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Digital Revolution that Evokes a Vintage Thriller Movie: Rereading Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* is set in a post-apocalyptic world after a financial crash in the US, where people struggle to survive without a home or a job. The Positron Project grants the only escape – the perfect community imbued with vintage charm. What seems to be an optimal solution, though, is a trap for the volunteers, as it is a dystopian world powered by the digital revolution and aimed at exploiting others for personal gain. This article analyzes the novel as a horror story modeled on a slasher movie. Using a format familiar to modern audiences allows Atwood to ask fundamental questions about the value of freedom and the power of the media in trapping the most vulnerable social groups – especially those at risk of losing their homes and jobs. Juxtaposing the novel with Atwood's article "We Are Double-Plus Unfree," published earlier in *The Guardian*, grounds the story within the contemporary sociopolitical context.

Keywords: Digital revolution, survival, freedom, media, horror story

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Eski Bir Gerilim Filmini Çağrıştıran Dijital Devrim: Margaret Atwood'un *The Heart Goes Last* Romanını Yeniden Okumak

Öz

Margaret Atwood'un *The Heart Goes Last* romanı, ABD'de yaşanan finansal bir çöküşün ardından evlerinden ve işlerinden olan insanların hayatta kalmaya çalıştığı post-apokaliptik bir dünyada geçer. Positron Projesi, nostaljik cazibesiyle mükemmel bir toplum sunarak tek kaçış yolu gibi görünmektedir. Ancak, ideal çözüm gibi görünen şey aslında gönüllüler için bir tuzaktır; zira, dijital devrimle beslenen bu distopik dünya, bir grubun çıkarları için diğerlerinin sömürülmesine yöneliktir. Bu makale, romanı, şiddet içeren korku filmlerini örnek alan bir korku hikâyesi olarak analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Modern izleyiciye aşina bir format kullanmak, Atwood'un, özgürlüğün değeri ve medyanın en hassas toplumsal gruplar (özellikle evlerini ve işlerini kaybetme riski altındakileri) üzerindeki etkisi hakkında temel sorular sormasına olanak sağlar. Romanın, Atwood'un daha önce *Guardian* gazetesinde yayımlanan "We Are Double-Plus Unfree" başlıklı makalesiyle bir arada incelenmesi, hikâyeyi çağdaş sosyopolitik bağlama oturtur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital devrim, hayatta kalma, özgürlük, medya, korku hikâyesi

Introduction

Dramatic events of recent years – the financial crash of 2008, the Covid-2019 pandemic, wars fought on most continents, and social unrest in many parts of the globe, additionally magnified by the newest developments in the field of AI and the fear of humans soon being replaced by machines, led to a general sense of insecurity shared by many people in the world. It all resulted in a renewed interest in dystopian stories, which outline the possible bleak futures that we still may escape. Critics agree that Margaret Atwood is a master of such stories, using speculative fiction to issue a warning and to show

a 'what if' scenario (Waltonen XVI; Howells *True Trash* 298). With the release of *The Handmaid's Tale* serial, the popularity of her writing skyrocketed, and audiences started looking for new novels, set in different circumstances (Harris; "Statistics"). Given how timely her narratives turn out to be, this is the right author to turn to – after all, "each novel is about something people become incredibly interested in half an hour later," as remarked Atwood's former publisher, cited by Howells (*Cambridge* 1). Hence, in the face of a new digital revolution and the uncanny, humanlike properties that AI is gaining, readers may turn to *The Heart Goes Last*, where such a scenario is played to its fullest. Even though it is not the most popular of Atwood's novels (as evidenced by "Margaret Atwood Statistics"), arguably it deserves more attention, as it touches upon the issues that have been extremely relevant ever since it was published.

The Heart Goes Last, published in 2015, is set shortly or parallel present, in the world of mayhem and destruction caused by a financial crash in the USA, where people struggle to survive without a home, a job, or valuable possessions. The only escape from such a reality is granted by the mysterious Positron Project – the perfect community of twin cities that operates in a bimonthly cycle: people have a normal stable life for a month and spend the next one in prison. The story is narrated by two volunteers to the project, a married couple, Stan and Charmaine, who decide to trade their hopeless existence in the real world for the comfort and safety that the ideal community promises. They soon discover, though, that the pretty retro façade hides an ugly truth, an escape from the threats posed by the digital revolution is not so easy, and the sense of security comes at a price.

