



# WONDER WOMAN AND THE HANDMAID: INSPIRING TRANSFORMATION?

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Based on the DC Comic hero first introduced in 1941, Wonder Woman's home island Themyscira is female only, with the film revealing her confusion at women's status in First World War Britain. The film is the highest grossing film from a female director ever. It has received much critical acclaim.



- The serial adaptation of Margaret Atwood's book *The Handmaid's Tale* has been provocative; with questions asked by some about whether the series is a reflection on the Trump administration. The book material was written in 1985. Raising issues generally around authoritarianism, power and class and particularly around sex based injustice, the series has brought second wave feminist concerns to a new audience.
- Interesting that *Wonder Woman* and *The Handmaid's Tale* were released at around the same time within the UK.
- These two cultural works present two hugely different representations of women. Without wishing to present them as an either/or in terms of their use or lack of for political activism, as an activist and specialist in working for women's liberation, I have been considering the value of both.
- One of the main criticisms from activists about both works is their lack of representation of either race, or racism. For *The Handmaid's Tale*, people of colour have been cast in majority roles, however, the lack of racism as a theme in a series about authoritarianism has been criticised. *Wonder Woman's* representation of people of colour has been pointed out as problematic. Tech Journalist Cameron Glover said in *Harpers Bazaar*:
- "In the film, the only Black women depicted are a handful of Amazons on

Themyscira, the hidden island where Diana and her people live in peace without men. The first Black woman we're introduced to is Diana's caretaker, a representation which hits the Mammy trope on the head."

- Journalist Ellen E Jones has said of the Handmaid's Tale:
- "In Gilead, handmaids such as Offred are forcibly separated from their families, regularly raped by their "commanders", traded as if they were cattle, banned from reading and punished with maiming and public lynchings. None of these details are the inventions of Atwood's imagination or embellishments from Miller's writer's room; this is what actually happened during 245 years of slavery in the US – albeit to black women rather than white ones. Isn't it odd, then, to neither openly acknowledge this history, nor grapple with its legacy on screen?"
- But, now we are getting ahead of ourselves. How has the Handmaid's Tale been utilised by activists?



“As symbols of a repressive patriarchy, the crimson robes and caps — handmade, repurposed or ordered online — have become an emblem of women’s solidarity and collaboration on rights issues, similar to the pink knitted hats worn during the Women’s March after President Trump’s inauguration.”

