (*Simulations* 2).

Gender Regulation and Resistance

[T]hose who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished. (Butler, "PA" 273)

Gender Traitors end up on the Wall. (Atwood, *The Handmaid's*

Tale 233)

Butler reminds us that there is compensation for performing gender properly, for at least visually conforming to a viable (commodified) subjectivity. How an identity-sign can be used, while avowing its cultural contingencies, is therefore an important question in considering agency within a regulatory regime of naturalized, dominant gender codes (Butler, "Imitation" 19). Langman suggests that

with the influence of so many models in diverse realities, and the unending bombardment of media images, it seems more likely that identity is expressed in a variety of provisional identities or self-images that may serve as templates or strategies for self-presentations in *specific situations*. (57)

Is there space for such intentional theatricality within the inexorable performative matrix?¹² If so, what kinds of escape acts are possible? If one can attempt to slide outside of the proscribed, scripted and packaged identity, what could one "make" of oneself? According to Mary Russo, a woman exceeding hegemonic boundaries is inevitably constituted as a grotesque spectacle. Yet the exaggeration of certain "feminine" characteristics can also, according to Butler, Baudrillard and Mary Ann Doane, enable a sort of liberatory masquerade, a paradoxical resistance to bearing

the hegemonic signs of gender through an imitation which becomes insubordination. Through her own theatrical narrative, Atwood considers this very possibility, notably through *Lady Oracle's* Joan Delacourt and, most dramatically, through Zenia in *The Robber Bride*.

CONCLUSION

Space in the Specular Maze? Determinism and Agency in Atwood's Texts

[D]id the maze mean certain death, or did it contain the answer to a riddle, an answer she must learn in order to live? (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 332)

The theoretical shifts away from both classical Marxist historical materialism and the model of the rational, Cartesian "individual" which I have highlighted above are important challenges to the notion that culture is a system in which meanings are unitary and values are stable, operating universally on a homogeneous group of individuals. Most importantly, the above approach to culture, subjectivity and language raises the critical question concerning human agency in a historically specific material and discursive cultural space. Does it construct a deterministic paradigm of culture and subjectivity, a closed system of external control and overdetermination from which the subject can find no escape? Or, does the poststructural model of a heterogeneous, contradictory subject operating in

a semiological chaos of hyperreality itself offer possibilities for active resistance and social change?

Margaret Atwood's fictional universe poses precisely such questions in narrative terms, and I want to argue here that it does so insistently throughout the novels. The sense of entrapment and complicity in the world of commercial, semiological and "emotional cannibalism" (Woodcock) raises the problem of agency repeatedly. With the postmodern understanding of materiality that I have outlined, Atwood's attention to commodity culture can be read as providing a significant field of political investigation into the production of codes and values and the subject's constitution within, and negotiation of, this terrain. Increasingly shifting away from issues of cultural production to consumption as production, her work moves beyond a vulgar materialism to conceptualize the hyperreal. *The Edible Woman* intuits this moment in its particular treatment of consumerism and subjectivity. Despite the novel's dominant preoccupation with commercialism, concern with the production-consumption cycle at the symbolic level -- at the site of the gendered subject as an *object* under this regime -- highlights not only the significance of cultural goods themselves, but also the ways in which the process of abstraction brings commodity fetishism to the level where "we consume less the thing itself, than its abstract idea, open to all the libidinal investments

ingeniously arrayed for us by advertising" (Jameson, *Signatures* 12). In its representation of a cannibalistic culture, *The Edible Woman* foregrounds images and the ways in which female subjects are entrapped, commodified and fetishized, forced to conform to patriarchal, commercially viable images or aim for invisibility.

By fully dislocating some of the dichotomies found in *The Edible Woman* which fix a deterministic order in a narrow materiality, Atwood's subsequent texts consider the potentially liberatory implications of the fact that a "rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 155). In fact, the contours of the cultural labyrinth itself are problematized, refiguring determinism and agency through the question of "whether the universe is infinite and unbounded, or infinite but bounded" (*Cat's Eye* 235).

Lady Oracle represents the dynamic interplay between dominant gender codes and the female subject in a self-conscious fashion, presenting a vision of a carnivalesque consumer society where specular mimesis plays itself out, absorbing originary referents, through a fragmented performative subject. While this comic novel presents an ultimate determinism, it also provides a parodic reading of some of the critical issues to posit a vision of culture and subjectivity which, by their very confusions and incoherences, hold space for *provisional* escape acts.

Contemporary notions of the carnivalesque developed from Bakhtin -- which propose that social norms and codes may be inverted or destabilized in everyday life (Shields 8) -- offer one means to theorize the possibilities for resistance and transgression. When appropriated for feminist critique, as Russo has done, the Bakhtinian carnivalesque intersects with strategies of masquerading femininity to produce sites of limited resistance to hegemonic codes. Drawing upon theories developed by Russo and Butler to construct a model of the performative, gendered subject, I will show how *Lady Oracle* playfully deals with one woman's positioning in a materially constrained, yet dynamic, culture and her relentless efforts to dodge its boundaries.

As Atwood herself has noted, *The Handmaid's Tale*, while positing an unreal dystopia, is nevertheless built on the roots of contemporary conditions and historical facts (qtd. in Schreiber 209). It offers a useful space in which to examine Atwood's conception of the materiality of language. While viewing past history and culture as a significant pre-history to the present (as traditional Marxists would suggest), the novel explores the ways in which texts themselves are "pre-texts" to history, modes of "writing the future" (Wood) in politically significant ways. By figuring language itself as a form of cultural power which exists in a limited economy -- like any other cultural commodity -- I will examine its function in the novel as "the place where

actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested" (Weedon 21). Despite the apparent determinism structured into phallogocentric discourse, the protagonist's struggle against the oppressive political regime includes an appropriation and subversive use of phallogocentrism itself.

In *The Robber Bride*, Atwood engages the particularly current question of technological determinism in the hyperreal, in a consideration of the body's own materiality as a sign and site of meaning production. Here, technology's intersection with the body creates a space of possibility. Through a subversion of the notion of an organic wholeness and a technology which effaces its own traces of production, the text considers the forms of desire and power implicated in the new cyborg-like subject.

Endnotes

1. These theoretical challenges to the liberal-humanist, Cartesian paradigm of the individual have contributed to the adoption of the term 'subject' in poststructuralist critique. Using Foucault's formulation, one is "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" (*The Foucault Reader* 21).

2. Materialist feminism has developed in tandem with these theoretical movements, to analyze the "importance of ideas, language and culture to women's oppression" (Newton and Rosenfelt xix) and to consider the ways in which gender itself is inscribed in and by particular social and economic relations of power.

3. The Freudian and Lacanian notions of fetishism, similarly to Marx's formulation, posit a process of constructing an abstract, and intangible social value or meaning around an object. However, while the object is invested with certain social meanings which do not inhere in the thing itself, its conception does not deride the fetish as obfuscating any essential, 'true' value or meaning. It instead suggests that the meaning or value in the object (or subject), is itself constructed around a *founding lack* in an economy of desire. The Freudian and Lacanian notions of fetishism begin at the scene of symbolic sexual difference, where the perceived threat of castration is unconsciously disavowed "by idealising the original source of the threat ... the absence of the mother's penis," or symbolic phallus (Kuhn 198). The woman becomes a fetish or icon of the male gaze, a spectacle whose threatening, castratory aspects -- derived from her perceived 'lack' -- are controlled through various strategies of defusion including the act of looking itself (Kuhn 61). Because of a lack of a referent for desire or value, the fetish holds the status of a floating material signifier (Pietz qtd. in Apter, Introduction 3). The conception of fetishism as a signifier standing in for a supposed "real" (Apter, Introduction 5) resists the truth/falsehood dichotomy of classical Marxism as well as the surface-depth or appearance-reality dichotomy underlying liberal-humanist conceptions of culture while enabling a materialist understanding of hyperreality by bringing out thematic intersections between issues of consumerism, psychic drives and gender constitution.

4. All subsequent references to *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* will appear as CPES.

5. We here witness a movement away from Saussure's structuralist conception of the sign as symbol (where there is a fixed although arbitrary bond between signified and signifier and an implied referent) to the Lacanian reformulation that meaning is derived through the differentiation between signifiers, which constructs subjects as well as texts. Neutral signs are made significant through substitutive modes, implying an absence of a transcendental signified. Jacques Derrida's theory that the signified is always absent, constantly displaced by yet another signifier, is also relevant here, supporting the notion that meaning operates through absence and difference.

6. Atwood's narrative conception of reality in *Cat's Eye*, which eschews the notion of "discrete objects [or bodies] which remain unchanged" (235) explicitly considers the model of a two-dimensional chronotope through the analogy of the Möbius

strip of codes (234).

7.As Langman argues, one site for such simulation of "cultural memory" is that "utopia of consumption," the shopping complex (49).

8.Attempts by the hegemonic order "to condition the circumstances or contexts in which sign use and interactions take place" (Hitchcock 61) are reflected, as Jonathan Dollimore has noted, in a long-standing connection in literature between "the proper discipline of words and social regulation" (117-18). Implied in this preoccupation, is, of course "the possibility of an unsettling lack of control over language, as if the very instrument of civil order ... were open to radical inversion, in the sense of a treachery potential within language itself, or in the subversive uses to which it could be put" (Parker 101).

9.All subsequent references to "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" will appear as "PA."

10.All subsequent references to "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" will appear as "Imitation."

11.Performative carries the double-meaning here of both dramatic and non-referential (Butler, "PA" 273).

12.For a detailed consideration of this question in recent critical theory, I have relied on Gabriel's "Performing Theory, Performing Gender."

Chapter Two

Symbolic Cannibalism in *The Edible Woman*

Within Atwood's oeuvre, *The Edible Woman* is important in its development of a basic "vocabulary of discontent" with capitalist culture -- in many ways compatible with elementary Marxist critique -- and in mapping out and destabilizing binary oppositions and conceptual categories which are further interrogated and reshaped in subsequent novels. A highly comical satire on consumer culture, the text includes a consideration of the shaping of identity and gender relations through a thematics of commercial and interpersonal commodification and cannibalistic consumption¹.

At perhaps its simplest level, the text raises the issue of the exploitation of human need for profit, problematizing the very notion of "natural" human necessity. Somewhat simplistically, need is presented as both a use-value itself as well as an *effect* of corporate manoeuvring, whereby desire is either manufactured or manipulated for profit. Surveying the different brands and colours of Kleenex available at the supermarket, the protagonist Marian McAlpin notes: "There really wasn't a single human unpleasantness that they haven't managed to turn to their uses" (179). She envisions the entire enterprise of shopping as a snare which transforms the consumer into an

etherized "somnambulist" (177):

It was dangerous to stay in the supermarket too long. One of these days it would get her. She would be trapped past closing time, and they would find her in the morning propped against one of the shelves in an unbreakable coma, surrounded by all the pushcarts in the place heaped to overflowing. (179)

Even the music piped into the store. Marian asserts, is "supposed to lull you into a euphoric trance, lower your sales resistance to the point at which all things are desirable" (177).

Surveying a vast array of commercial products, Marian intuits the false democratization marketed under the guise of choice. In a statement which resounds with a basic Marxist notion, she asserts: "In the products, *the things themselves*, there was no real difference" (176). Any selection, she notes, is not a "rational" choice based on substantial value (177). Rather, it is a function of the libidinal appeal of the commodity-fetish:

You let the thing in you that was supposed to respond to the labels just respond, whatever it was; maybe it had something to do with the pituitary gland. Which detergent had the best power-symbol? Which tomato juice can had the sexiest-looking tomato on it, and did she care?

(176)

While Marian, as a market researcher, is well aware of these dynamics of consumerism, she is also pessimistic about her ability to evade the soft sell:

just because she knew what they were up to didn't mean she was immune Something in her must care; after all, she did choose eventually, doing precisely what some planner in a broadloomed office had hoped and predicted she would do. (176)

The manipulation of human desire for profit is not, then, simply presented as the imposition of false consciousness. As Marian emphasizes, Seymour Surveys (the company for which she works) functions specifically to determine what people like and want. Products are then developed to best conform with -- or make use of -- targeted desires which are marketed as needs, such that both consumer satisfaction and corporate profit are maximized.

Thus, desires and "needs," are not presented as "natural" or unmediated in the novel. Rather, the desiring subject is intricately bound up in a symbolic cultural economy which operates in tandem with the capitalist economic system on similar principles of scarcity, individualism, and the democratic ideal. The notion of happiness, acknowledged as an inherent, universal, individual right in capitalist ideology, circulates in contradiction to existing social conditions, thereby

creating an elision between what one *is* and what one is ostensibly *entitled* to be (Berger 148). Through commodity consumption and accumulation the individual endlessly seeks self-fulfilment and the ideal of wholeness, whereby gaps in identity -- read as unnecessary barriers to happiness -- can be filled in.