The novel addresses the general theme of survival – here, survival in the face of force majeure, is too powerful for any individual to handle. As Wisker observes, an apocalypse and the ensuing strife for survival is an important motif in Atwood's oeuvre, usually manifested in the form of eco-Gothic. Here, however, the apocalypse has its roots in an economic crash that results in anarchy and abuses of power (Wisker 413). What the protagonists witness is the end of their world, and hardship caused by human weakness. Consilience, which seems to be a safe haven, also proves to be a dystopia only disguised as a dream.

As Fraile-Marcos argues, this community forces alienation among people, since even spouses cannot talk openly about the month they spend apart, in the Positron prison (Fraile-Marcos 30-31). Moreover, as the prison hides its founders' dirty secrets involving organ trafficking and technology misuse, the story showcases the negative impact that scientific developments can have on society if used improperly, or for the wrong reasons.

The novel is a satire, and it includes many lowbrow elements readily recognizable by the twenty first century audience. Atwood often uses pop culture and new media (like her Facebook or Twitter/X accounts, or the fan fiction platform Wattpad) to make a stronger point, better resonating with younger readers, who may not be familiar with the classic works like Milton's *Paradise Lost* but are closely acquainted with pop culture and the internet discourse (Howells *Reinventions* 16; Howells *Margaret Atwood* 52). Moreover, as many authors point out (e.g., Howells *Cambridge* 2; Irvine 204), she is a great enthusiast for blurring genre boundaries and mixing elements that seem to be discrepant at first, but which enrich the story and make it more relevant for her readers. She strongly believes that popular forms combine into a collective mythology (Howells *True Trash* 297) that contains the ready-made cultural patterns rooting the story in the main themes of contemporary culture, and she often rewrites popular genres as parts of her works (Wilson 215; Howells *True Trash* 297). Arguably, *The Heart Goes Last* can be read as a horror story modeled on a slasher movie. This article aims to analyze the novel from this perspective to discover how such a reading may enrich its perception, and how it may open a debate on the value of personal freedom in the age of digital revolution and widespread addiction to new media.

Is such a reading – or rereading – legitimate? In her non-fiction piece *In Other Worlds*, Atwood distinguishes between what she calls "the novel proper" and the novels "of lesser solemnity" (57-58), i.e., genre fiction, in which she draws inspiration from the genre itself, subverting it and using it to her purpose. She challenges conventions and constructs new meanings by transgressing the established codes of practice. While doing so, she often uses patterns and images that are recognizable to the audience, as it makes the story more relatable

for the reader. As Kowal argues, in *The Heart Goes Last* she uses the 1950s aesthetic that is "a simulacrum of bygone reality" (147) to bring the narrative closer to home, and to make the reader realize the significance of the issues that are central to the tale. Since horror films are a crucial part of popular culture, using such a package would communicate the message much more efficiently. Satirical as such a vision may appear, it is also very persuasive in conveying the picture of American mass consumerism and the abuse that comes with too much power that inevitably leads to exploitation.

Characteristics of a Horror Film

Horror films, as one of the oldest cinematic genres, have been intertwined with the development of the medium itself (Dixon 3). In the United States, they have been a staple since cinema's inception, allowing audiences to develop an affinity for the genre and an understanding of its narrative logic (Dixon 3-5). Over time, this familiarity helped the genre evolve and gain popularity, culminating in a significant proliferation during the 1970s and 1980s, when horror movies became particularly prominent (Dixon 138). During this period, the genre pushed boundaries by depicting the monstrosity humans are capable of, often showcasing violent and gory scenes that did not shy away from brutality (Dixon 143).

While horror films have not occupied as central a role in Canadian cinema as they have in Hollywood, they have nonetheless carved out a niche and found a devoted following. Canadian horror distinguishes itself in notable ways from its American counterpart, though. As Freitag and Loiselle observe, a key difference lies in the location of terror's source: rather than focusing on external threats, Canadian horror often situates the monster within, blurring the line "between external threat and internal dread" (4). This emphasis on internalized horror reflects societal anxieties, producing a pervasive unease that resonates deeply with viewers (Freitag and Loiselle 21). The possibility that the monster resides both inside and outside intensifies the discomfort, making these tales particularly haunting (Vatnsdal 28).

This framework of horror, with its focus on internal and external dread, provides a compelling lens through which to examine *The Heart Goes Last*. True to the conventions of Canadian horror, the monstrosity in the novel is not confined to its villains, Ed and Jocelyn—the founders and main beneficiaries of the Positron Project. Instead, the monster extends into the community itself, which collectively chooses to ignore the disturbing realities of their world. It is also present within the individual characters, who willingly participate in the system for personal gain, revealing the moral compromises that sustain the nightmare. Moreover, in alignment with the tradition of Canadian horror films, as described by Vatnsdal (29), the terror in *The Heart Goes Last* lingers beyond the conclusion of the narrative. The book does not offer closure, instead leaving the reader with unsettling possibilities and unanswered questions that echo long after the final page. This open-endedness deepens the sense of unease, solidifying the story's place within the horror genre.

