Krausz, Katinka

"Fixed indissolubly" : problematic images of femininity in Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman

The Central European journal of Canadian studies. 2021, vol. 16, iss. [1], pp. 43-54

ISBN 978-80-280-0035-6
ISSN 1213-7715 (print); ISSN 2336-4556 (online)

Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/144904
Access Date: 17. 02. 2024
Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

MUNI ARTS
Masarykova univerzita
Filozofická fakulta

Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts,
Masaryk University
digilib.phil.muni.cz

Central European Journal of Canadian Studies
Revue d'Etudes Canadiennes en Europe Centrale
volume 16 (2021) | (43–54)

"Fixed indissolubly:" Problematic Images of Femininity in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

« Figée à tout jamais dans ce mouvement » : Les images problématiques de la féminité dans *La femme comestible* de Margaret Atwood

Katinka Krausz

Abstract

This article analyzes Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, focusing on the way photographs are used in the narrative to draw attention to conflicts. In the novel, Atwood effectively utilizes the associative connection between photography and hunting – a connection which has long been established in the discourse and terminology of photography. Marian's relationship to her own portrait and her reluctance to be photographed highlights the problematic nature of commercial photographs and the way their depiction of women maintains and promotes the myth of femininity. The situation in which Peter attempts to take Marian's picture reflects the circumstances of traditional photography and its gender relations, inasmuch as the photographer is male and his subject is female. This paper provides a close reading of key passages in the novel, using the rarely discussed history of pornographic photography and its effects on the rhetoric of commercial photographs, based on the works of Annette Kuhn and Abigail Solomon-Godeau.

Keywords: *The Edible Woman*, Margaret Atwood, photography, depiction of women

Résumé

L'article examine *La femme comestible*, le roman de Margaret Atwood, en mettant l'accent sur la manière dont les photographes sont utilisées pour attirer l'attention sur les conflits. Dans cet ouvrage, la photographie et la chasse sont explicitement liées. Cette association n'est pas l'invention d'Atwood, elle existe depuis longtemps dans la terminologie et le discours de photographie, pourtant l'auteur l'a effectivement utilisée. La relation de Marian avec son propre portrait et sa répugnance à être photographiée montrent la nature problématique des photographes commerciales et la façon dont ce type des représentations maintient et promeut le mythe de la féminité. La situation dans laquelle Peter tente de prendre la photo de Marian reflète les spécificités de la photographie traditionnelle et la relation de genre dans ce contexte, dans la mesure où le photographe est un homme et son sujet est une femme. Cet article propose une lecture attentive sur le roman, en utilisant l'approche de Annette Kuhn et Abigail Solomon-Godeau concernant l'histoire de la photographie pornographique qui n'est guère recherchée et ses effets sur la photographie commerciale.

Mots-clés : *The Edible Woman*, Margaret Atwood, photographie, représentation de femmes

Gender difference and conflicting power relations are often intertwined, and in Margaret Atwood's novels they frequently form the central problem. *The Edible Woman* (1969) has generally been discussed as a work which highlights women's struggles in 1960s Western society with a particular focus on consumerist culture, but in my view the novel has a wider perspective. Its argument is not limited to the challenges women have to face: it implies that hegemonic understandings of gender affect every member of the given society, including men. In the novel, publicity images[1] and photographic portraits are placed in this context, and analyzing them brings noteworthy aspects of this problem to the surface. Addressing gender difference in photography, Abigail Solomon-Godeau argues that "the exchange of looks (or refusal of looks) between men and women, the photographer's look and the look of the spectator, all participate in a complex grid of power relations" (275). In Atwood's novels, the conflicts that are presented through photographs or other recorded pictures are usually not limited to gender politics; however, in *The Edible Woman*, the picture–recording situation is both the manifestation and locus of the power struggle between the male and female characters. In this analysis the focus is on the problematic images of femininity that Atwood presents in *The Edible Woman*, and their relationship to cultural (gender) traditions of photography.

Fiona Tolan discusses *The Edible Woman* in light of feminist theory, citing Betty Friedan's argument regarding the sale of self-images through commercials. Friedan claims that advertisements are a key platform for the promotion of gender ideology, targeting people – mostly women – with idealized self-images (qtd. in Tolan 30), which then are absorbed by society and maintained as conventions. In Atwood's novel, the conventional images of femininity (and also masculinity) that appear in publicity images are frequently juxtaposed in the narrative with the characters' realities. Almost all of the characters diverge from their stereotypical images either in their look or the way they conduct their lives: women are or plan to be single mothers (Marian's roommate Ainsley and their landlady) or settle on a working life like some of Marian's colleagues, and men care for their children and do housework (Clara's husband Joe). The only male character who seems to be picture-perfect is Peter, but his immaculateness is presented as unsettling.

Despite the diversity of characters in terms of gender roles, most of them are introduced with a certain amount of narrative judgement. Since Atwood tells the entirety of the novel from Marian's point of view, the reader sees every character through Marian's eyes. Even when the narration shifts from first to third person, Marian remains the focalizing character, and every character is filtered through her perception, even herself. It is through her eyes then that among the variety of the female characters everyone seems to be worthy of judgement, because she sees all of them as "models of adult women offered by society" (Howells 44), none of which she is able to identify with. Furthermore, it is through her eyes that the reader sees Peter as "ordinariness raised to perfection, like the youngish well-groomed faces of cigarette ads" (Atwood 61).