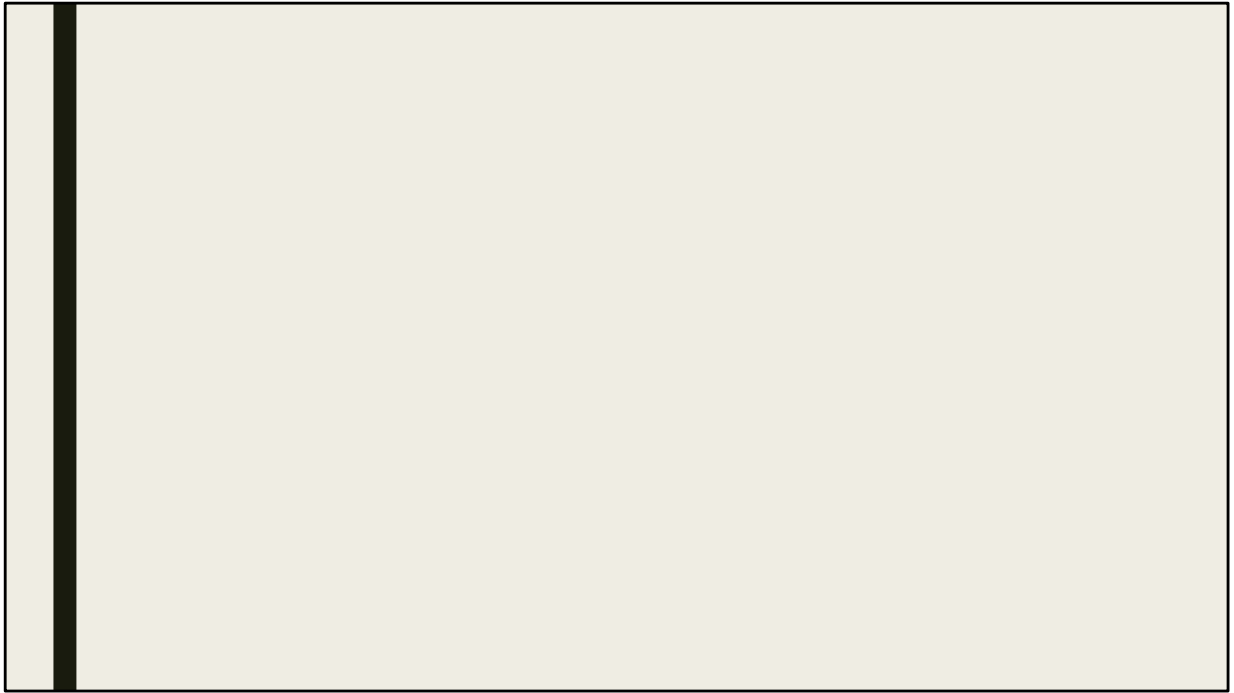
Christine Hauser

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/us/handmaids-protests-abortion.html?mcubz=0>



**FUNNY OR DIE**

- Handmaid's Tale for Men: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ciPszqk703k&t=1s>
- But outside of political activist circles and those with feminist literacy, how is the Handmaid's Tale viewed?