While *The Heart Goes Last* aligns with the characteristics of Canadian horror by exploring the internal and societal sources of monstrosity, its setting in crisis-stricken America lends it a structure that closely follows the typical pattern of a slasher movie. As Carol J. Clover outlines in her seminal study of the genre, this structure is highly formulaic and rooted in familiar narrative elements (Clover 9). Much like a folktale, it features a hero, a villain/monster, a terrible place, a series of victims, and a simple yet effective weapon. Similarly, its linear plot mirrors the simplicity of fairy tales: after the conflict is resolved (i.e., the villain dies or is captured and the hero escapes), the order is restored. This predictable framework ensures that every spectator knows what to expect and how the story will unfold, as each narrative is essentially a variation on a well-worn theme. Yet, this familiarity does not diminish its impact. Instead, the story remains compelling because it taps into deeply ingrained fears, playing them to their fullest through the on-screen conflict (Clover 11).

There are frequent references to film and cinematic metalanguage in general throughout the novel. Some of them are direct, like the description of Consilience as "a town in a movie, a movie of years ago" (*Heart* 32), the house after Stan's disappearance

that feels alien, "like one of those scary movies" (*Heart* 180), or the restaurant where everything is made "to look like an old movie" (*Heart* 223-24). Vintage movies are shown continuously on the Consilience TV channel – "comic movies, tragic movies, melodramatic movies" (*Heart* 111) – and although they seem mild and rather innocuous, not to excite the citizens excessively, they do include some dramatic moments that remind the characters of their lives from the times before the project. More violent films also appear as protagonists visualize such scenes in moments of distress. For example, Stan is fantasizing about "last-minute escapes, and tunnels, and trapdoors" (*Heart* 143) as he is drugged and strapped, waiting for his uncertain future in the prison ward, and then he is envisioning his release from the trap "if this were a spy film" (*Heart* 164). Similarly, Charmaine sees herself as "a fatal woman, like Marilyn in *Niagara*" (*Heart* 189) as she is getting ready for Stan's funeral. These references to film not only enrich the narrative but also serve as a metaphorical framework, highlighting the characters' desires for escape, identity, and control in a world that increasingly feels scripted and out of their hands.

While such references evoke the influence of film on the characters' perception of reality, some scenes are presented using cinematic metalanguage, further blurring the lines between life and the constructed narratives they inhabit. The whole novel is narrated by two first-person narrators, Stan and Charmaine, interchangeably. As both are getting ready for the Procedure in which Charmaine is the killer and Stan is the victim, their thoughts and their points of view are intertwined, which feels like the shot/reaction shot technique in film narration (*Heart* 150-51). The narrators change during one chapter ("Choice"), which further reinforces the idea of this cinematic technique. In another instance, Jocelyn is getting out of a car, "feet first. Shoes, ankles, grey nylon" (*Heart* 104). This description reflects a camera movement, the upward tilt that is typical for introducing a femme fatale to the scene, especially in vintage productions. By employing such cinematic techniques, the novel not only mirrors the metalanguage characteristic of the film but also enhances the readers' engagement with the characters' psychological states. This way, the narrative experience feels more immersive.

Reading *The Heart Goes Last* as a Slasher

Typically for Atwood's novels "of lesser solemnity" (*Other Worlds* 58), *The Heart Goes Last* transgresses the generic conventions of the style it embraces – the slasher in this case – and uses them to convey a deeper meaning. Hence, the stylistic elements are not copied literally. What the author offers is an adaptation of the genre, "a repetition with variation," to use Hutcheon's words (8). She uses the horror style but at the same time, she distances herself from it by introducing crucial changes.

The setting reflects what Clover describes as the Terrible Place (30-31). It looks more or less decrepit, and it usually feels repulsive for no apparent reason, but what makes it the perfect location for a horror story are the things that happen there behind closed doors, which are yet to be discovered by the protagonists. Notably, as Clover observes, the building may at first seem to be a safe haven and an escape from the peril that is commonplace outside (31). Indeed, that is the case of the Positron Project in the novel, which seems to be the ideal society from the 1950s, surrounded by the total mayhem and devastation that has become the reality after the economic crisis. The fifties were "chosen for the visual and audio aspects" (*Heart* 41) because it feels safe and familiar at the same time, with a nostalgic vibe that heightens the sense of security. Even the Positron prison feels reassuring like "a nest, with a golden egg shining within it" (*Heart* 42), where "it felt safe to be caged in" (*Heart* 56), away from the dangerous passions that may take control over one's life, and away from the burden of making one's own decisions. In contrast, the world outside the walls of Consilience is a battlefield, where zombie-like, "dead-eyed teenagers armed with broken bottles" (*Heart* 42) are ready to murder anyone at any moment. Stan and Charmaine have to sleep locked inside their car for fear of being attacked and killed by such human monsters.