Promises for a unified and better self are articulated most persuasively through images which reify commercial products, enveloping them in a magical and enticing veil. Marketing strategies of packaging and advertising simultaneously present the spectator/consumer with a vision of what is possible in the future and also what is lacking in the present. Through an image -- not any use-value or substantial quality of the product itself -- the advertising "*plug*" implicitly presents an unreal fetish as a means for closing the gap, interpellating consumer identity. The ads for Moose Beer which Marian helps to develop, for example, hail the targeted male consumer with promises of realizing his "true-and-improved" self, an idealized phantasm. Again, needs and wants are conflated and tied in with (gendered and classed) identity: "Any *real man* ... *needs* a beer with a healthy, hearty taste, a deep-down manly flavour Moose Beer is *just what you've always wanted*" (19, *emph. added*). This ad displaces desire -- that of the "average beer-drinker, the slope-shouldered pot-bellied kind" to be a "real man" (20) -- onto the commodity-fetish in order to

make the male consumer "feel a mystical identity with the plaid-jacketed sportsman" shown in the ads (20). The commercial image, however, operates in the hyperreal, where, as Marian notes, the fish has "no slime, no teeth, no smell," and the hunter has "no twigs in his hair, his hands bloodless" (153). The discrepancy between an advertised simulation and its "real" imitation is again vividly illustrated for Marian in the supermarket, where an attractive, semi-nude poster girl in a grass skirt and flowers sharply contrasts with her real-life copy, a paper garlanded, gum-chewing cashier with bumpy dark pink flesh, scaling orange lips and rodent-yellow teeth (180).

In the novel's reading of consumerism, the power of images to construct an ideal reality to which people think they have and deserve access creates a perverse culture where even the most extreme behaviour can be blamed on inescapable sign consumption. The "Underwear Man," a character who makes lewd telephone calls to women under the guise of a market researcher, parodically epitomizes the consumer dupe:

Perhaps his otherwise normal mind had been crazed into frenzy by the girdle advertisements on the buses Society flaunted these slender laughing rubberized women before his eyes, urging, practically forcing upon him their flexible blandishments, and then refused to supply him with

any. He had found when he had tried to buy the garment in question ... it came empty of the promised contents. (116)

The Underwear Man's crank phonecalls are really, Marian thinks, a systematic search for an absent yet insistent fetish -- "the underwear-clad image he so ardently desired" (117)². The media made their promise to him, so he uses the telecommunications network for the purposes of collecting: "A *just exchange*: they owed it to him" (117, *emph. added*). Yet the exaggerated construction of The Underwear Man as "victim of society" (116) ironizes Marian's disclaimer of individual agency and responsibility through societal determinism. The Underwear Man is, then, a nodal point in *The Edible Woman's* inquiry into the power of images to shape desire by manufacturing idealized and naturalized phantasms which are pursued by consumers as "the normative measure of the real" (Butler, "Imitation" 21). Thus, the Underwear Man ultimately figures as at least a *potential* "Everyman": "Maybe it was really Peter," Marian thinks (117).

Cannibalism among this people is one of their institutions; it is interwoven in the elements of society; it forms one of their pursuits, and is regarded by the mass as a refinement.
 -- Rev. Thomas Williams. missionary to Fiji from 1940-1853 (qtd. in *Sunday* 151)

Investigating the fetishized nature of social

relations, the text interrogates "emotional cannibalism" (Woodcock) as a branch of "symbolic cannibalism" which Atwood identifies as the crux of the novel (*Second Words* 369). Understood anthropologically as an "ideology of consumption" (Lewis ix), cannibalism is appropriate to Atwood's analysis of social relations since, as Marshall Sahlins points out, it "is always symbolic even when it is real" ("Raw Women, Cooked Men" 88). In *The Edible Woman*, the ideology of cannibalism is revealed in the analogical connection between eating and gender relations³. The epigraph to *The Edible Woman*, an excerpt from *The Joy of Cooking*, could easily have been juxtaposed with a similarly constructed excerpt from *The Joy of Sex*, in its anticipation of the subsequent narrative preoccupation with eating and sexual relations "as closely related modes of intimate social interaction that readily flow together, both literally and metaphorically" (Lewis 75). The title of the novel itself explicitly situates this connection at the scene of gender, where the female is a fetishized object of acquisition or symbolic consumption. Throughout the novel, gustatory activities of hunting and eating are presented as analogous to the social cannibalism which figures women as dehumanized prey, and victims of the culturally specific process of "cooking" -- in Claude Lévi-Strauss's sense of socialization (*The Raw and The Cooked* 336).

The consumer/consumed binary in the novel generally

situates men as consumers and women as commodity-fetishes or symbolic delicacies. In this regard, consumption is constructed as a masculine power heavily mediated by socially constructed desires and needs. Conversely, objects of consumption are feminized, whether material artifacts, foods, or women themselves. Masculine consumption of the feminine is largely presented in the text through three central analogies: hunting, butchery/eating and photography (the latter emphasizing the cultural process of fetishism as a "fixing" of an object/person in time and space). All are used to characterize Peter's behaviour toward Marian.

Yet *The Edible Woman* does not simply use the metaphor of cannibalism to reiterate ahistorical, structuralist notions about woman as an object of exchange or the transformation of the natural into the cultural (Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship; The Raw and The Cooked* 338). I.M. Lewis emphasizes that the ideology of cannibalism provides a "cluster of imagery and metaphor to express the exercise and experience of power, domination, and subjection which may be realized in different forms in particular historical and cultural contexts" (64). *The Edible Woman*, in fact, grounds symbolic cannibalism in a specifically capitalist rubric, where the realm of advertising is central. Here, men are equally targeted as both cannibals and objects of consumption. As W.J. Keith points out, the Moose Beer jingle -- which Duncan associates

with "cannibal stories" (48) -- promotes the idea of the edible *man* in its promotion of "a deep-down manly flavour" (Keith 32; Atwood 19).

Such advertisements comically translate the anthropological notion that the consumption of an object (whether animal, plant or human) enables one to achieve power or life-force (Sanday, Lewis), while situating their promises of transformation in a decidedly commercial realm which threatens to change people into things. The notion that advertising culture is cannibalistic is also explicitly dramatized in an ironical nurse discourse in the novel which posits a female cannibal. In one humorous yet ominous advertisement, a smiling nurse holds out a bottle. Its caption reads: "GIVE THE GIFT OF LIFE" (98). This image, as Atwood notes, resonates with other notions in the novel (qtd by Kaminski 28) which highlight the ways in which desire is intricately bound up in the complex subject of consumption. According to Duncan, even the ostensibly natural, altruistic, feminine quality of nurturing is rooted in the desire to consume: "every woman loves an invalid But be careful You might do something destructive: hunger is more basic than love. Florence Nightingale was a cannibal, you know" (98)⁴. Later, Marian notes that Duncan's roommates act as though she's trying to "gobble" him up (191). Such remarks, of course, play upon Marian's guilt and implicitly contribute to her anorexia as a form, in

part, of self punishment and rejection of the cannibal/consumer role.

The discourse of consumerism underlying relations between the sexes is played out most prominently through the romance and engagement of Marian and Peter. Marriage is presented as a practical capitalist "arrangement" (100), as well as an institution of acquisition. Marian's trip through the supermarket makes the connection between marriage and cannibalistic consumerism explicit, as she walks "slowly down the aisle, keeping pace with the gentle music that swelled and rippled around her" (176). Once she is "ringed" by Peter, he takes "pride in displaying her" (180) as if he has "[j]ust bought a shiny new car" (90), or triumphed over his prey. Marian speculates that since he "always kept the car manual in the glove compartment," he may even have purchased a marriage-manual, "one with easy-to-follow diagrams" (152). After all, she thinks, "It would be just like Peter If you got something new you went out and bought a book that told you how to work it" (152). Marian finds this objectification amusing: she too feels a sense of "proud ownership" (149) when fondly surveying her "nicely packaged" fiancé (148): "So this object, then, belong[s] to me" (87).

Yet Marian experiences a growing sense of alienation from Peter which stems from ominous visions of him as a violent consumer and her self-identification as a victim of

scopic and physical mastery. In one scene, metaphors of photographer, hunter and butcher dramatize the threatening view of Peter. Although Marian is not bothered that he is "sizing her up as he would a new camera" (152), she immediately becomes troubled watching him cut his steak: "How skilfully he did it: no tearing, no ragged edges. And yet it was a violent action, cutting" (153). While "violence in connection with Peter seem[s] incongruous to her" (153), she immediately recalls a newspaper story about "a young boy who had gone berserk with a rifle and killed nine people" (153). It was, she thinks, "a removed violence, a manipulation of specialized instruments," and also "a violence of the mind, almost like magic" (153), implicating Peter's symbolic brutality over her through his camera. Watching Peter dissect his steak also reminds Marian of a diagram in her cookbook, a "cow with lines on it and labels to show you from which part ... all of the different cuts were taken" (153). The topography of the female body is similarly "ruled and measured" for scopic consumption (154)⁵. Like the cow, Marian senses she is undergoing a process of packaging, a transformation into an object done "so efficiently and quickly that it was made clean, official" (154), disguising the underlying violence.

Initially, Marian's identification with a creature marked, packaged and consumed as a commodity makes eating meat impossible. The skin of the chicken becomes simply

"too much like an arm with goose bumps" (155). Her refusal to assume the role of symbolic cannibal soon extends beyond animal products, her food circle dwindling to a point (269). Even rice pudding becomes taboo: "her eyes had seen it as a collection of small cocoons. Cocoons with miniature living creatures inside" (211). The line distinguishing "the devourable from the non-devourable" (156) disappears in the text, as Marian intuits the invasion of a tormenting production-consumption cycle in virtually every area of life.

Ironically, however, Marian's rebellion against her society of consumption, "leads her to an extreme in artificiality," where her only alternative to animal foods seems to be "the cellowrapped and plasticoated and cardboard-cartoned surrogates" (Keith 45; Atwood, *EW* 158). As T.D. MacLulich points out, she has no choice but to use the "products of the consumer society to sustain a rebellion which is ostensibly directed against that very society" (122). Yet she still wonders whether these are "[s]ubstitutes or merely disguises" for "fiendishness" and "killing." She even contemplates "what they grind up to put into" the vitamins she is compelled to take. In this obsession, Marian's sense of physical and psychological entrapment itself can be seen as "consuming" her.

The process of Marian's objectification as a woman, both by Peter and society in general, presents a rather

deterministic vision, although her complicity is not denied. Preparing herself for Peter's party, her body parts provide the raw material to be "cooked" or transformed into an appropriate feminine fetish. At the beauty salon "[t]hey treat your head like a cake," Marian notes, "something to be iced and ornamented" (217). Underlining her sense of helpless manipulation by "expert" external forces while introducing an element of her complicity, Marian's experience is also described as an operation where she is as passive as an etherized patient (217-19). Together, the gastronomic and medical analogies present her transformation as a murderous process which simultaneously reduces her to organic raw material and effaces her as a living, human, creature. "Was this what she was being pushed towards, this compound of the simply vegetable and the simply mechanical?" she wonders, surveying the other "iced" victims, a "totally inert" row of women under hair dryers, an identical set of aliens, their heads metal domes (218).

Following his marriage proposal, Peter's efforts to transform Marian into the perfect "spectator-owner's wife" (Berger 138) dramatises how his fetishism is an attempt to fix her as a status symbol used to display and support his social and financial position, as well as secure his heterosexual masculinity. Justifying the proposed marriage, he declares: "It'll be a lot better in the long run for my practice too, the clients like to know you've got a wife;

people get suspicious of a single man after a certain age, they start thinking you're queer or something" (87). Peter's condescending possessiveness makes Marian feel inanimate, like "a stage-prop ... a two dimensional outline" (67) or "lavatory fixture" (58). Even her sexual encounter with him in the bathtub is perceived as a murderous event, the bathtub her coffin (56). His photographic "capture" also threatens a sort of death by fixation: "Once he pulled the trigger she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change" (256).

The alienation Marian feels from society, Peter, and her complicit self, as well as her sense that she is subject to forces of production beyond her control, compels a rejection of herself as both consumer and consumed. This renunciation, manifest through her anorexia, is both "supremely defiant and supremely obedient at the same time" (Caskey 181). Duncan points out that her act of protest threatens her very survival: "you're probably ... rebelling against the system; though it isn't considered orthodox to begin with the digestive system [Y]ou've got to [eat] to stay alive" (198). Paradoxically, the refusal of food translates into a treatment of herself as an inanimate object while it is also a resistance to society's interpellation of her as both consumer and consumed. The rejection of food gives her some sense of self-control even

though this takes the form of (self) denial.

