



Women and Gender Studies Section



CALL FOR PAPERS

‘ARTPOLITICAL’ – MARGARET ATWOOD'S AESTHETICS

International Conference, 8-10 October 2020, University of Göttingen, Germany

Convenors: Dr. Dunja Mohr (Erfurt) and PD Dr. Kirsten Sandrock (Göttingen/Wien)

For Margaret Atwood, politics and art inherently belong together. In the pioneering poetry collection *Power Politics* (1971), Atwood addresses the intertwining of the personal and the political, which has run through her oeuvre ever since. “Power is our environment. We live surrounded by it: it pervades everything we are and do, invisible and soundless, like air.” (1973, 7) For decades Atwood’s work has resonated as tales of and testaments to political, socio-economic, and (bio)technological concerns of our present times. While Atwood has been vocal about politics, an environmental activist, and keenly involved with the PEN association, her writings have recently acquired a new international impact that underlines the fusion of politics and aesthetics in her work. Her classic female dystopia *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) has gained momentum as a prophetic 20th-century allegory of 21st-century political developments in the US, seeing a 670% year-on-year increase in sales and firmly sitting on the *Sunday Times* bestseller list for sixteen weeks in 2017. Exceptionally popularized by the multi-Emy and Golden Globe award-winning Hulu TV series adaptation (Miller 2017–), Atwood’s dystopian work has received a surprising fan following, including admonitory dress-ups in Handmaiden gowns. The publication of Atwood’s recent Booker prize winning *The Testaments* (2019), a revisiting of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, came along with a global fanfare, midnight book store launches including staff in the signature Handmaiden gowns, live readings, and a ‘Margaret Atwood Live’ broadcast to cinemas around the world.

In *Political Aesthetics* (2010) Crispin Sartwell terms the conceptual “intimate” (11) relationship between politics and aesthetics “artpolitical”, arguing that all political systems, and politics of resistance, use aesthetics and an aesthetic system. With reference to the importance of aesthetics for a political philosophy, Ernst Bloch has emphasized the important political function of narration, “Stage and story can be either a protective park or a laboratory; sometimes they console or appease, sometimes they incite; they can be a flight from or a prefiguring of the future” (1968). In this sense, literary and media representations and cultural adaptation practices contain a significant transformative potential that reaches beyond the page. Although arguably not all literature is driven by a political impetus, literature that intentionally triangularly oscillates between reality, speculation, and fiction provides an exceptional imaginary laboratory—what John Gardner called a “moral laboratory” (1978)—for ethical, political, and personal choices and for

concerns about resilience, responsibilities/responsibilities, and vulnerabilities (cf. Johnson 1993; Nussbaum 1995, 1997, Butler 2016, Haraway 2016).

Our conference seeks to address this interaction between politics and aesthetics in Atwood's oeuvre as well as its various transmedial adaptations. We seek to explore the various facets and layers of the artpolitical in her work, including for example the themes of social and environmental justice, Anthropocene, posthumanism, the role of religion or political satire as well as social control, and (biotech-)identity. While *The Handmaid's Tale* and its adaptations have gained special attention in recent years, we also welcome papers that address different works by Margaret Atwood, including her poetic, fictional, and non-fictional work as well as her speculative fiction. We invite contributions from different fields of research and are particularly interested in interdisciplinary and intersectional approaches, including political sciences, cultural and media studies or sociology.

Topics may include, but are not restricted to:

- political and literary aesthetics
- Canadian literature and power politics
- genre politics
- narratological approaches to artpolitical
- prosumers, fan culture, and political organization
- gender, body, and (national) identities
- teaching artpolitical
- the politics of writing: testimony and witnessing, knowledge and power
- posthumanism and biotech
- transmedia adaptations
- serialization, sequels and re-visions
- environmental justice, Anthropocene
- totalitarianism, political systems, surveillance, corporatism
- vulnerabilities, response-abilities, acts of resistance

ABSTRACT SUBMISSION: Please submit your abstract for a 20-minute presentation (no more than 250 words) and a brief bio (max. 150 words) to dunja.mohr@uni-erfurt.de and ksandro@uni-goettingen.de. The **DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS** is **20 February 2020**.

*** The international *Margaret Atwood Society* generously sponsors the conference with a “**Best conference paper *Margaret Atwood Society Award*” (250 USD)** and granting one-year free membership to the winner and the two runners up. For eligibility, please submit your full conference paper **until 14 September 2020**. ***