However, it soon turns out that Consilience is a Terrible Place rather than a Paradise on Earth. Just like in a horror movie, the terror unfolds slowly and gradually, starting with simple things that seem to be discrepant for some reason, unknown to the protagonists at first. The reader observes the setting and starts paying attention to the unusual

elements, such as the blue teddy bears, produced in piles by the women in the knitting circle in prison (*Heart* 70). As the protagonists gain more knowledge and experience, a new face of the project emerges. The prison changes from a safe haven to a nest of terror and fear, with screams and high hysterical laughter to be heard (*Heart* 136), and a sense of insecurity is instilled once someone realizes they have lost control over their life. When Charmaine gets scared and unsure about her fate (*Heart* 137), the voices of the drugged convicts awaiting the Procedure resemble "a slobbering zombie sound" (*Heart* 136). The gradual unveiling of the project's true nature mirrors the tension characteristic of the horror genre, leaving the protagonists – and the readers – overwhelmed by a growing sense of dread.

Another crucial element for a slasher movie is the killer – a "psychotic man usually propelled by psychosexual fury" (Clover 27), or a person (a man or a woman) presenting overt gender confusion and often wearing clothes typical for the opposite sex (Clover 28). In *The Heart Goes Last* there are two masterminds behind the Positron Project, and they fit into this description closely enough to be deemed part of the slasher poetics. The first one, Ed, is the face of the project. He appears in the marketing campaign promoting it outside, and he is then responsible for the regular motivational speeches that are televised and aired for all the residents of the Consilience project to boost their morale. He has the smile "of a born salesman" (*Heart* 40), he uses the right intonation (*Heart* 38) and the perfect body language: "a wave of the hand, like Santa Claus" (*Heart* 44). He is full of big words: "like the early pioneers, blazing a trail, clearing a way to the future" (*Heart* 37). However, these words are empty, as both Stan and Charmaine come to realize. They are "bursts of sound, like a scratched CD. *Brought together malfunction regrettable sacred deplorable admirable brave enduring heroic forever.* Then, *Join loss spouse help hope community*" (*Heart* 207, emphasis original). Such words and such public performances are his methods to build his empire, and he uses them like a weapon to squash any opposition and take complete control over the population of Consilience. Using propaganda repeated regularly, he can convince the people "to recognize the greater good and choose the lesser evil" (*Heart* 119), and thus persuade them to turn a blind eye to all the irregularities and violations that are happening

there. Ed's charismatic yet manipulative persona embodies the power of psychological control: not only is he a figure of authority, but his marked benevolence conceals his true monstrous nature.

After Stan and Charmaine become disillusioned with the project, Ed is presented as a predator, a monster, and a "potential baby-blood vampire" (*Heart* 226). He approaches "like a manta ray in one of those deep-sea documentaries" (*Heart* 224), and he plays a cat-and-mouse game with Charmaine after Stan is gone. The steak he orders for her at a restaurant, "seared and brown, branded with a crisscross of black, running with hot blood" (*Heart* 224) implies cruelty and the violent behavior he is capable of should the situation require so. His motives become clear after Stan's disappearance, when it is revealed that Ed had a sex bot made in Charmaine's image (*Heart* 213), and he will go to any lengths to get her, as well. In his obsessive pursuit, he is an emblem of the slasher villain driven by psychosexual fury, ready to risk much to get hold of the object of his infatuation. Like a maniac, he is extremely dangerous because he is so unpredictable in his passion. As it is revealed, the whole point of setting up the Positron project for him is to obtain a sex slave – a woman with her brain adjusted by neurosurgery to become obsessed with him alone (*Heart* 263). The only alternative to this kind of bondage is death – "think Henry the Eighth" (*Heart* 213).

While Ed's predatory nature and manipulative tactics are clear, Jocelyn's role as a ruthless figure within the project unfolds more gradually, with her subtle yet formidable control over the lives of the residents of Consilience becoming increasingly apparent. She is strong and influential, and her power reaches beyond the agreed constraints of Consilience. She has access to the key data, so she can reprogram the system, reset the arrangements, and fiddle with someone's life. Like a master of puppets, she can ruin the life of her Positron Alternates, Stan and Charmaine, by arranging two extramarital affairs – Charmaine's with Max, and hers with Stan. Also, she is the only person capable of smuggling people out of Consilience. Her power seems to be unlimited: "she could just wave her hand and reduce him to zero" (*Heart* 110). So is her penchant for cruelty and violence, as Stan supposes: she could kill him any time and for no reason and dispose of the body by putting

it "into the chicken-feed grinder" (*Heart* 124). She is iron-fisted and capable of anything.