The reconciliation of an identity with her own body is further complicated in a society which places high value both on the female body and on artificiality. Augmenting the sense of Marian's entrapment, the novel "amusingly examines the impossibility of living authentically amid the self-induced delusions of consumer society" (Kolodny 92). To Marian, the only portions of her flesh that were "without a ... covering ... looked fake, like soft pinkish-white rubber or plastic" (239). This can be read as more than the visual distortion common to the anorexic (Caskey 181-2). It also figures a subversion of the real by the artificial, through a reversal which plays itself out in her culture at large. Here, commodification threatens a loss of meaning (and value) in the "natural," or perhaps spells its very *impossibility*. The Baudrillardian notion of simulacra is carried through in *Surfacing*, where the protagonist notes that "the only things worthy of life were human, their own kind of human, framed in the proper clothes and gimmicks, *laminated*" (138). Anna's artificial face, then, "*is the natural one*" (48, *emph. added*). Similarly, Lucy in *The Edible Woman* seems to have "a face and shape that almost demanded the artificial: nailpolish and makeup and elaborate arrangements of hair blended into her, became part of her. Surely she would look peeled or amputated without them" (217). While "Marian had always thought that on her own

body these things looked extra, stuck to her surface like patches or posters" (217), she contemplates her appearance when made up for Peter's party: "What was it that lay beneath the surface these pieces were floating on, holding them all together?" (239). She is unable to see "the total effect," and can only see a fragmented self, an array of objects -- one at a time -- of which she is comprised (239).

Recurring motifs of organic dissolution confound the binary of surface artificiality and underlying nature: ultimately, all seems artificial and mechanized. Marian senses her own face "peeling away in flaps and patches, the metal surface beneath showing through" (255)⁶. Conversely, Marian views objects as increasingly lifelike as her sense of objectification grows. This is often due to her displacement of insidious aspects of Peter onto his possessions. His clothes, for instance, seem to assume a malicious personality: "How could they hang there smugly asserting so much invisible silent authority? She reached out a hand to touch them, and drew it back: she was almost afraid they would be warm" (239)⁷.

Marian clearly faces a situation in which she is trapped between the alternatives of either being complicit in her construction by external forces or aiming for invisibility and abjection. Her horror, however, does not simply imply a rejection of the artificial definitions of femininity and a search for the natural as is arguably the

case in *Surfacing*. Disgusted by the half-organic, half-artificial women with whom she works, she observes:

What peculiar creatures they were; and the continual flux between the outside and the inside, taking things in, giving them out, chewing, words, potato-chips, burps, grease, hair, babies, milk, excrement, cookies, vomit, coffee. (171)

Realizing with revulsion that she is "one of them," part of this choking "sargasso-sea of femininity" (171), she wants to withdraw. Yet she suffers the insistent threat that by escaping this production-consumption matrix, she will lose all boundaries of selfhood. Plagued by images of herself "dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle," or spreading out, not being able to contain herself any longer" (227-28), Marian needs culture to give contours to her originary shapelessness. The alternatives of femininity presented to her, however, are all unappealing. Even the most ostensibly "natural" functions of the female body imply to Marian a loss of control. Her pregnant friend Clara, for example, seems subject to a body which is "somehow beyond her, going its own way without reference to any direction of hers" (31). Marian panics, paradoxically grappling for something outside of herself and distinct from the morass of femininity to define her perimeters. She seeks "something solid, clear: a man," perhaps, or any kind of "fixed barrier between herself

and that liquid amorphous other" (172). She therefore accepts a degree of complicity and turns towards "truth" to shed light on who she is and what she should do to make sense of herself and her place in society. Yet the "hard circle" of her engagement ring, which she views "as a protective talisman that would help keep her together" (228), threatens to fix her as a motionless, inanimate fetish-object.

Problematizing the natural/artificial dichotomy, the text also challenges the surface-depth binary posited in a romantic paradigm where characters "eagerly search for signs of 'truth', 'sincerity', and 'true self'" (Cohen and Taylor 5)⁸. Marian, in her quest for viable boundaries, insists that an essential core must be discovered both in herself and Peter if she is to be "true" to herself, decent toward others, and able to make correct -- rational -- choices. Marian certainly disapproves of Ainsley's deliberate masquerades used to entice Len Slank: "it doesn't seem ethical. It's like bird-liming, or spearing fish by lantern" (67). For Marian, Ainsley's tactics are as misleading as advertising or the marketing of different brands of the same product which present a false semblance of choice. Increasingly conscious of incongruous and ominous elements in Peter's personality, Marian wonders about his "true self, the core of his personality, the central Peter" (117). She wishes there was a test, "simple

and direct as litmus-paper," "something that avoided words ... [s]ome way she could know what was real" (279). Her desire for this knowledge, of course, presumes an a-priori, non-discursive "truth" lurking beneath the matrix of language. Physically, Peter is an unmarked surface, a simulacrum which focuses Marian's very problem:

he was ordinariness raised to perfection, like the youngish well-groomed faces of cigarette ads. But sometimes I wanted a reassuring wart or mole, a patch of roughness, something the touch could fix on instead of gliding over. (57)

Yet Marian insists that there must be something "hidden under the surface, that secret identity which in spite of her many guesses and attempts and half-successes she was aware she had still not uncovered" (117). Compounding her confusion is a sense of collusion. She wants the "real Pe'er, the one underneath" to be "nothing surprising or frightening And I called him out, she thinks, I evoked him" (254, *emph. added*).

The hopeless search for fixed, unambiguous points of reference in *The Edible Woman* clearly problematizes truth and the notion of a natural, unified identity, and implies that people are as fetishized as commercial products. While Peter figures as the model consumer in the text, apparently ignorant of his desire to emulate fictive images which surround, confront and persuade him, Duncan is plagued by a

sense of simulation and dissimulation in endless and meaningless production, both academic and personal. Relating his experience as an English graduate student, Duncan intuits the loss of substantial meaning and value caused by a capitalistic repetition compulsion:

You read and read the material and after you've read the twentieth article you can't make any sense out of it any more, and then you start thinking about the number of books that are published in any given year, in any given month, in any given week, and that's just too much. Words ... are beginning to lose their meanings. (94)

Yet Duncan takes advantage of the carnivalesque nature of language to construct *himself* as a floating signifier. In his encounters with Marian he continuously disorients her by shifting his stories and playing contradictory roles, anticipating *Lady Oracle*, "a novel in which every I is a lie" (Lecker 194). In *The Edible Woman*, Duncan is the playful and ambiguous character who most effectively problematizes Marian's notions of truth and coherent identity and best articulates the notion of the performative, simulated subject operating in hyperreal society of surfaces. He complains, "I'd like something to be real. Not everything that's impossible, but maybe one or two things" (209). He tells Marian:

all I can think of is those layers and layers of

woolly clothes you wear, coats and sweaters and so on. Sometimes I wonder whether it goes on and on, maybe you're woollen all the way through. (209)

Duncan suggests that he might discover the "real" Marian by sleeping with her, but initially rejects the idea. For him, sex is always-already a performance scripted elsewhere; he cannot get "turned on," because it is impossible to differentiate between a woman and the artificial model she unwittingly mimics:

If they'd read more they'd realize that all those scenes have been done already. I mean *ad nauseum*. How can they be so trite? They sort of get limp and sinuous and passionate ... and I start thinking oh god it's yet another bad imitation of whoever it happens to be a bad imitation of, and I lose interest. (196-97)

Despite this hilarious recognition that "gender is a kind of performative imitation for which there is no original" (Butler, "Imitation" 21), Duncan himself dramatizes the impossibility of fully escaping the culture he apparently rejects, for the simple fact that subjectivity is a "materializing" of historical possibilities (Butler, "PA" 273). Ending up in bed with Marian, he is repulsed by the very substantiality he purportedly seeks. "There's just altogether too much flesh around here. It's suffocating," he complains (265). The "natural" as a supposedly hidden

value is as tenuous as it is for Marian. Later, in an abrupt change of stance he asserts, "I've had enough so-called reality for now You aren't an escape any more, you're too real" (270).

The commodification of human identity corresponds with Baudrillard's bleak mimetic nihilism as well as Butler's notion that simulacra fix provisional, gendered subjectivities. "Pre fab" models function as idealized identities which people emulate. Like "elegant mannequins posturing in their bright glass cages" (174), people become imitators of simulated, mass-mediated "originals." Life seems to mimic art, and all falls into the hyperreal aporia of simulacra. In high school, Clara "was everyone's ideal of translucent perfume-advertisement femininity" (30). She is now "complacent and embarrassing ... sentimental, like the love stories in the back numbers of women's magazines" (132), modelling her marriage on mass market romance. Peter's gendered subjectivity is similarly grounded in "clichés of popular culture" (Greene 105). His masculine ideals, the text points out, are those gleaned from male magazines, pornography and murder mysteries (56). *The Edible Woman* thereby clearly insists that self-presentations are "intertwined with popular images, at times becoming parodies of media images" (Langman 63). Positing market-based images as their models, the "office virgins'" artificiality and similarity to one another effaces any

clear distinction between them. Peter's friends, "the soap men," are similarly indistinguishable simulacra:

they were all well-dressed, and on the verge of being successful, and they all had wives who were also well-dressed and on the verge of being successful. They were all anxious; they were all polite to her Marian's greatest apprehension about them was that she would get their names mixed up. (181)

Social interactions, in this narrative world of the simulacra, are similarly represented as commodified performances. The relationship between Marian and Peter, for example, is best described as a spectacle through which Peter seeks recognition from his peers. Marian and Duncan more explicitly dramatize social interactions as "productions of commodified spectacles at the interpersonal level" (Langman 63). Their sex scene, as W.J. Keith points out is "a parody of the 'daring' low-life movie" (56), one which indicates that social scripts are hierarchized and mediated by buying power. Counting his money for a hotel room, Duncan declares:

Well, it won't be the King Eddie ... but it'll get us something. Not around here though, this is expense-account territory Looks like this is going to be an underground movie rather than a technicolour extravaganza spectacular. (260)

Yet, while the text sets out a rather deterministic vision of the commodified, simulated human performer as an inevitable effect of consumer culture, it also intuits a potentially liberatory aspect in this very model. In contrast to Marian's helpless sense of externally imposed definitions of identity and behaviour, Ainsley's self-fashioning manipulates various versions of femininity for her own purposes. Her "dumb show" (119) as an innocent young girl plays into Len Slank's predatory game, while enabling her to covertly and victoriously appropriate the male position as hunter. Marian, sensing herself as prey to the designs of others, aims at invisibility, by hiding, starving and choosing her clothes "as though they're a camouflage or a protective colouration" (6). Ainsley, on the other hand, quite literally *invests* in the gaze of others, carefully selecting her costumes to present the most appropriate -- most consumable -- image, in order to get what she wants. A "quick-change artist" (6), she is a fledgling precursor to Zenia, the femme fatale figure in *The Robber Bride* -- a vampiristic consumer *par excellence*. Duncan, with his stronger awareness of provisional and theatrical subjectivity, figures in the text as an even more complex and accomplished "changeling" (142). Intuiting that "everything ... is immediately produced as sign and exchange value" (Baudrillard, *CPES* 87), Duncan engages in a "perpetual game of substitution and reinvestment" (Nye and

Pedersen 1), both professionally and personally. Yet Marian asserts that she does not mind being "used" by Duncan, and understands that after her marriage he would simply "dig up another substitute" (190). Peter's demands are somehow more ominous, because he seems to be "threatening her with some intangible gift in return" for her becoming his wife (189), perhaps the unappealing and oppressive entanglement of a conjugal life like Clara's.

Ultimately, Marian realizes that she cannot escape the matrix of production and consumption by simply rejecting consumption. The peculiar and paradoxical resolution to her sense of entrapment -- which finds appropriate imagery in the supermarket (which highlights commodification) and the labyrinthine Royal Ontario Museum (which emphasizes "mummification," or fixing an object in time) -- is a return to "so-called reality" as a consumer (293). Baking a cake version of herself, she offers it to Peter as a "substitute" for the artificial mate he seeks in her (284): "The image was complete ... its face doll-like and vacant" (283). This cake, as a "metaphor" of women as "interchangeable" commodities (Atwood, qtd. in Kaminski 27), reiterates the theme of substitution which is introduced by Duncan earlier in the text. Since both objects and humans are commodified and fetishized, they become essentially equivalent. Thus, Duncan, who tells Marian that she is "just another substitute for the laundromat" (147), gladly eats the cake

which Peter refuses. Marian then eats the cake herself in a metaphorical act of self-cannibalism, pointing out the undeniable complicity of her position in society: "You look delicious Very appetizing. And that's what will happen to you; that's what you get for being food" (283).