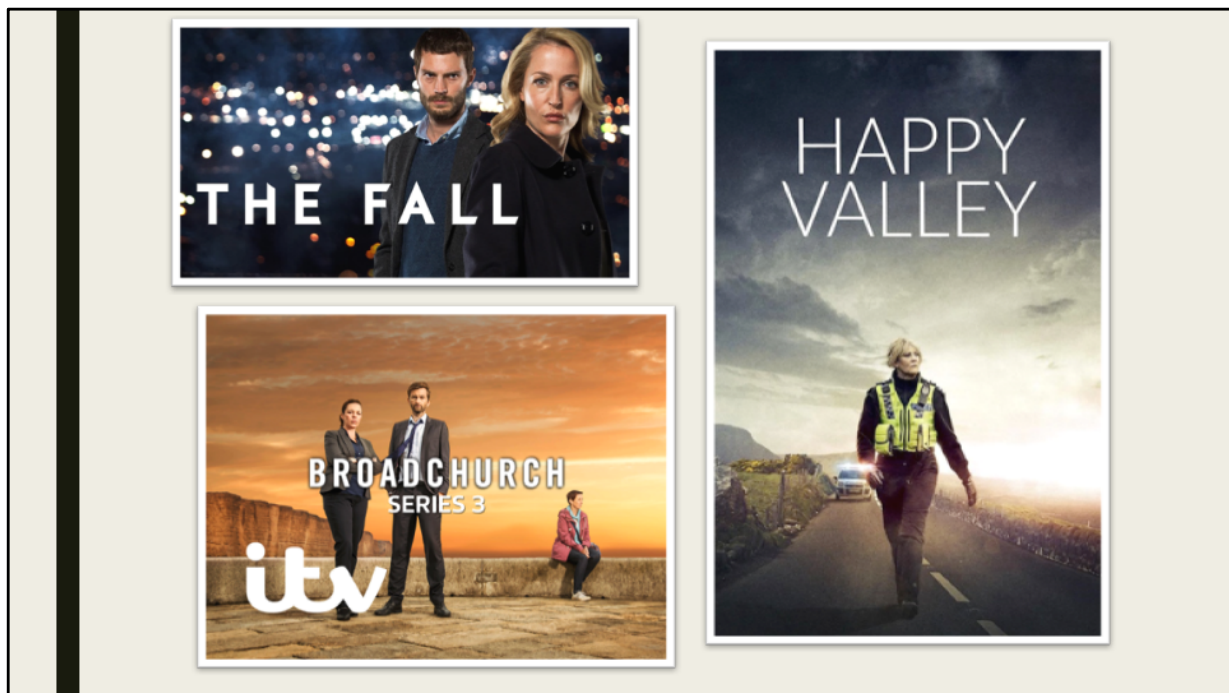


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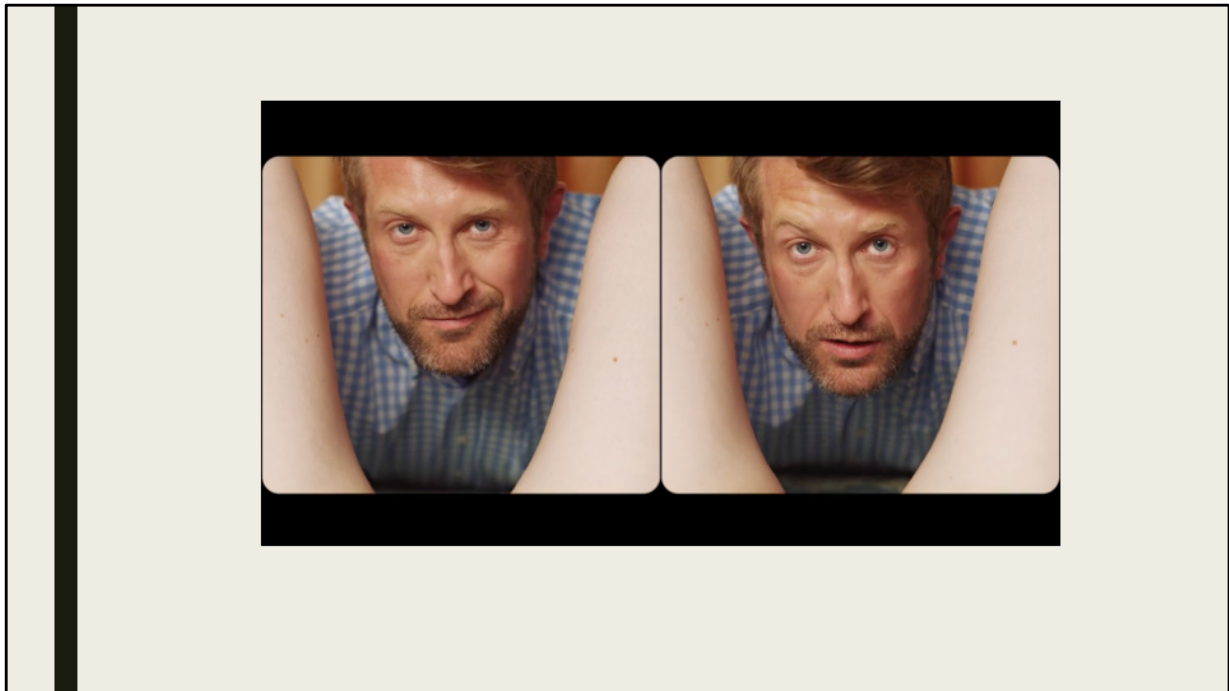


- It has beautiful cinematography and there has been an intention to reduce the age of the commander and his wife, casting the stereotypically attractive Joseph Fiennes and Yvonne Strahovski.
- People have made comparisons between the Handmaid's Tale and ISIS, and with Trump's politics (particularly Mike Pence). Yet it seems that outside of feminist circles it is perceived much more as entertainment than a cautionary tale.
- The issue with dystopian realities being depicted in books or film, is they can often seem so far away from our current reality as to be irrelevant. Particularly for those without the privilege of developing critical consciousness, it can seem ridiculous to suggest any relationship between dystopian fiction and our current context.
- Tell the story of Baggy, the Hunger Games and Black Mirror.
- The other question that must be asked is what does the graphic depiction of sexual and physical violence, female genital mutilation, and psychological abuse for entertainment do to the psyche of those who watch it?