As such, Jocelyn plays the male part in the vintage universe of Consilience – in other words, she presents gender confusion. With all the women in the community acting like the perfect housewives from a poster advertising the 1950s, she is more powerful and clever than all the men in the Management of the project, including Ed. She travels in a black Surveillance car, instilling instinctive fear in the people she passes by. She has a scary smile, and she is "prowling around" like a predator (*Heart* 296-97), which invokes Ed's manner. She seems ruthless when trying to achieve her goals, which makes Stan wonder if she is a psychopath (*Heart* 129). Finally, she can dispose of Ed using his weapon against him – neurosurgery turning him into a love puppet of another woman – and hence escape liability. Jocelyn's subversion of traditional gender roles and her relentless pursuit of power make her a far more dangerous figure than the men she manipulates, including Ed. As her manipulations unfold, they reveal a darker undercurrent in the project's power structure, namely the blurred lines between control and submission.

While Jocelyn embodies ruthlessness, her manipulations and cruelty require a counterbalance – one of survival, endurance, and eventual resistance. In slasher films, this role is filled by the 'Final Girl' – "the one who did not die, the survivor" (Clover 35). She begins as one of a group of prospective victims of the manic killer. She witnesses the violent deaths of her friends and can see their mutilated bodies. She can see the full extent of the danger; she is chased and attacked vehemently but she endures and in the end, she either escapes and is rescued, or she fights back and kills the monster herself. Given that she survives the killer's onslaught, this character serves as a foil to the antagonist, suffering immense violence but triumphing in the end.

The Final Girl is presented as the main character – the only character to be given any psychological depth, in fact (Clover 44). She is intelligent, reasonable, and calm. She does not panic but can think instead, which helps her notice the danger before her friends get suspicious or fall into the trap and start dying. Moreover, as Clover

observes (40), the protagonist is boyish, or at least "not fully feminine," which can be noticed not only in her rationality (stereotypically attributed to male characters in exploitation movies), but also in her appearance (wearing unisex clothes), and often in her name, too. She is also sexually reticent: unlike all the other female characters, she seems not to be attracted to the boys in the group and she often acts as if she were a virgin. In the time of trial, though, she may scream in fear at first, but at the end, she fights like a man and usually stabs the killer with his weapon, which Clover (58) calls "her symbolic phallicization."

The viewers take the Final Girl's perspective for a large part of the movie (Clover 44). With the camera-narrator, which equals the omniscient third-person narrator in the novel, she is the focalizer of the events, and her perspective is intertwined with the killer's perspective throughout the entire narrative. The viewers observing the story through her eyes get insight both into the situation and into her mind. They can sense her fear, feel her resolve, and observe her determination to survive. Taking her perspective in the last scenes adds the element of jump-scare, but it also helps the audience to identify with the victim more closely. *The Heart Goes Last* is told by two narrators, Charmaine, and Stan. It may be argued that the generic character of the Final Girl is split between the two of them, and whereas Charmaine seems to fit the description better because of her gender, some aspects typical of it can also be observed in Stan.

Charmaine is the main character that undergoes development in the story. At first, she is presented as pure, innocent, and naïve, almost virginal: she is "so clean, so crisp, so blue and white, so baby-powder-scented" (*Heart* 67), "safe, simple, clean. Armored in pure white undergarments" (*Heart* 93), with a "quasi-virginal restraint" (*Heart* 250). She seems to be the perfect fit for the Consilience project since there is "the retro thing about her, the cookie-ad thing" (*Heart* 48). She is also amiable and happy all the time as if she were cut out of an old-fashioned advertisement. She smells of cinnamon – "such a cheerful smell" (*Heart* 145), and she has a "chirpy, childishly high Barbie-doll voice" (*Heart* 94). In other words, she is described as an ideal victim who would never even try to defend herself. However, her innocence is misleading, and in fact "bland is good camouflage" (*Heart* 51). "Fluffy,

upbeat Charmaine" (*Heart* 130) is much stronger than she lets on, able to play the part of the "angel of mercy" and kill prison inmates without wavering. Her iron resolve is unfeminine when considered against the standards of the fifties. Then again, it is precisely her level-headedness and her determination that make her the perfect counterbalance for the killer, capable of confronting him in the end.