Within the structuralist matrix of Lévi-Strauss, cooking signifies an attempt to bridge the gap between the artificial human society and the natural world (*The Raw and the Cooked* 338). Marian's baking of the cake can be seen as an attempt to take control of part of the process of her production despite a self-conscious awareness of her cultural mediation. In this cake, the "most consumable object image of the novel" (Hutcheon 142), the divisions between truth and artificiality, nature and culture, self and society, as well as production and consumption are dissolved as discrete categories. Marian, as a consumer, regains at least a modicum of power, realizing that her identity lies not only in boundaries produced and delimited by external forces, but in consumption and the self-producing subject. Yet she still has not solved the problem of the way in which one can escape complicity by being neither consumer *nor* consumed. In *Survival*, Atwood implies that this can only be achieved in a society where "Victor/Victim games are obsolete" (39).

Endnotes

1. *The Edible Woman* is, paradoxically, the most 'writerly' of Atwood's texts and also the most poorly received by popular reviewers. "Its potentialities are disappointingly unrealized," writes one critic, while another asserts that "in a world where books filled with drama, passion, humanity, humour, fantasy, challenge, or even love are galloping into print, forget it" (qtd. in Greene 95). Such an evaluation clearly (and surprisingly) overlooks the novel as a highly comical satire on commercialism (Keith 47; Dooley). I would argue that it is, in fact, the most 'consumable' of Atwood's novels, if this implies, in Barthes' characterization, realism and normative categories of understanding. Atwood herself insists that, in terms of gender, her inverted romantic comedy is "social realism" (qtd. in Kaminski 27).

2. This figure makes a reappearance in *Life Before Man* as a pathetic lingerie salesman, wiggling his fingers through a pair of split crotch panties. His hand, "tented in black nylon, clothed like a puppet in some woman's empty groin" (90), again points to the absent (feminized) substance of value in the commodity fetish. He is also reconstituted in *Bodily Harm*, as the ubiquitous "faceless stranger" lurking in the shadows with a rope -- a victim and perpetrator of the pornographic image culture under attack in the novel.

3. Claude Lévi-Strauss has highlighted this link:
Now, these comparisons are only particular instances of the very profound analogy which people throughout the world seem to find between copulation and eating. In a very large number of languages they are even called by the same term. In Yoruba 'to eat' and 'to marry' are expressed by a single verb the general sense of which is 'to win, to acquire,' a usage which has its parallel in French, where the verb 'consommer' applies both to marriage and to meals. (*The Savage Mind* 105, emph. added)

4. We once again confront the desiring, cannibalistic nurse figure at the end of *Lady Oracle*. Joan is drawn to a reporter whom she inadvertently injures upon his arrival at her hide-out in Italy: "He's a nice man; he doesn't have a very interesting nose, but I have to admit that there is something about a man in a bandage" (344).

5. *Hustler* magazine made this violent connection explicit in a cover image depicting a woman's body partially fed through a meat grinder, "grade A pink" stamped on her buttocks.

6. The implications of late twentieth century celluloid culture, where people figure more as cyborgs than natural organisms and the 'natural' becomes so problematic as to be essentially meaningless, will be more explicitly dealt with in my fifth chapter.

7. The text clearly echoes Marx's notion that people assume the relations of objects and objects assume human characteristics (*Capital*, Vol 1).

8. In subsequent novels this paradigm and the opposition of appearance and reality are more fully interrogated. In *Lady Oracle* and, most markedly, *The Robber Bride*, the binary is exploded, as the Real no longer functions as a plausible hermeneutic for understanding identities and events.

Chapter Three

Freaks and Dancing Girls: Performing Femininities in *Lady Oracle*

Drawing out the thread of theatricality found in *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle* stages a fragmented subject in carnivalesque play with hegemonic codes. In a significant rupture from *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, Atwood's third novel thereby moves away from positing a self in direct battle with a monolithic power of "the system"/society. Further, the notion of self is no longer problematized through binaries found in the earlier narratives: those of surface/depth or fake/real, and the commodified/organic. Nevertheless, the commercialized social realm -- albeit as a more complex and fluid structure of power -- still figures significantly in the potentialities for the protagonist's selfhood.

While rendering Marian McAlpin's questions concerning the ethics of performative identity rather naive, *Lady Oracle* affirms the impossibility of escaping simulation in the very theatre of society. Yet, through its multiplicitous and contradictory protagonist who dramatizes that selfhood no longer figures as any singular psychic or existential category of being, the text raises questions about whether feminine theatricality does, in fact, hold space for effective resistance to hegemonic codes.

Continuing a critique of women's commodification under consumer capitalism, *Lady Oracle* figures femininity as a historical idea, a "corporeal style" (Butler, "PA" 272) and a cultural sign along two main trajectories. The first is the dominant set of signs and practices represented in and through Hollywood and its fetishized stars. Played out on the stage of culture at large, Hollywood is narratively situated within a broader cultural context, wherein gender itself becomes an act, both intentional and performative. The second array of gestures, meanings and images situates femininity in a counter-hegemonic side-show, played out at the site of the ex-centric, grotesque female form.

During the protagonist's childhood, both Hollywood and carnival figure as important sites of influence and identification, and as spaces for resistance to her mother's unrelenting criticism. Although Mrs. Delacourt complains that movies are "vulgar," and refuses to take her daughter to the theatre, Joan suspects that her mother has, in fact, seen many films in her time (78). Whether or not this suspicion is true, Mrs. Delacourt has clearly not been immune to Hollywood's fetishistic force in post-war North American culture¹. She is, as Joan remembers her, a comical yet pathetic imitation of the Hollywood glamour girl, slim and beautiful -- "even more beautiful," Joan remarks, "when she was coloured in" (63). She would spend time in front of a triple mirror at her vanity table,

"putting on her face." Around her mouth "she made a larger mouth with lipstick ... like Bette Davis" (65). Yet, Joan notices, instead of making her mother happier, "these sessions appeared to make her sadder, as if she saw behind or within the mirror some fleeting image she was unable to capture or duplicate" (63).

Setting up an impossible (because imaginary) standard for her daughter as well, Mrs. Delacourt names her Joan Crawford, after the actress. Later in life, Joan will come to realize that the model itself was a simulation:

Did she name me after Joan Crawford because she wanted me to be like the screen characters she played -- beautiful, ambitious, ruthless, destructive to men -- or because she wanted me to be successful? Did she give me someone else's name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own? Come to think of it, Joan Crawford didn't have a name of her own either. Her real name was Lucille LeSueur, which would have suited me much better. Lucy the Sweat. (38)

While Joan is somewhat reassured by the fact that there was "more than one side to Joan Crawford," indeed something "tragic" about her (38), she intuitively grasps what was most important: Joan Crawford was thin (39). In the end, the young Joan rebels: "I wouldn't ever let her make me over in her image, thin and beautiful" (86).

If, in this war with her mother, "the disputed territory" is Joan's body (67), Joan is determined to take control. Rather than submit to being carved into the appropriate commodity, she fights back through excessive consumption:

I swelled visibly, relentlessly, before her very eyes, I rose like dough, my body advanced inch by inch towards her across the dining-room table, in this at least I was undefeated. (67)

In profound contrast to Marian's resistance in *The Edible Woman* -- starvation and retreat -- Joan's tactic is exaggerated visibility, overeating and "clomping silently but very visibly through rooms in which [her] mother was sitting; *it was a sort of fashion show in reverse, it was a display*" (69, *emph. added*). Making a spectacle of herself is clearly a reaction to the sense of abjection felt by this fat child who has even been denied "a name of her own" by her mother:

I ate to defy her, but I also ate from panic. Sometimes I was afraid I wasn't really there, I was an accident; I'd heard her call me an accident. Did I want to become solid, solid as a stone so she wouldn't be able to get rid of me? (76)

Yet Joan's tactic of excessive self-assertion is heroic within very narrow bounds. She knows, even as a child, that

strangers saw her obesity "as an unfortunate handicap, like a hump or a club foot, rather than the refutation, the victory it was" (71-72). Seeing herself through their eyes shakes her confidence and seems to defeat her purpose. "It was only in relation to my mother that I derived a morose pleasure from my weight; in relation to everyone else, including my father, it made me miserable," she says (71-72).

When Joan's mother enrolls her in ballet school -- partly because the popular Hollywood musicals have made it fashionable (39), and partly because she wants Joan to lose weight -- Joan suffers the most humiliating punishment for her size. Rather than join the rest of the class on stage as a butterfly, she is forced to play a mothball. "It wasn't that I couldn't dance," Joan points out (46). Even as a child, she realizes that her appearance is the problem: "Although I was too young to be much bothered by my size, it wasn't quite the effect I wanted. I did not look like a butterfly" (43). As an adult she understands that without the "right effect," one becomes an absurdity:

The problem was fairly simple: in the short pink skirt, with my waist, arms and legs exposed, I was grotesque I must have looked obscene, senile almost, indecent; it must have been like watching a decaying stripper. (43)

While her "dance of rage and destruction" (47) as a mothball

steals the show and grants her more attention than the other girls. Joan's sense of vulnerability and invalidation is not assuaged: " 'This isn't me,' I kept saying to myself, 'they're making me do it'; yet ... I felt naked and exposed, as if this ridiculous dance was the truth about me and everyone could see it" (47). Although the audience vigorously applauds, Joan is horrified by their accompanying laughter. She longs to perform despite her size without ridicule, like opera singers:

Even though they were fat they could wear extravagant costumes, nobody laughed at them, they were loved and praised [T]o be able to stand up there in front of everyone and shriek as loud as you could, about hatred and love and rage and despair, scream at the top of your lungs and have it come out music. That would be something. (76)

Thanks to Hollywood films and her Aunt Lou, Joan is exposed to the possibility of such escape. At the movie house she rents a space where she can be fat and melodramatic simultaneously and without reproof, while empathizing with and living vicariously through the tragic yet glamorous women on the screen:

these binges of approved sniveling were among the happiest moments of my childhood I suffered along with sweet, patient June Allyson as she

lived through the death of Glenn Miller; I ate three boxes of popcorn while Judy Garland tried to cope with an alcoholic husband, and five Mars Bars while Eleanor Parker, playing a crippled opera singer, groped her mournful way through

Interrupted Melody. (79)

Unlike the oppressive standards set by her mother's appropriation of Hollywood, these characters offer Joan a sense of liberatory identification, particularly in the context where she, as spectator, holds some power over their meanings. Aunt Lou helps Joan by turning her attention to certain cultural values inscribed by the fetishized stars. In contrast to, and in contest with, Mrs. Delacourt's rebukes -- "To think I named you after Joan Crawford" (38) -- Aunt Lou points to Susan Hayward: "See? Red hair can be very glamorous" (78).

Clearly, while Hollywood is a prolific cultural site which represents and reproduces particular codes and values, a monolithic and unitary set of meanings is not imposed on the subject. Rather, the subject is engaged with cultural values and meanings in a mutually constitutive relationship. As such, Joan is influenced by representations in many different ways. Her role as a female spectator at the theatre not only involves her desire for -- and association with -- external images, but also positions her as the object of her own gaze. Perhaps Joan's most significant

identification is made with Moira Shearer in *The Red Shoes*: the dancer who, torn between her career and her husband, finally throws herself in front of a train. "I wanted those things too," Joan says, "I wanted to dance and be married to a handsome orchestra conductor, both at once" (79). Joan's entire dilemma is encapsulated before her on the screen -- after all, she couldn't dance as a ballerina, and "who would think of marrying a mothball?" (48)².