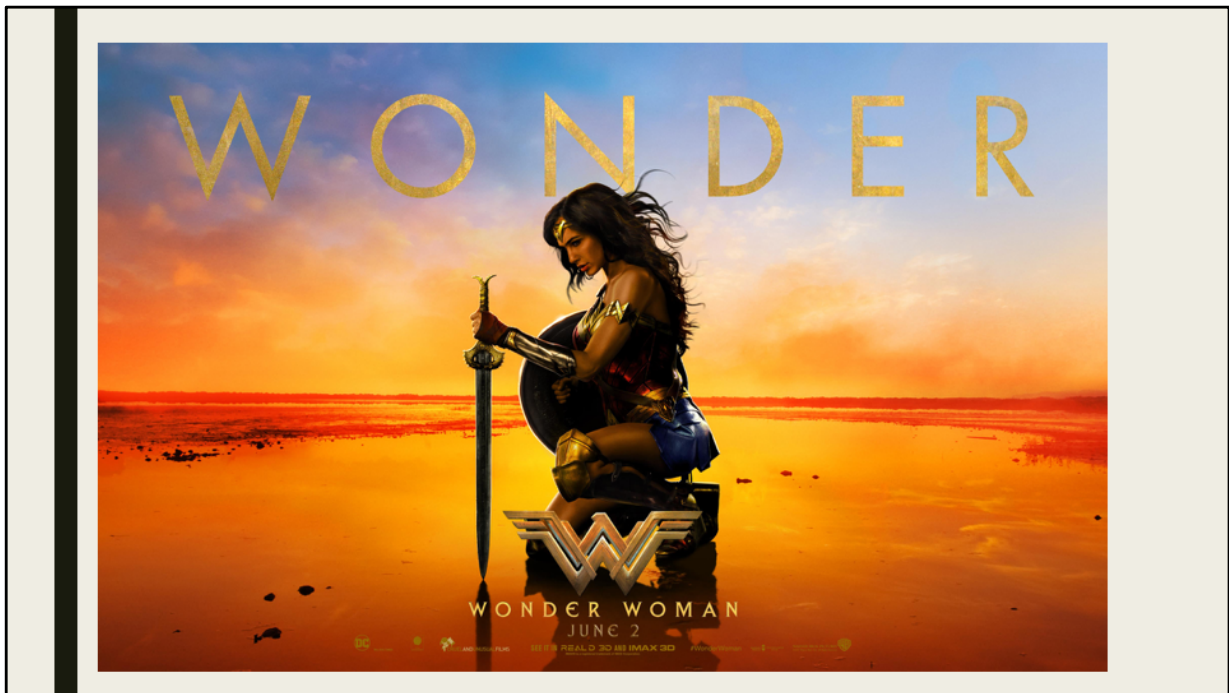




- The proliferation of graphic sexual violence and other forms of male violence towards women in popular programmes such as Broadchurch, Happy Valley, The Fall and others has raised these issues in public consciousness, but in doing so, there are questions about whether women's trauma being utilised for entertainment creates voyeurs, or more socially responsible citizens? It may give opportunities for those who have been subjected to abuse to feel able to disclose, but from a political point of view does the overall cost of potentially othering male violence, triggering already traumatised people and utilising women's trauma for entertainment help? Does it alienate the public, "it's not real, it's drama" or educate and inform, is it as simple as either/or?



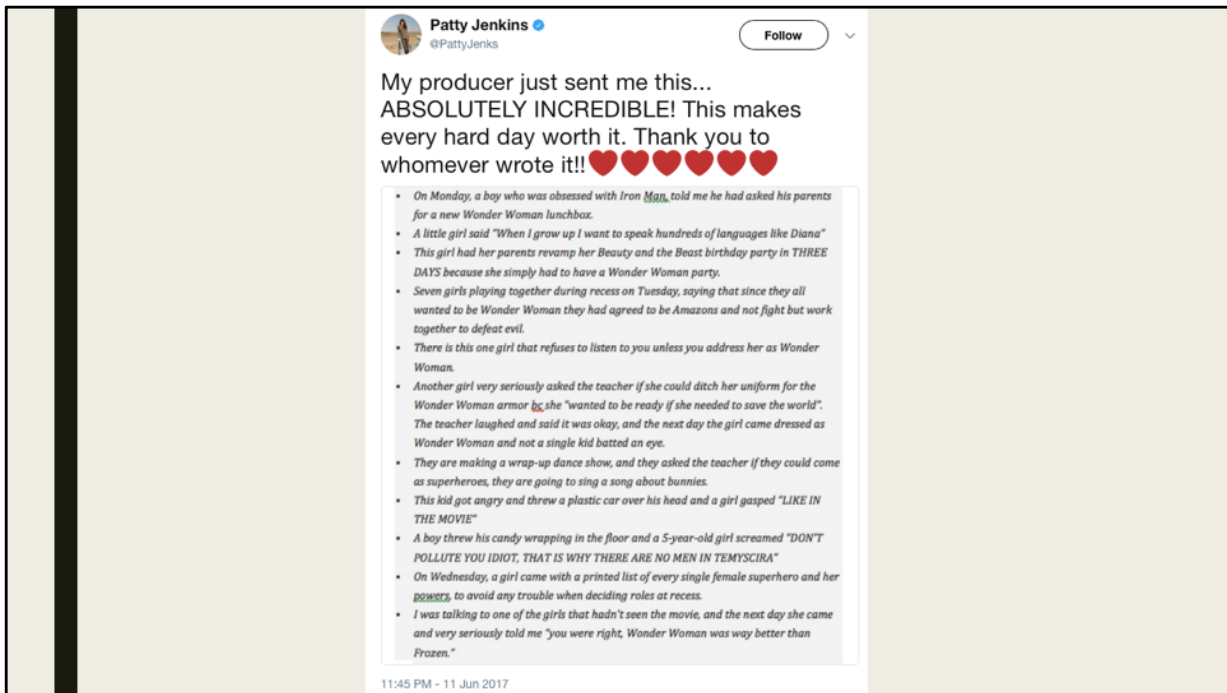
- And as poet Hollie McNish points out in her recent collaboration with Jake Dypka: “Cunnilingus is censored more than rape scenes or blow jobs”. Does our increasing acceptance of male violence graphically used within entertainment reflect something of our society when female pleasure is still censored?