The perception of the character changes once she starts her affair with Max. Just like the Final Girl becomes vulnerable once she loses her virginity or restraint, Charmaine is revealed to be a killer in the Positron prison after she starts dating her Alternate. Her appearance changes then, too, as the pure whites are replaced with fuchsia and cherry-colored garments. She is "swept away. Drugged with desire" (*Heart* 53), but the price she must pay is high: the hardship and disappearance of her friends, Veronica and Sandi (*Heart* 140-41), the elimination of her husband (*Heart* 153), and her final confrontation with Ed.

The resemblance to the Final Girl motif is also clear in Charmaine's handling of the killer. She resorts to her apparent innocence, giving him "her blue-eyed look, her child's look" (*Heart* 225) and painting her toenails Blush Pink, which is "very popular among the 12-year-olds" (*Heart* 251) but in fact, she is far from intimidated. What she is doing there is giving him a false sense of security, using his weapon – his penchant for young girls, and his infatuation with her timid self (*Heart* 194). She can defeat him because she notices the danger soon enough to avoid falling into the trap, and she is determined to go to any lengths to defeat him.

Stan is the other reflection of the Final Girl in the novel. Even though he is male, he bears many traits of this generic protagonist of the slasher movie, and in many respects his and Charmaine's characteristics are complementary. Strangely enough, though, in many ways, Stan matches the role of the standard female victim of the slasher much better than Charmaine. While she pretends to be or is perceived as, weak, harmless, and completely reliant on others, she successfully plays the role of the angel of mercy and is therefore a crucial element of the organ harvesting system. Even though she does not know the

real reasons behind her job at the Positron, she chooses not to ask. Stan, on the other hand, is a puppet in the hands of Jocelyn. He is objectified for most of the novel, as he is used as a sex toy, then a tool for Jocelyn's revenge, and finally as a cog in Jocelyn's intricate plan to destroy Ed's project. He is honestly scared of what she may do to him when they share a house (*Heart* 93), which is reminiscent of the image of a passive, terrorized female victim in an exploitation horror movie. Moreover, the fact that he is smuggled out of Consilience dressed up as Elvis, in a box full of teddy bears, is emblematic of his helplessness and the victim position. And yet, he survives while the killers – Ed and Jocelyn – are removed from the picture, and he can enjoy a peaceful life like the one they had with Charmaine before they discovered the truth about the Positron project. His story reflects the fate of the early Final Girls, as described by Clover (35) – delivered to safety by others and leaving the monster behind without actually defeating him themselves.

Stan is very quick to sense that there is something wrong with the project; he has a "slightly uneasy feeling" (*Heart* 34) even before they sign the deal to join Consilience. He is also highly skeptical of Ed's pep talks at a time when everyone else seems to be completely taken in – he considers it "bullshit" (*Heart* 37) and "some sort of pyramid scheme" (*Heart* 44) from the very start. He can understand the thing others seem to disregard, namely that there must be some ulterior motives behind the beautiful words, and that in fact "some folks must be making a shitload of cash out of this thing" (*Heart* 81). Charmaine also has her doubts, but she chooses to silence them, whereas Stan applies cold logic and discovers that the talk is a marketing campaign full of empty words, with the truth hidden from a discerning eye. Like the Final Girl, he can sense the danger before anyone else can see anything alarming there.

A slasher must involve a specific kind of weapon (Clover 31) – something pretechnological, requiring brute force and causing carnage. Typically, it is the kind of weapon that brings the attacker and the attacked into close contact, and that penetrates the victim's body (the exploitation motif), such as a knife, a hammer, an axe, a chainsaw, or a needle. The weapon is first used by the killer but at the end, it is appropriated by the Final Girl, who often uses it to incapacitate or

execute the murderer. Charmaine is equipped with needles when she executes the prisoners, but it is Stan that is often depicted in a horror-like pose, with a hedge trimmer that he uses as his armament. He fantasizes about committing violent acts when working on the hedge. His fantasies usually involve Jocelyn, which makes the situation an act of revenge of the Final Girl on the killer. He daydreams of the "sharp saw whizzing around" (*Heart* 83) and slicing "neatly through a neck with a lightning-swift move, as in the Japanese samurai films" (*Heart* 93). He bases his visions on horror films, thinking about "leather gloves, only with gauntlets, and a leather face mask" (*Heart* 93), thus clearly referencing Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Dir. Tobe Hooper, 1974). He also envisions detaching Jocelyn's head from the rest of her body using a sharp tool, possibly an axe (*Heart* 94). He becomes empowered at the end of the novel, just like the Final Girl, because he gets to keep the weapon even though the killer is far away and his family is safe – when in Las Vegas a year later, he still spends weekends "trimming the cactus hedge" (*Heart* 301). It is a confrontation of the Final Girl with the killer, but the Final Girl is armed and ready this time.