As a child, Joan also encounters a very different theatre of femininity. Aunt Lou exposes her to the CNE Midway, an equally commercialized, yet more ambiguous and carnivalesque space of meanings, replete with freaks, fat ladies, and dancing girls. This discovery of what can be seen as the antithesis to Hollywood -- while in some ways its very hyper-stylization and exaggeration -- reveals a competing yet equally forceful and enigmatic set of representations which become deeply imbricated in Joan's identity and self-fashioning. Most significantly, the young Joan encounters what will become both the mirror and ghost of her very self: the Fat Lady. This strange figure has the power to shock and entertain, mesmerize and amuse. Unlike herself, Joan notes, the Fat Lady is allowed to wear the same outfits as the dancing girls, despite her size. Yet, like the late nineteenth-century female circus performer, this grotesque woman provokes "wonder and ambivalence" (Russo 222). Transfigured as a compelling and haunting

performer in Joan's imagination, she figures as an escape-artist of sorts, sliding over social boundaries of femininity, and testing society's response to her transgressions. While the Fat Lady often dramatizes a power that Joan desires, she remains a monstrous figure, refracting Joan's fears of social censure. Her "outlaw body" (Kroker) can achieve, at best, a parodic femininity: "no one would whistle, no one would yell *Take it off baby*" (*Lady Oracle* 252). Without her harem costume, her veils, she is no longer an acceptable scopic commodity; she is simply grotesque, outside the acceptable margins of spectacle, much like the "decaying stripper" whom no one desires. As Russo notes, making a spectacle of oneself demands an exposure under a limelight which, however ostensibly transgressive and carnivalesque, is nevertheless subject to recuperation into "a complicitous place in dominant culture" (213, 214). Joan herself observes: "The man with the megaphone sounded the same for freaks and dancing girls alike. They were both spectacular, something that had to be seen to be believed" (88).

The tie-in of gender borders and the notion of femininity as performance with consumerism is dramatized in one of Joan's daydreams. Here, the Fat Lady is superimposed onto a "real" televised skating program:

The Fat Lady skated out onto the ice.... She smiled at the crowd, nobody smiled back, they

didn't believe what they were seeing because she was whirling around the rink with exceptional grace. (276)

She is interrupted by a commercial in which a famous female figure-skater "praise[s] margarine, unconvincingly, her eyes hypnotized by the cue cards" (276). When the competition resumes and the Fat Lady returns, her grotesque form becomes even more clearly "unruly" in the public sphere (Russo 214). As a less viable distraction than the margarine woman, she loses her power and poise: "The Fat Lady kicked her skates feebly; her tights and the huge moon of her rump were visible. Really it was an outrage" (277). She bursts into song, but it is too late: "They've gone for the harpoon gun," Joan hears the commentator say. "The were going to shoot her down in cold blood, explode her" (277). This tragic, comic, and daring yet ultimately defeated, figure plays out Joan's own struggles as a woman and as a female artist, while encapsulating the limits of escape and transgression.

The text's deterministic vision, while presented as inextricable from a social base, is manifest at the site of the subject: a very space, effect, and performer of the social itself. The society/self opposition in Atwood's first two novels is, then, replaced by a self/other dichotomy found within the protagonist herself. While Joan is able to physically escape the terrors of being the Fat

Lady by shedding her excess weight, she cannot psychically elude this figure, or the spectre of the social penalties that she learns the grotesque is both a part and a function of. Joan is like the Gothic heroine "who feels literally possessed by the spirits of other women from out of the past" (Modleski 33). Her very sense of self -- despite her multiple social guises -- is, in part, secured by her former derided self, the Fat Lady in her adult imagination: "she hovered around me like ectoplasm, like a gelatin shell, my ghost, my angel" (322). Joan fixes her identity by at once disavowing and perpetually calling attention to this "abject, interiorized, and ghostly other" (Fuss 732):

there was always that shadowy twin, thin when I was fat, fat when I was thin, myself in silvery negative, with dark teeth and shining white pupils glowing in the black sunlight of that other world.
(247)³

Joan fears absorption into her "former body," a monstrous force which threatens to disguise, conceal and obliterate her (322). She is not simply afraid of becoming fat: she fears a blameworthy visibility and exposure. Noticing a rip in the seam of her nightgown, she wonders, "With no one looking at me, watching for these transgressions, would I become sluttish?" (22). Haunted by the accusing voice of her mother -- "Why don't you take better care of yourself ... don't you want to make something

of yourself?" (22) -- Joan decides she should mend the tear. While transgressive acts are indeed possible, they are not necessarily without cost, either socially or psychologically. Perhaps the most threatening aspect of transcending social limitations to Joan is a commensurate departure beyond the frontier of her Self into a terrifying, chaotic landscape. When it seems she is losing control over her escape plan (a strategy for invisibility), she reiterates a fear of an irrecoverable loss of boundaries:

would I become one of those Fellini whores,
gigantic and shapeless? Perhaps I was
becoming hysterical. I didn't want to spend the
rest of my life in a cage, as a fat whore, a
captive Earth Mother for whom somebody else
collected the admission tickets. (329-30)

Here, the text conflates the punished female hysteric with twentieth-century avant-garde film performers and the circus freak. This, all at the site of the mother's body, which -- as in *The Edible Woman's* Clara -- simultaneously figures "demarcation and dissolution of identity" (Russo 222), scopic attraction and repulsion -- here manifest as an entertainment commodity.

A loss of authority over her own identity -- which is at the same time a loss of command over her own performance -- is already familiar to Joan as a bestselling writer. Linking her fear of exposure with external control

in consumer society, she notes:

I felt very visible. But it was as if someone with my name were out there in the real world, impersonating me, saying things I'd never said, ... doing things for which I had to take the consequences: my dark twin, my funhouse-mirror reflection. She was taller than I was, more beautiful, more threatening. She wanted to kill me and take my place, and by the time she did this no one would notice the difference because the media were in on the plot, they were helping her.

(252)

Besides the Fat Lady and her marketed image as a writer, Joan battles with a third version of her evil twin: her mother. Drawing out the particularly female Oedipal narrative in the text, Joan declares, "she had been my reflection too long" (331), and wonders how she can escape the phantasmagoric appearances of her mother's "astral body" which haunt her wherever she goes⁴. Despite the fact that her mother is "a vortex, a dark vacuum," into which she is drawn and swallowed up -- as both into her former flesh and as into the womb -- she realizes she has "never let her go" (331); for her mother is not only her Lacanian mirror reflection, but her muse and literary creation as well. Identifying her mother as the female figure in her poems, Joan concludes:

She had been the lady in the boat, the death barge, the tragic lady with flowing hair and stricken eyes, the lady in the tower.... She needed her freedom also. (331)

Thus, the evil twin or Other of the Imaginary not only figures as the ominous and threatening ideal which can never be attained, or the anti-ideal which is resisted; it is also that which sustains Joan in her specious Real⁵.

Perhaps, Joan thinks, it is her inner duality which somehow explains her living a double life. In fact, she suspects, everyone was playing out both "sides" of themselves. After all, she notes, "Every man I'd ever been involved with ... had two selves: my father, healer and killer; the man in the tweed coat, my rescuer and possibly also a pervert; the Royal Porcupine and his double, Chuck Brewer" (295). Clearly, Joan thinks, her husband Arthur "was someone [she] didn't know at all" (295)⁶. Yet Joan's own enactments make her rethink her sense of duality. There is not simply that "shadowy twin" accounting for her double life as both Louisa K. Delacourt and Joan Foster. "[F]or I was more than double," Joan observes, "I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many" (247). Her ability to be various women successfully and simultaneously proves to herself her very heterogeneity, and problematizes the conception of a non-specious self and an essential, material

"Real." Confronting the shifting nature of reality and identity, Joan says:

the difficulty was that I found each of my lives perfectly normal and appropriate, but only at the time. When I was with Arthur, the Royal Porcupine seemed like a daydream from one of my less credible romances But when I was with the Royal Porcupine, he seemed plausible and solid [I]t was Arthur who became unreal; he faded to an insubstantial ghost, a washed-out photo. (261)

Paradoxically, the insubstantiality of both Arthur and the Royal Porcupine are actually what constitutes them and makes them real for Joan. The identity of each is yet another reified sign, whose value resides less in any ostensibly intrinsic qualities than in transitory values Joan attaches to them. "I felt I'd never really loved anyone," she says, "I'd polished them with my love and expected them to shine, brightly enough to return my own refection, enhanced and sparkling" (285). Joan sees that she too has been pursued as an insubstantial fetish: "I was a shadow for Paul, ... evanescent as a cloud I was not the same as my phantom" (285). Remembering the Brownies' motto "There's magic in love and smiles" Joan makes a bitter connection between commodities and human emotions: "Now it seemed to me that the name of a furniture polish could be

substituted for 'love' in this maxim without at all violating its meaning" (284). She longs, then, for "that impossible white paradise" she reads about in Paul's trashy nurse novels, "where happiness was possible" and "love was as final as death" (286).

In her own reality, "everything changed and shifted;" (286) there is no finality, solidity or depth. Even the Fat Lady is insubstantial: "although she was so large, she was very light, she was hollow, like a helium balloon" (275). In this "society of the spectacle" (Debord), surface and form constitute the substantial; the performative "layer" provides the only source of meaning. It is a world, then, comprised of only visual and imaginary images, a world of simulacra which belies essential, unchanging meanings. As such, self-assertion (agency) and self-protection are carried out at the level of the hyperreal, through performance. In a rupture from the ethical concern for "false" appearances in *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, Joan is committed to maintaining a firm hold on her masquerades. She becomes deeply worried about losing control over her own image(s), and particularly over Louisa K. Delacourt. She is afraid that to be "found out" would spell the discovery that she, too, is hollow. Yet she fortifies herself against this threat by her very layering of identities.

Implicitly acknowledging the power in her masquerades, Joan attempts to regulate herself as an object of others'

knowledge by keeping her various "selves" discrete. "I ... was a sorry assemblage of lies and alibis, each complete in itself but rendering the others worthless," she says (213). Although efforts at hiding her obese self from Arthur fail, she smugly speculates about "how annoyed he'd be if he discovered he'd only made it as far as the first layer" (198-99). Joan eventually considers that even the seemingly traitor parent Arthur may be no more "single-minded, single-hearted" or "single-bodied" (213) than she is: "I soon discovered there were as many of Arthur as there were of me. The difference was that I was simultaneous, whereas Arthur was a sequence" (213). The contrast between herself as a synchronic layering of hermetically sealed masks and Arthur as a succession of identities is undercut by her own acknowledgement of the futility of pursuing truth beneath appearances. Reminiscent of Marian's suspicions and fears of Peter as the predatory Underwear Man in *The Edible Woman*, Joan suspects that Arthur may also have "a sinister other life" (295). He may be the person harassing and stalking her, making crank phonecalls and leaving dead animals on her doorstep. Watching Arthur sleep brings about a reaction almost identical to Marian's: "I was afraid now, almost afraid to move; what if he woke up, eyes glittering, and reached for me ...?" (295). Both Joan and Marian's characterizations of their partners draw from a template of already-commodified simulacra, where the sinister Gothic

male figure overlaps with the "homicidal maniac" (*The Edible Woman* 257) in popular culture.

Despite the apparently unlimited possibilities of identity and the prospects for overstepping socially proscribed gender roles, the presentation of self and perceptions of others take place, as Butler has noted, in a regulatory societal matrix informed by historical, hegemonic codes. In turn, meaning is restricted to the performative surface where the commodified subject functions. Socially legitimate identities -- those by which one functions as a "viable" person in society -- are firmly imbricated in social institutions (Butler, "Imitation").

Not surprisingly, Joan's public identities are those of the capitalist citizen and patriarchal subject. Upon her marriage Joan Delacourt moves from her originary patriarchal frame to yet another, wherein she becomes Joan Foster. Meanwhile, she maintains a separate and equally licensed identity as a costume gothic novelist:

I was two people at once with two sets of identification papers, two bank accounts, two different groups of people who believed I existed. I was Joan Foster, there was no doubt about that; people called me by that name and I had authentic documents to prove it. But I was also Louisa K. Delacourt. (214-15)

While both Joan Foster and Louisa K. Delacourt are socially

sanctioned and legitimate social identities, the latter figures differently in the cultural hierarchy. Joan fears being exposed as a Costume Gothic novelist to those who know her as the more respectable Joan Foster, wife and "serious" writer. Less concerned about being judged as a fraud, she senses that her integrity would be under fire specifically because of the cultural value assigned to "pulp" fiction:

my brief interlude of being taken seriously would be over. Unpleasant as it had been, I'd discovered it was much better than not being taken seriously. I would rather dance as a ballerina, though faultily, than as a flawless clown. (289)

Clearly, such a comment raises serious questions about the psychological dimensions of carnivalesque resistance, and casts doubt on the possibilities for Joan to truly escape her limited and limiting world.