So having considered some of the implications of the Handmaid's Tale, let us move on to look at Wonder Woman. As a completely separate genre, Wonder Woman's contribution to culture is in the form of superhero movie. Unlike the Handmaid's Tale, on Wonder Woman's home island of Themyscira, women are depicted as powerful and there is not a man in sight. I have spoken to many women whose experiences of the opening scenes in Wonder Woman were deeply emotional. Seeing women depicted so strong and capable empowered them greatly.



Example of this...



**Patty Jenkins**   
@PattyJenks

Follow 

My producer just sent me this...  
ABSOLUTELY INCREDIBLE! This makes every hard day worth it. Thank you to whomever wrote it!! 

- On Monday, a boy who was obsessed with Iron Man, told me he had asked his parents for a new Wonder Woman lunchbox.
- A little girl said "When I grow up I want to speak hundreds of languages like Diana"
- This girl had her parents revamp her Beauty and the Beast birthday party in THREE DAYS because she simply had to have a Wonder Woman party.
- Seven girls playing together during recess on Tuesday, saying that since they all wanted to be Wonder Woman they had agreed to be Amazons and not fight but work together to defeat evil.
- There is this one girl that refuses to listen to you unless you address her as Wonder Woman.
- Another girl very seriously asked the teacher if she could ditch her uniform for the Wonder Woman armor *bc* she "wanted to be ready if she needed to save the world". The teacher laughed and said it was okay, and the next day the girl came dressed as Wonder Woman and not a single kid batted an eye.
- They are making a wrap-up dance show, and they asked the teacher if they could come as superheroes, they are going to sing a song about bunnies.
- This kid got angry and threw a plastic car over his head and a girl gasped "LIKE IN THE MOVIE"
- A boy threw his candy wrapping in the floor and a 5-year-old girl screamed "DON'T POLLUTE YOU IDIOT, THAT IS WHY THERE ARE NO MEN IN TEMYSCIRA"
- On Wednesday, a girl came with a printed list of every single female superhero and her POWERS, to avoid any trouble when deciding roles at recess.
- I was talking to one of the girls that hadn't seen the movie, and the next day she came and very seriously told me "you were right, Wonder Woman was way better than Frozen."

11:45 PM - 11 Jun 2017

What has also been reported is the way it has impacted children...



- Josh Rossi's three year old daughter, Nellee. I think what we see in contrasting Wonder Woman with the Handmaid's Tale is the difference between the carrot and the stick, between hope and fear. The Handmaid's Tale shows us the worst of what could happen to women, and as Margaret Atwood says, it is all stuff that women have been subjected to. Whereas Wonder Woman gives us hope that women can be represented positively, it gives us hope that our daughters and sons get to be inspired by strong women, it shows us that women can do anything.



This colloquium is about crises of cohesion. In such times, is dystopian art a positive contribution to address this by raising awareness of the trajectory we are on? Does their providing us with cultural motifs (i.e. Handmaid's costumes) to be used for protest and warning outweigh the ways they may alienate the general population from making connections with current political and social realities because they seem so farfetched and other to our current reality?





Or should we focus more on the Hope that is brought about by films such as Wonder Woman? The impact of this film on children and women has been immense and perhaps in crises of cohesion it is hope that is most difficult to come by? However, it does not need to be an either/or. And both have their place in working towards transforming communities.