Sharp pretechnological weapons entail using graphic violence, which is another element typical for a slasher. The body is mutilated so strikingly and explicitly that it evokes disgust and terror in the audience. In *The Heart Goes Last* carnage is not so literal, but rather it is implied in the fragmentation of the body when describing a person or a technical device. In the automatized world of the Positron, Charmaine is given instructions by "a head box," "a canned image of a head" (*Heart* 68), which is so lifelike that it is hard to decide if it is real or not. The head is not disconcerting or scary, since such images are just a fact of life there, as "no doubt there are eyes embedded everywhere" around Consilience (*Heart* 92). Yet the single body part that is emphasized the most strongly is the eyes, for instance, "those darn teddy bears with their bright, unseeing eyes" (*Heart* 113), or the subject of the Procedure, whose "eyes are horrified" (*Heart* 69). As Clover (166) argues, it is the human eye that is the strongest vehicle of terror, therefore horror films often include extreme close-ups on the victim's eyes to convey their intense fear. The eyes used by Atwood in the most extreme parts of the story play a similar part and have a similar effect on the reader.

Fragmentation is also used by Charmaine as a strategy of emotional detachment during the Procedure when she kills a person but prefers to consider them a collection of body parts rather than a human. Hence, she "strokes the man's head, smiles with her deceptive teeth" (*Heart* 69). It is a survival technique, which is made still more obvious when she is trying to disconnect herself from the act of executing Stan. She tries not to see him, but to analyze his face bit by bit instead: "she knows every feature of his head so well, each eye, each ear, and the corner of the jaw, and the mouth with Stan's teeth in it, and the neck, and the body that's attached to it . . . This body doesn't have a future" (*Heart* 153). Doing so, Charmaine can persuade herself to persevere and continue the Procedure even though it is impossible "to use her head and discard her heart because the heart goes last" (*Heart* 180).

However, in other instances, fragmentation and body mutilation are used to intensify the terror, which is mostly done using the uncanny valley effect. The effect, first described by a Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori in 1970, refers to the feeling people experience when encountering patients with prosthetic limbs or when interacting with humanoid robots (33-34). As Mori argues, people like robots that look human, and they appreciate their similarity to real human beings. However, this affinity increases only up to a certain point. Once the object has too many human characteristics, such as moving eyes or skin, it becomes revolting to the onlookers. Mori calls this sudden drop in appeal the uncanny valley. Once scientists go past this point and build a robot that is indistinguishable from human beings, the eerie feeling passes, and the audience likes the object again. Subjective as the sensation is, it is surprisingly universal: it is observed in all people, although the exact point at which it occurs differs from person to person (Mori 35). The moment of its occurrence also changes depending on the object's movement: it is reported to happen much earlier once a person notices that a robot can move and interact with them on their own as if it had a mind. Hence, robots (or prosthetic limbs) that are still may be classified as appealing, but once they start moving, they become creepy.

The uncanny valley effect is frequently used in horror movies to magnify the audience's fear and repulsion (Strait et al.). It also occurs

in *The Heart Goes Last*, arguably to the same end. It is reinforced in the novel by the introduction of the fragmented bodies of robots, which is a clear reference to the feeling of eeriness as originally described by Mori. The robots here "come in units. Arms, legs, torsos, basically the exoskeleton. Standard heads, though we do the customizing and skinning here" (*Heart* 185); "There are moving belts conveying thighs, hips, joints, torsos; there are trays of hands, left and right" (*Heart* 187). As the narrator admits, the effect is "ghoulish" (*Heart* 187). Moreover, the body parts are in motion, thus magnifying the onlooker's and the reader's disgust: "a dozen of headless, naked plastic bodies miming the act of copulation;" "the space is filled with the motion of thighs and abdomens, like some grotesque art installation" (*Heart* 200). It makes Stan feel as if he were in a morgue or a slaughterhouse, and the readers are bound to share his disgust when trying to picture the image. The disembodied parts are all the more uncanny because of their constant robotic movement, and the fact that they are lifelike enough to give the wrong impression at first. They therefore cause an atavistic fear in the observer. Kosa (126) links the fear to what she calls the "transhumanist potentialities of biosciences" – hence, the horror is linked with the misuse and the uncontrolled development of technology.