The view of high art as immune to processes of commodification which devalues her costume gothics is belied by the text's treatment of Joan's experience. Even the respectable Joan Foster, author of *Lady Oracle*, is constructed by the media and publishing industry as a spectacle, one over which she has no control⁷. Morton and Sturgess, Foster's publishers, explicitly speculate on the persona they will construct to sell her book: "I thought we might *do you* as a sort of female Leonard Cohen," Sturgess tells her (227, *emph. added*). Resenting the stage-

directions of her publishers, Joan makes a connection between herself and "Mr. Peanut," a fabricated character who dances around supermarket parking lots while attendants sell colouring books and packages of peanuts (235). Joan is sent off to "key spots" to wave and entertain in an equally "blind shambling way" while her publishers peddle copies of her book: "Suddenly, I saw what it was like to be the peanut: clumsy, visible, and suffocating" (235). She senses an increasing loss of control over both her public self and the product of her labour. When Joan protests that her book is not really about "Modern love and the sexual battle," as the jacket blurb notes, Sturgess retorts, "You write it, you leave it to us to sell it" (239).

Joan is either packaged by her publishers as Joan Foster, or forced to construct Joan Delacourt's image as mysterious absence due to her need to conceal her "true" identity, or, more accurately, her contradictory authorial personae. However, Joan's desire to conceal her own fabrications ironizes the accepted and unquestioned construction of the apparently more legitimate Joan Foster, who is more acceptable simply because the construction was effected through the conventional channels of the culture industry. In both cases, the line between the carnivalesque and the hegemonic dissolves. Joan cannot escape becoming a spectacle in either case, because she herself cannot control the cultural production of value and meanings.

Ultimately, Joan discovers that any presentation (including invisibility) is subsumed under yet another set of existing codes, which she finds even more unpalatable. Her vulnerability to exposure to the public, partly through media attention, makes self-presentation both a matter of deliberation and also a matter of external mediation. When she takes the drastic step of staging her own death, in hopes of casting off her life and starting anew, she physically escapes the geographical borders of what she has known as reality, but she cannot psychologically cross over to "the other side." Even the Italians in Terremoto see her beneath her disguise.

While a thematics of theatricality in *Lady Oracle* opens space for a greater degree of agency than is possible in Atwood's first two novels, all three texts posit a similar determinism. The protagonists -- as commodified subjects -- cannot ultimately escape the boundaries of their culture, the social conditions limiting agency and restricting the possibilities for their identities. Their strategies of escape -- whether substitution (*The Edible Woman*), a return to nature (*Surfacing*) or masquerade (*Lady Oracle*) -- are themselves imbricated in culture and, as such, are always-already commodified simulacra. Even for Joan, the greatest trickster of all of Atwood's characters (with the possible exception of the femme fatale Zenia in *The Robber Bride*), her escape acts are provisional elusions at best.

Endnotes

1. As Charles Eckert has pointed out, the evolution of the form and character of consumerism was deeply influenced by Hollywood. Women, as the dominant domestic consumers, were particularly subject to its sway.

2. Throughout her adult life, Joan's theatrics -- her two separate authorial identities, her masquerades and concealments, as well as her mock-death -- play out the dilemma of the female artist, echoing both *The Red Shoes* and Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" (Gabriel). Atwood's description of her own experience as a young, aspiring female writer echoes, in very similar and equally comical terms, Joan's struggle in *Lady Oracle*. Atwood says:

My choices were between excellence and doom on the one hand, ad mediocrity and cosiness on the other. I gritted my teeth, set my face to the wind, gave up double-dating, and wore my horn-rims and a scowl so I would not be mistaken for a puffball. (VanSpanckeren xiv-xv, emph. added)

This autobiographical description is also reminiscent of Elaine Risley's tactics as an emerging artist in *Cat's Eye*.

3. The photographic image is fitting here as it encapsulates the position of woman as both a divided subject and an object of her own gaze.

4. Male characters in Atwood's writing are also threatened by their reflections in their mothers' eyes. Nate, in *Life Before Man*, for instance, can feel the weight of his mother's imaginary and ideal son, "a plaster mannequin threatening to enter and choke him" (263).

5. Atwood's most recent novel, *The Robber Bride*, explores the function of the psychic 'twin' in greater depth.

6. Unlike Marian in *The Edible Woman*, who has similar misgivings about Peter, and wonders about his essential identity, Joan does not speculate about Arthur's "true self."

7. Indeed, in all of Atwood's novels where writers and visual artists figure (and they are thematically central in *Lady Oracle*, *Bodily Harm* and *Cat's Eye*) the texts explore these figures as products of their own art (Hutcheon 145). *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* give particularly detailed treatment to artists, not only as effects of their own commodified creations, but indeed as commodities themselves, fetishized

figures constructed and marketed with a view to maximizing profits. In terms of the art or literature being sold, the artist-image figures significantly as a reifying force on the work that is being offered to the public.

Chapter 4

Language Play as Material Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*

If *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* examine the production of the subject and culture by various sign systems, *The Handmaid's Tale* places particular emphasis on the effects of the "awesome materiality of language" itself (Foucault, "Orders of Discourse" 8) in reconstituting the desiring subject. Self-conscious of the fact, as Hutcheon notes, that "this is a dystopia created out of words," the text offers us a vision of our contemporary wor(l)d "carried to the extreme" (156, *emph. added*). Atwood's fictional Gilead, in short, presents words as yet another set of cultural goods which demands a peculiar sort of buying power, as well as a particular sort of consumption, from the subject.

Reading contemporary society through a speculative lens, the novel traces language (in the strict sense of writing and speaking) as one signifying practice in the discursive marketplace which produces meanings, values and subjectivities. Yet the novel explores and utilizes language not only as a material medium of ideology, but also as a field of political contestation. In what follows I shall suggest that Offred, in confrontation with a veritable "prison-house of language" (Jameson), constructs escape acts, in turn, through language itself. If *The Handmaid's*

Tale appears to present the darkest scenario of all of Atwood's fictions, it also, paradoxically, presents a less deterministic vision. It does so by allowing alternative voices to subvert the authority of both the fictional state of Gilead and culture itself.

This struggle in and through language emerges within three central, but complex and often overlapping, narrative fields. The first is the Gileadean present, in which the dominant discourses are contested by discourses of resistance. A second battle is legible in the protagonist's own tale telling, where discourses of her past compete with those of the present. The third dialogical encounter pits the specious present of the Epilogue against the handmaid's text, which becomes a narrative of the past written toward the future.

The novel's treatment of discursive hegemony, held by the authorities of Gilead, considers the role of language as both an ideologically saturated system of power and a dynamic field of contention. While coercive strategies of discipline and surveillance are important to Gilead's consolidation of power and the reconstitution of its subjects, more covert and insidious forces are crystallized through the generation and dissemination of particular "truths" naturalized through linguistic repetition. While language ideally functions here as a social body of shared signs, its force, in fact, resides in unequal accessibility

to language.

By constructing Gilead's political authorities as those privileged to read, write and speak, the text links the hierarchy of political and social power with a hierarchy of language use. The autocrats in Gilead clearly understand the challenge in constructing a new socio-political order for already inscribed subjects, and recognize that their reconstitution involves strict control over language within a tightly controlled interpretive community. In fact, in one of the first acts after the assassination of the American President and Congress, the pro-theocracy rebels take over the media and suspend the Constitution. Newspapers and other sites of knowledge production are censored or closed down. With these initial steps, a stranglehold over public information enables the reformulation of social definitions. Here, the text shows how political realities are precariously defined through language and dangerously affected by institutional censorship. The notion of freedom defined and protected by the American Constitution, for example, quickly dissolves with the destruction of the document, and is replaced by a concept of negative freedom -- "freedom from" (24).

While the dangers of censorship are a persistent theme throughout the text, it is in more covert and insidious forms that exclusion and silencing become thematically and politically central. At the most fundamental level, *The*

Handmaid's Tale considers the ways in which a systemic exclusion is encoded in language itself. The notion that the production of truth or reality includes a discursive "development and transformation from an existing discourse or set of closely connected discourses" (Henriques 113) resounds in light of the fact that the ostensibly "new" oppressive phallogentric discourses of Gilead were already circulating in the previous regime. As a commentator in the novel's Epilogue notes, "There was little that was truly original with or indigenous to Gilead. Its genius was synthesis" (289). Phallogocentrism is carried over into the new order, partly through language, reproducing patriarchal ideology and impacting heavily on material realities.

The control over the production of knowledge which delineates Gileadean reality and names viable subjectivities is an almost exclusively male realm. The "Commanders of the Faithful" function as the owners and custodians of language who attempt to control, market and distribute social reality¹. The Bible, as state property with significant political power, is kept "locked up" by the Commander. Offred notes: "It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it? We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read" (82). Offred's ironic reflection that "The Fall was a fall from innocence to knowledge" (183) also unwittingly connects the threat that unregulated knowledge poses to Gilead. Yet it

is not the Bible itself that is under textual interrogation, but rather the oppressive religious discourse which Gilead creates through a selective process of textual (mis)appropriation. During "Beatitudes," for example, the handmaid is compelled to listen to a male voice articulate Gileadean theology, a distortion of *The Communist Manifesto* masquerading as Saint Paul: "From each, says the slogan, according to her ability; to each according to his needs" (111). What Offred hears seems wrong, but there is "no way of checking" anymore (84). She thereby quickly comes to understand the power that men such as the Commander hold through language: "He has something we don't have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once" (84).

Salvagings and Particicutions, the state-organized mob ceremonials, also strategically disseminate propaganda in order to consolidate cultural values and maintain the status quo. When a man named as a rapist is presented to a crowd of Handmaids at a Particicution, Offred recounts, "there's a surge forward, like a crowd at a rock concert ... that urgency coming like a wave through us. The air is bright with adrenaline, *we are permitted anything and this is freedom*" (262, *emph. added*). Even Offred cannot help but elicit the calculated reaction: "despite myself I feel my hands clench I want to tear, gouge, rend" (262). When the handmaid is told that the alleged rapist was actually "a political" she does not know what to believe: "One of ours,

I think. A Guardian. It seems impossible" (263). Gilead's attempt to make the "shared lie ... a shared tie" (Agnew 94), aims at constructing a community based on shared interpretations (Bauer 159). By blurring the distinction between truth and falsehood, the state reaffirms the current order. Offred resents the inexorable power in the transmission of such messages:

Aunt Lydia rummages in her pocket, produces a crumpled piece of paper She's rubbing our noses in it, letting us know exactly who she is, making us watch her as she silently reads, flaunting her prerogative. (258)

However, the text also suggests the possibility of subversion here. Aunt Lydia is compelled to discontinue giving detailed descriptions of the crimes punished at the ceremonials since "such a public account, especially when televised, is invariably followed by a rash ... of exactly similar crimes" (259). Offred understands the transgressive potential of such knowledge: "The crimes of others are a secret language among us. Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable of, after all" (259).

Since "[k]nowing was a temptation" (183) which could undermine Gilead's control 'here is a tight rein over public discourse. Songs are outlawed, "especially the ones that use words like free. They are considered too dangerous" (51). Even "the names of shops were too much temptation"

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(24), and are replaced by pictorial signs. This very restriction, of course, is a silent rejoinder to the subject's desire to know, a craving which becomes a indiscriminate hunger for Offred. She is "ravenous for news, any kind of news; even if it's false news, it must mean something" (19). Trying not to be deceived by the carefully marketed, "very convincing" anchorman, -- whose benevolent performance masks an insidious dialogue between the state authorities and its people's wish to believe that "[e]verything's for the best" (79) -- Offred listens to the propaganda eagerly, "hoping to be able to read beneath it (78).

In the Commander's room, a very "oasis of the forbidden," Offred enjoys some freedom to feast on language. She "voraciously" reads magazines from the past, "trying to get as much into [her] head as possible before the next long starvation" (173). "If it were eating," the handmaid declares, it would be the gluttony of the famished, if it were sex it would be a swift furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere" (173). In this society where "intellectual intercourse is sin" (Rubenstein 110), playing Scrabble with the Commander is both ridiculous and "kinky in the extreme" (145):

This once was the game of old women, old men
 Now of course it's something different. Now it's
 forbidden for us. Now it's dangerous. Now it's

indecent Now it's desirable. (130)

The textual and sexual power at the root of the novel's investigation are conflated in Offred's experience when the Commander allows her to write for the first time: "The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost. I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains" (174). The Red Centre motto "Pen is Envy" rewrites the Freudian notion of female desire for the phallus into desire for the coveted masculine logos. In the end, Offred acknowledges that it is this institutionalized lack which, in fact, inscribes her desire: "they were right, it is envy" (174).

The prohibitions on language, then, are significantly linked with desire and power in the text. Although he is ultimately unsuccessful, Offred's Commander -- who had a career in his former life as a market researcher (173) -- tries to take into account the fact that desiring subjects are already inscribed by a set of significations from the former regime. The Aunts who keep watch over the handmaids and protect the official ideology are named after "commercial products available to women in the immediate pre-Gilead period, and thus familiar and reassuring to them" (290)².

In direct relation to issues of desire, sexuality and identity, Offred's body makes the material consequences of language highly legible. Partly due to the relentless repetition of biological reductionist tenets, the handmaid's

own nakedness becomes "strange" to her (58). Defined as a reproductive vessel in Gilead, she no longer thinks of her body "as an instrument ... for the accomplishment of [her] will Now the flesh arranges itself differently" (69). In a regime that restricts sex to a biological act for the fully clothed, arousal and female orgasm seem increasingly "outdated" and purely a "symptom of frivolity" (89). It becomes increasingly clear that neither sexuality nor "love" exists outside of language and history:

Falling in love, we said; I fell for him The more difficult it was to love the particular man beside us, the more we believed in Love, abstract and total. We were waiting, always, for the incarnation. *That word, made flesh.* (211, *emph. added*)

While the narrative highlights the real power in naming things -- listening to Aunt Lydia, Offred knows "we are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives" -- it also shows something positive in the elisions between what is decreed and what actually takes place. Offred intuits a sense of possibility in Jezebels, for example, upon learning about the existence of call-girls in a purportedly desexualized regime: "official creed denies them, denies their very existence, yet here they are. That is at least something" (221). Being what is *not* named is an infiltration into a gap in the discursive order, a trespass which becomes a

potential strategy of resistance when it translates into invisibility or self-naming.

At the Leah and Rachel Centre, the handmaids, soon to be stripped of their former identities and given provisional patronymic labels, furtively mouth their original names to one another from bed to bed (4). Offred's old name, alone a word without meaning, has come to signify an identity by which she knows and values herself. It gains fetishistic force as the handmaid sees that all it denotes is slipping away. Throughout the tale, Offred battles against abjection by holding onto her name as a "charm" that, while "not quite within reach," is her beacon for the future (80).

If friendships are, as Offred says, "suspicious" (67), then Gilead regulates and minimizes speech to prevent the possible seeds of political resistance from taking root. When the handmaid's hopes for an "older sister, a motherly figure" are dashed by the dehumanizing verbal transactions with the Wife, Offred longs for what once seemed to be trivial conversation. She recalls: "How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was *talk*. An *exchange, of sorts*" (10-11, *emph. added*).

According to one critic, the prescribed formulaic speech patterns forced on the handmaids in Gilead "prevent practical conversation" (Freibert 284). Yet this judgement overlooks the novel's considerable play with the transgressive possibilities inherent in language. While the

linguistic regulations aim to efface individual difference and circumvent insurgency, they cannot prevent the sabotage of official discourse. Despite their "amputated speech" (189), Offred and her partner Ofglen effect such resistance through false compliance to proscribed conversation; their very mimicking of orthodox dialogue parodies and overturns it. While the relentless repetition of the accepted greetings and responses -- "Blessed be the fruit"; "May the Lord open" (41) -- renders them virtually meaningless, linguistic play also creates a space for subversive thoughts and desires garnered from the forbidden storehouse of the past. The meanings derived from memory comprise what is perhaps the most transgressive structure against Gilead's consolidation of power³. For example, although Offred replies with an appropriate "Yes Praise be" to Ofglen's remark that "It's a beautiful May day" (41), she immediately plays with and, in turn, rewrites the comment so that it articulates her own situation:

Mayday used to be a distress signal And it was something from Beethoven, for the beginning of the victory, in one of those wars It's French From *M'aidez*. Help me. (41-42)

In the end, Offred learns that *Mayday* is the password of Gilead's political underground, so the word does in fact come to signify both a distress call and the key to what we may assume is her victorious escape.

Later, the handmaid learns the complex and tentative role which language plays in her own difficult empowerment. In part, her ability to resist co-option by the system is supported by her recognition that the relationship between a word and its meaning is neither singular nor immutable, an acknowledgment supported by her memories of the past. This openness is a recurrent point to which Offred turns for comfort:

I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself. (104)

Her last comment here cleverly turns on her use of "compose" to reiterate an insistence on the arbitrary and incomplete (re)construction of her own autobiographical narrative. It also denotes a sense of her own power, albeit limited, to construct herself through language. Elsewhere in the text, she similarly discerns herself as something she must "now compose, as one composes a speech" (62).

The linguistic directive which will sustain her is not surprisingly, then, a foreign language. Although Offred cannot decipher the line she is both fascinated and empowered by its very presence:

Nolite te bastardes carborundorum [I]t was a

message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn't yet been discovered. Except by me, for whom it was intended. It was intended for whoever came next. (49)

This trespass of the proscribed empty and silent space of her closet is an irruption into Offred's vacant world, absent of language and female community. Functioning as both a material presence and a defiant event, it scripts a resistance to the commodification of the protagonist by speaking personally to her as distinct from her patronym, while making a connection between women in the same colony Of/Fred. Pleased that the "taboo message made it through, to at least one other person" (50), it inspires a sense of hope and rapport.

Yet, Offred wonders, "Why did she write it, why did she bother? There's no way out of here" (138). The handmaid's sense of anguish is heightened when she learns that the epigram was a line of graffiti taken from the Commander's childhood textbook. It was "just a joke" (174), situated among an array of misogynist word games and sexist mock-conjugations, reiterating the text's concern with the language and culture. This discovery diminishes the handmaid's positive sense of community with other oppressed yet rebellious Offreds. Realizing, with some jealousy, that she has not been the first to visit the Commander's den, to "enter his silence, play children's word games with him"

(175) she feels expendable and powerless. Yet the ostensible trivialization of the former Offred's message in view of its "origins" is not fully justified, as the epithet gleaned from the Commander was indeed a risky appropriation of his words in defiance of his own system: "Don't let the bastards grind you down" (175).

Offred's own linguistic play is a form of power which accords her a provisional sort of freedom. Just as in the past, when Offred "lived in the gaps between the stories" (53), telling her tale is a way of sustaining herself amidst present terrors:

Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off (37).

Offred's narrative parody of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* -- "I tell, therefore you are" (251) -- reiterates the Whorfian hypothesis that *language speaks us* while emphasizing the possibility of standing against oppression by "shaping absence into the presence of the text itself" (Weir 64). The "You" she inscribes becomes a god of promise in whom she can believe. Although the silent, unresponsive absence becomes a source of her despair at times, making her "feel very unreal" (183), the telling of her tale itself

politically mediates against such abjection. Its very utterance is a resistance to the erasure of the handmaids that Offred foresees in the annals of Gilead: "From the point of view of future history we'll be invisible" (214). Yet, in light of the fact that Offred records her story on tape, her account is also implicitly made in view of a future material presence, and as such is a decidedly political act. While she says that "this is only a story," such story telling has a force to which Atwood herself ascribes in her support of Amnesty International: "all it does is tell stories. It makes *the story* known. Such stories have a moral force, a moral authority which is undeniable" (*Second Words* 350).

Those who eventually hear Offred's tale in the post-Gileadean future figure as potent forces who hold power over the very survival of her story. This significance is made ominously clear in the "Historical Notes" following the handmaid's narrative, which engages a dialogue between Offred's own utterances and those of the academy which appropriate, analyze, and situate them within yet another matrix of power. Drawing an indictment of censorial practices from the present (Offred's past) through the speculated future (Offred's textual present) and into the even more distant future of the year 2195, the text condemns both the explicit and more covert ways in which language is imbricated in a selective and exclusionary system of power

which impacts significantly on notions of the past and present. In a textual play on Kant's sceptical remark that "scholars inform the world of what has been done" (qtd. in Wood 20), the academic community is shown to have an active role in recreating the values of the past which is, as the text suggests, the way to create the values of the future (Davidson, "Future Tense" 120). Offred's tale becomes engulfed within the academy that reproduces it, underscoring the institutional ownership or appropriation of both present language and discourses of the past. At the Symposium on Gileadean Studies the keynote speaker's very title, "Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*," undercuts Offred's own authority. Professor Piexoto, a male don of Cambridge University, establishes himself as more reliable than Offred's eyewitness account. Revealingly, he focuses less on details of the handmaid's life than on the men who shaped it (Rubenstein 112). Of particular interest to Piexoto is the identity of Fred the Commander: "What would we not give now," he says, "for even twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford's private computer!" (292). Even the chairwoman of the conference is the object of sexist jokes and is relegated, just as Offred and her tale are, to a "marginal place as mere handmaiden to Piexoto's central text" (Davidson, "Future Tense" 119).

Thus, the textual coda loops back through the main narrative, compelling a reconsideration of Offred's comments

on the "word. How we *squandered* it, once" (84, *emph. added*). While the narrative emphasizes the critical importance of language as a valuable social commodity and condemns even the most apparently justifiable targets for censorial exclusion (such as pornography), it also points to the ways in which language is not only spoken through us, but indeed "speaks us." This attention to discourse as a process which has historically been a male domain significantly develops Atwood's own materialist understanding of language as "always both a tool, a medium, and something that limits" (qtd. in Castro 226). It also points to the double-edged problem of female authority in a patriarchal symbolic order where women must find ways to exercise resistance by *writing against* the very language of their oppressors.

Endnotes

1. It is important to note here that the body of knowledge used to delineate "reality" is, in fact, historically produced. Knowledge should not be viewed, then, as a universal, absolute body of truth, since truth itself, as Foucault has theorized, is an effect of power produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false. Thus, "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol.1 100).

2. Yet the logocentrism which underlies Gilead's strictures against reading and writing fails to accord sufficient consideration to the fact that the subject is discursively produced by more than just the written and spoken word. Offred remembers that one of the food stores was once a movie theatre, a bastion of meanings and cultural values produced through other forms of signification such as images, clothing and gestures. The actresses on the screen "wore blouses with buttons down the front that suggested the possibilities of the

word *undone*" (24).

3. Although I cannot fully treat the topic here, it should be noted that memory allows Offred to engage the contradictory moments of representation and cultural difference in a clash between her own verbal text and that of Gileadean culture. It figures as a crucially important -- albeit provisional and fictional -- site of sustaining and resistant language in Offred's narrative. In her mind, in silent times, she goes "somewhere good" -- back into a safe haven of the past. Offred recognizes that this is, at best, a selective and distorting activity of reconstruction reflecting a desire to assuage the agony of the present with more soothing thoughts. Yet, she asserts, it is critical to her survival (100). Coveted as a valued commodity, memory is critical in reinscribing a resistant subjectivity. As long as memories of the past persist, Gilead's power remains under threat, its values and meanings complicated by the "truths" and desires constructed in a different version of reality.

Chapter 5

The Cyborg's Seduction in *The Robber Bride*

I stop only long enough to allow myself to be sprayed by a girl giving away free squirts of some venomous new perfume. The femme fatale must be back Briefly I glimpse myself through her eyes: bloom off the rose, teetering on the brink of matronhood, hoping for the best. I am the market.
-- Elaine Risley (Atwood, *Cat's Eye* 119)

Elaine's comment foreshadows the very knot of investigation in Atwood's subsequent novel, *The Robber Bride*.

Highlighting the notion that the feminine is the idealized and unreal ground of desire, Zenia is incarnated as an enticing simulation, a pure floating signifier of desire. This character, a triumph of modern technology, dramatizes the notion that technological "determinism" is, in fact, one "ideological *space* opened up by the reconceptions of machine and organism as coded texts through which we engage in the play of writing and reading the world" (Haraway 69). In *The Robber Bride*, Atwood considers technology's intersection of machine and organism as one of subversion and possibility. Writing against the sense of technology as a material force which destroys nature, the text constructs a character who, through her mutable and technologically mediated body, insists that she is a site of ongoing meaning production, rather than an empirical, natural finality.

In fact, "nature" becomes seriously dislodged within the hyperreal matrix of contemporary culture represented in

the text. Dismantling the notion that nature is appropriated to produce culture, technology confounds the nature/culture dichotomy at the site of Zenia's body to belie its conception as "a material limit that is absolute" (Doane, "Technophilia" 163). The natural body as a source of innocent value which is fetishized and obfuscated, in a vulgar Marxist conception, is thus "fatally undermined" (Haraway 70) by the technological hyperreal represented in the novel. As a result, the natural body as "the gold standard of social discourse" (Lacqueur 18) is problematized, as its status as a transcendent authorization of interpretation is lost (Haraway 70).