The robotic body parts described in the novel are disturbing not only because of the uncanny valley effect they give but also because they reflect the exploitation that is to be found in the real world. The disembodied heads lying around on the table evoke the reader's primal fears, but it is the fact that it is "Charmaine, gazing up at him out of her blue eyes" (*Heart* 193) that makes the scene more intimate and therefore truly repulsive. Even though it is only a prosthesis, its application is obvious: it is going to be connected with one of the wriggling bodies from the assembly line and will be used as a sexbot to satisfy Ed's fantasies of owning and subduing the real person (*Heart* 274). Other Possibilibots, equipped with different heads and different functions, reflect the global exploitation of the female body, as they are prepared to be exported to different parts of the world. Worse still, there are kiddybots, packed with the knitted blue teddy bears, to satisfy the pedophiles' tastes, too (*Heart* 200-201). The terror evoked by the novel, then, is not limited to the eerie appearance. On the contrary, it is made tangible and real because of such a close connection of the images to real-life problems.

The prevalent commodification of the (mostly female) body that is facilitated by scientific developments and the use of advanced technology in the Positron is the focal point of the story, its climax before the final denouement. The assembly line full of robotic body parts is the most significant revelation of the narrative. Even though it is not one of the typical elements of a slasher – although it may be said to belong to the field of biomedical horror – it is the prime focus of the narrative. It is gradually ushered in by the structural elements of the horror, such as the manic killer, the Final Girl, or the Terrible Place, which prepare the reader for the central message of the story.

Double-Plus Unfree

The significance of the novel, in which the reality is satirically distorted, becomes clear once Atwood's work is juxtaposed with her article "We Are Double-Plus Unfree" from *The Guardian* which was published around the time of the release of *The Heart Goes Last* (Atwood "Double-Plus"). In it, she discusses the question of freedom – "freedom to" and "freedom from" – and, as she argues, people nowadays are more and more willing to give up the first to gain an illusion of the latter. As life, in the real world, is slowly but surely turned into a prison with constant digital surveillance by the authorities, Ed becomes even more authentic as a manic villain from a horror story. His master plan also becomes palpable, and the readers are more than ever willing to believe that "once you've got a controlled population with a wall around it and no oversight, you can do anything you want" (*Heart* 126). Consilience is built on the foundation of words, the language of marketing, which may become a powerful tool in the hands of a skilled salesman. The perfect images aired day and night on the Consilience TV lull the residents and make them disregard the evil things that are happening around them. This willful ignorance is reinforced by the careful choice of words, as the regular propaganda broadcast on TV becomes white noise, further dulling their awareness. Since "nobody has much to say about it" (*Heart* 120), people stop paying attention and they are unwilling, or maybe even unable to return to reality with all its problems.

The final warning that Atwood issues in her novel is included in the last conversation between Charmaine and Jocelyn, closing the whole tale. Charmaine is told the truth, and she is given her free will back: "Take it or leave it . . . The world is all before you, where to choose," to which she can only reply, "How do you mean?" (*Heart* 306). As Jocelyn is putting the power back in her hands, Charmaine is reluctant to take it. Arguably, the scene resonates more profoundly with the audience because of the deliberate use of the horror story format in the novel. The tension created by the slasher narrative, where the Final Girl often faces her oppressor one last time, makes the audience view the encounter with suspicion and unease. By positioning Jocelyn, who caused much of the terror in the story, as the one seemingly granting Charmaine freedom, Atwood subverts the expectation of clear resolution typically found in such narratives. This ambiguity forces readers to question whether the offer of free will is genuine or yet another manipulation, heightening their emotional engagement with the scene and underscoring the novel's central themes of control and autonomy. The central question remains open, then. Are we double-plus unfree, or are we still capable of taking our own lives in our hands?

Conclusion

In her 1983 piece "An End to an Audience?," Atwood argues that "fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community" (346). In *The Heart Goes Last*, she proves that it still holds. A dystopian tale set in a world resembling ours, the novel shows the dissolution of social ties powered by the AI revolution in the face of an economic crash. The Positron Project is the place of horror – a modern-day slasher – where the terrible truth is packaged as the American Dream to make it irresistible for potential victims. By applying a well-known pop-cultural frame and by referencing new technologies that have been in the spotlight of public debates for a few years now, Atwood can successfully engage readers in a discussion concerning crucial ethical issues that need to be addressed urgently. Given that she is always the first one to recognize "the need for literary culture to keep up with the times" (York 148), it is clear that she exploits the appeal of popular culture to make an important statement and to voice her opinion in the discussion on the most pressing questions:

How can we see the value of "freedom to"? How can we escape the trap of "freedom from"? At a time when digital technologies start to control our lives more and more completely, a generic horror story like *The Heart Goes Last* might be a real wake-up call for the reader even a few years after its publication.

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