Doane notes that "science fiction, a genre specific to the era of rapid technological development frequently envisages a new, revised body as a direct outcome" ("Technophilia" 163). *The Robber Bride* similarly constructs a "revised body" for Zenia, thereby raising questions about both the body as unstable sign and woman as pure simulation. It also considers the implications for a potentially infinite and boundary-transgressive subjectivity. As a surgical melding of the organic and inorganic, Zenia can be figured within the "myth of the cyborg" which Baudrillard implies and Donna Haraway has theorized. In Haraway's conception, the cyborg "is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (65). In *The Robber Bride*,

Zenia certainly is a creation of her own multitude of fictions which impact on the lived relations of both herself and those around her. Yet her greatest fiction rests at the site of her body. A techno-fetish which defies any biological definitions of the naturally feminine, it simultaneously materializes the idealized feminine. Her "ceramic glaze," "amino-acid-fed-estrogen-replacement skin" and silicone breasts are indistinguishable from her "natural" body (118).

Yet one character observes that it makes no difference how much of Zenia is manufactured: she is "magnificent" (118). Atwood's most perfect simulation, Zenia appears as the very picture of desire. Corresponding closely to Doane's notion that the femme fatale is aligned with an excess or masquerade of femininity ("Film and the Masquerade" 235), Zenia dramatizes her paradoxical position as a female model whose very excess is her success. The overabundance, however, is not a seepage into the spaces of the grotesque; it is, in fact, that which conforms to -- albeit in a transgressive way -- the boundaries of the culturally feminine. That is, Zenia physically simulates the missing gaps or distance from fetishized images of ultimate femininity. Despite her own machinations -- in fact, because of them -- she *appears* as the perfect woman, a pure sign of desire.

In the hyperreal, both the ultimate commodified subject

represented by Zenia and the ultra-reified culture renders nature, authenticity and truth indistinguishable and inseparable from the artificial, manufactured or feigned. At this spectacular, ever-shifting level of technological possibility, the text insists, the scopic and material constitute the only provisional truths:

When you alter yourself, the alterations become the truth: who knows that better than Roz, whose hair tints vary monthly? Such things are not illusions, they are transformations You are what they see. (118)

Zenia herself accomplishes those transformations that Atwood's earlier protagonists longed for by intentionally simulating cultural models to her own advantage. Yet, in this novel, the conception of simulation wipes away any notion of hermeneutic depth or an originary model. As one character notes, Zenia is not *approximating* anything in her performances -- she is the simulation itself: she "has never been *almost*, even at her most fraudulent ... even her most superficial disguises were total" (42). Questions about whether she is "real" (432) get lost in the technological vortex of simulacra: "like a renovated building, Zenia is no longer the original, she's the end result" (118). "Loose in the air, but tethered to the world of appearances" like a hologram (57), Zenia herself can be seen, then, as the ultimate effect and representation of a technological

culture of "virtual reality" -- the ultimate hyperreal. As an always provisional end product in her own right, and an inexorably aestheticized fetish seen as a means to fulfill desires and "needs," she incarnates the seductiveness of technological culture itself, a very dynamic marketplace of identity fetishism.

The novel opens with the assertion that "[t]he story of Zenia ought to begin when Zenia began" (3). Yet, as pure sign, Zenia appears as "an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a [wo]man in space" (Haraway 67). We first encounter Zenia as a perfect body returned from the dead. No one knows who she "really" is, or where she comes from. All that is known about her is what she "materializes" (*The Robber Bride* 57). And when she mysteriously, and with only apparent finality, dies (again) at the end of the novel, her ever having existed is uncertain. "Even the name Zenia may not exist," Tony notes, attempting to trace its meaning (535).

It was only out of "hints and portents" that Zenia "devised herself: As for the truth about her, its lies out of reach, because -- according to the records, at any rate -- she was never even born" (535). Like Haraway's cyborg, Zenia refuses the search for innocent wholeness and takes irony for granted. Instead of seeking unitary identity, she accepts that identities are "contradictory, partial and strategic" (Haraway 72). Flagrantly rewriting the plot of

originary unity, she constructs a series of provisional unities. This strategy of self-presentation effectively manipulates those around her who seek such an authentic story of origin as a transcendent authorization of meaning. In one of her autobiographical fictions, Zenia notes the power of being an orphan: "You can be whoever you like" (193). Zenia's origin is always already a copy of the real, without an original. In the imagination of one character, it is a "European print, hand-tinted, ochre-coloured, with dusty sunlight and a lot of bushes -- behind which, out of sight in the undergrowth and hinted at ... something ordinary but horrifying" (3).

Zenia constructs many historical tableaux in which she places and defines herself -- any authentic underlying origin is completely effaced. In these "maps" she both literally and figuratively sews herself into a scintillating and unnerving guide, taking the other characters on journeys through what they believe is substantial territory. Trying to envision Zenia's "real" terrain, Tony -- a historian -- intuits its hyperreality:

Where was her battlefield? Not in any one place. It was in the air all around, it was in the texture of the world itself; or it was nowhere visible, it was in among the neurons, the tiny incandescent fires of the brain that flash up and burn out. An electric flower would be the right

kind for Zenia, a bright, lethal flower like a short circuit, a thistle of molten steel going to seed in a burst of sparks. (545)

Like the silicon chip, Zenia is a "surface for writing" (Haraway 70), an overexposed exterior which radiates the "blind and brilliant ambience of the simulacra" (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 150). As Tony remarks, "Zenia's life sparkles - no, it glares, in the lurid although uncertain light cast by large and portentous world events" (192).

Despite this narrative romp through the hyperreal, mythopoeic world of appearances, the title of Atwood's latest text gives the reader a hint that the author has in no way cast aside her fascination with emotional and symbolic cannibalism introduced in her first novel. "The Robber Bridegroom," as one of the main characters reveals, is a fairy tale "about a rich and handsome stranger who lures innocent girls to his stronghold in the woods and then chops them up and eats them" (341). In a gender reversal, Atwood makes her alluring cannibal a woman, one who chooses both women and men as her victims.

Invading the lives of three girlhood acquaintances -- Charis, Roz and Tony -- Zenia manages to seduce each of their lovers -- Billy, Mitch and West. By becoming the marketplace of their desire, she, in fact, becomes the consumer. Yet this pilfering is the result of the women's

initial attraction to Zenia, not that of their partners.

Recognizing this, Tony notes:

people like Zenia can never step through your doorway, can never enter and entangle themselves in your life, unless you invite them in. (133)

She asks herself, "Why did she do it?," echoing the insistent question carried through the text about women's position in the economy of desire, lack and consumption. Roz, encapsulating a critical question about women's determinism and agency suggests that the answers lie in the visual field of a phallic economy:

male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur. (456)

The female subject is situated as a male spectator here -- echoing John Berger's theory of the gaze which is explicitly quoted in the epigraph to *Bodily Harm* -- reading herself along patriarchal codes. However, through Zenia, the text suggests that there is a liberatory way to insert oneself --

through a masquerade of femininity -- into the libidinal economy: the "Zenias of this world have studied this situation and turned it to their own advantage; they haven't let themselves be moulded into male fantasies, they've done it themselves. They've slipped sideways into dreams" (456).

The text suggests that Zenia's success in tricking men and women with her tales and performances rest in an understanding of herself as both spectator and spectacle in a patriarchal culture. However, the dreams she capitalizes on are "the dreams of women too" (456). Women, as the texts suggest, are also objects of their own gaze and consumption: "women are fantasies for other women" (456). This notion is the central vehicle for interrogating the protagonists' complicity and ostensible "victimhood" in Zenia's seductions. Drawing on her image of perfect femininity as a site of meaning and identification, Charis, Roz and Tony read Zenia as a pure object of their respective lovers' desire. She is, then, what they would wish to be. By bringing her into their space, they metaphorically consume her in an attempt to become her (Fuss 714). As the very ideal of femininity and power, she invokes their desire, much like the advertised images of femininity which promise transformation while pointing out to the spectator her own gap or insufficiency in identity:

Zenia is the incarnation of how plainer, more oblong women wish to look, and therefore to be:

it's a belief of theirs that such things can be arranged from the outside in. (154)

Thus, the main characters envy her, even while they despise her. It does not matter that she is a "commodified fantasy," an insubstantial "simulacra of selfhood" (Langman 71).

As Langman notes, postmodern envy is a comparison of one's own subjectivity to the subjectivity which the Other *seems* to have (71). Zenia's success and the complicity of her female victims are structurally contained within the scopophilic field of identification. Yet, as a signifier, she holds a different meaning for each woman. She figures as the psychic twin and mirror image for each of them. Initially, Zenia is able to draw Tony into her trap by presenting herself as someone with a similar history: "both motherless, both war babies, making their way in the world by themselves" (193). Yet this identification is not the only element drawing her to Zenia. Tony realizes that the "taller, stronger, more daring" (160) shadow of herself that she has carried throughout her life has become incarnated in Zenia: "Tony looks at her, looks into her blue-black eyes, and sees her own reflection: herself, as she would like to be Herself, turned inside out" (193).

Charis also fixes her identity through an anterior reflection that Zenia represents. Charis has always identified her psychic twin as Karen, but eventually "[s]he

no longer looks like Karen. She looks like Zenia" (306). At one point Charis even feels as if that gap in her identity is closing, that Zenia "blends into her," and that "everything in her has been fused together" (306). Charis sees them side by side in the mirror, watching Zenia's "edges dissolve like a watercolour in the rain What she sees is herself, herself in the mirror, herself with power" (463).

The upwardly-mobile Roz envies Zenia for her "killer instinct" in the business world (457), but says that she will never attain her power because her body does not fit the pre-cast model of the femme fatale: "To be truly malevolent she would have to be thinner" (457). All of these characters, then, see a vision of their own ideal perfection in Zenia, and gain a sense of self-deprecation through her which, paradoxically, makes them desire to be with her. As a seemingly perfect simulation of a peculiar feminine model which each of them has idealized, Zenia exceeds all of Atwood's earlier female protagonists as both an agent and object of fetishism.

Ultimately, this femme fatale is transformed from "the evil mother of masculine fear into the literate mother who teaches survival" (Haraway 95) to the women around her. Charis, Roz and Tony all come to realize that Zenia has been the embodiment of power to define the "real," a power which they draw lessons from. Upon her death, they sense a

"vacancy" (542) returning to their lives, suggesting both the loss of a signifier which grounded their own meaning, and the perverse pleasure she accorded them in their search for her "truth." Despite all of Zenia's tricks, they feel sadness and gratitude as well as a reluctance to let her go. Charis tells herself that Zenia will surely return, for "the dead return in other forms ... because we will them to" (542). Looking back on Zenia as a fictional history which they all needed and conspired to create, Tony realizes that Zenia was, in fact, neither victim nor victor; "what side she was on doesn't matter There may not even have been a side. She may have been alone" (545). The "guerilla war" (545) she waged was not a war against her friends, but a war against Western tenets of concrete individuality, unity, coherence, and empirical finality in the body. It was a battle waged with "veils, thick and black. Nobody could see what you were doing in there behind them. You could be laughing your head off" (545). Even after Zenia is gone, she can still be seen, her "glazed pottery face" smiling, holding secrets in her play with subversive authenticity (546).

In summary, *The Robber Bride* inscribes a new feminist grammar of discontent which draws together Atwood's earlier narrative conceptions of symbolic cannibalism, the materiality of images and language, and specular mimesis in the hyperreal. While acknowledging that the conditions of

possibility for the subject are wrought by certain forces beyond her direct control -- such as technology -- the text also suggests that desiring subjects can and do find pleasure in the play of significations which both constrains and compels them.

In the tension between transgression and containment in her earlier novels, we have already witnessed a dynamic play with hegemonic codes and institutionalized ideals. These provisional escape acts are dramatized in *Lady Oracle* through a carnival of representations and a narrative parody which "both asserts and undercuts that which it contests" (Hutcheon 7). *The Handmaid's Tale* "underlines and undermines" (Hutcheon 8) the materiality of language itself through resistant word play. However, the narrative romp through the hyperreal in *The Robber Bride* seems to present the most optimistic of Atwood's materialist visions. The performance of Zenia's mediated body de-reifies the feminine fetish through its very mock-capture, leaving a potential space for new models. Yet the narrative death of Zenia does not suggest an end to Atwood's materialist critique of culture. In fact, the novel suggests that we need such "maps," since they "contain the ground that contains them" (539), and thereby enable us to "visualize the topology" of possibility (539). If the constructions of such "fictions" is arbitrary, as Tony asserts, it also scripts a resistance by positing an ending. "A period, a dot of punctuation, a

point of stasis. A pinprick in the paper: you could put your eye to it and see through, to the other side, *to the beginning of something else*" (540, *emph. added*). If Atwood's texts do not provide clear answers to the questions about determinism and agency which they persistently set out, these fictional works nevertheless provide us with a remarkable cartography of the spectacular stage of late capitalism.

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