---

[1] John Berger refers to images that appear in advertisements or in other publicly accessible platforms as "publicity images" (129); in my analysis I will use this term.

Quite fittingly, Marian works at a company that manufactures advertisements, and her job as a creator of surveys that facilitate the effectivity of advertisements is, in her account, to be "a manipulator of words" (Atwood 110). Through her job, Marian helps both to establish and to maintain masculine and feminine role models (Rigney 26), and thus she is supposed to be aware of the manipulations advertisements operate with (Tolan 28). Indeed, when the commercial she conducted surveys for is released to the public, she sees the falsities and machinations in it: the fisherman in the picture is "too tidy," his caught fish is "unreal," having "no slime, no teeth, no smell," the hunter is "posed and urbane, no twigs in his hair, his hands bloodless," because "you didn't want anything in an advertisement to be ugly or upsetting" (Atwood 150). Yet, as her remark about Peter resembling a cigarette ad shows, she is immersed enough in consumer culture to be affected by it and thus looks at herself and the people around her as marketable products. On one occasion, for example, she looks at Peter in the elevator mirror, regarding his "brownish-green summer suit whose cut emphasized the functional spareness of his body" (Atwood 65). At another time, she remarks to herself that "she was glad he had hobbies: he would be less likely to get heart failure after retiring" (Atwood 170), as if Peter was a durable husband-product that she is examining before buying, and which in fact is "off the market" (Atwood 238) through his engagement to Marian. Sharon R. Wilson argues that Marian sees "herself and her relationship with Peter through a filter of commercial art" (33–34), which makes her view Peter's date ideas as if he borrowed them from magazines. She interprets Peter within this framework, and she is desperate to sustain him as a prototype of the ideal man. When this image is in danger of being corrupted, she warns herself: "I [cannot] let my perceptions about Peter be distorted by the effects of alcohol" (Atwood 69).

At the same time, Marian's view of Peter is ambiguous. She finds his (apparent) perfection frustrating, wishing for "a reassuring wart or mole, or patch of roughness, something the touch could fix on instead of gliding over" (Atwood 61). It is possible that Marian's frustration originates from her insecurity about herself. Although she proves to be insightful about the girdle advertisement she encounters on the bus, meditating on its possible target audience and its workings, she is still affected by the expected "female form" presented in the picture. She guesses that "perhaps the lithe young woman was a self-image" and that the target was women older than her hoping to get "their own youth and slenderness back in the package" (Atwood 93), yet she seems slightly anxious about the "middle-aged spread” the girdle is supposed to conceal. Although she is in her early twenties, far from being middle-aged, she concludes: “maybe I already [have] it. You have to be careful about things like that […]; they have a way of creeping up on you before you know it” (Atwood 93).

This is not the only occasion when Marian feels that she is falling short of the expected performance as a woman among marketable products. Compared to her clear-cut view of Peter as a husband-product, she is not certain about her own purpose in relation to Peter and tries on various objects as possible identities. For example, on one occasion she interprets the bathtub as Peter’s choice of place for making love as “the expression of [her] personality” which makes her assume that Peter may be “thinking of [her] as a lavatory fixture” (Atwood 62). At another point she feels that Peter is “sizing her up as he would a new camera, trying to find the central complex of wheels and tiny mechanisms, the possible weak points, the kind of future performance to be expected” (Atwood 150). She often interprets Peter’s look as scrutinizing, and when Peter touches her, she feels as if “she was on a doctor’s examination table” (Atwood 149).

Marian’s reaction suggests that she has no desire for Peter but I find her interpretation of his look especially noteworthy. It reflects the power relations of looking that also surface in the party scene, when Peter tries to take Marian’s photograph (which I will discuss later in more detail). Here, the focus is on the scrutiny she perceives from Peter – a scrutiny which likely originates from her and is only projected onto him. When she examines the assembled female colleagues at the company party, she concludes, “they all wore dresses for the mature figure” (Atwood 166), echoing a slogan that implies that certain body forms are less acceptable than others, and that, therefore, they should be improved or hidden by pieces of clothing that are manufactured for this purpose. The use of the slogan-like “for the mature figure” reflects that she has absorbed certain phrases from commercials, which are woven into her language. The reality of the bodies around her demonstrates that the perfect body promoted by publicity images cannot be sustained, which revolts her.

Marian’s perception of herself as a flawed product may have its roots in the way advertisements that she encounters operate. The girdle poster with its sexual overtones – “a young woman with three pairs of legs skipping about in her girdle” by which Marian is “slightly scandalized” (Atwood 92–93) – is a notable choice from Atwood for Marian to contemplate on the bus. It presents a number of problems inherent to advertisements accompanied by pictures, and even more to those that use the female figure as illustration: primarily that they objectify women and present them as commodities. Laura Mulvey suggests that there is a correlation between this problem, the image of America as “the democracy of glamour,” and the rising movie star-culture of the 1950s:

> As the early 1950s boom meshed with the politics of the Cold War, America invented itself as the democracy of glamour. Glamour proclaimed the desirability of American capitalism to the outside world and, inside, offered an all-American image to the newly suburbanized, commodity-consuming white population. It was against this background that Marilyn Monroe rose to stardom, supremely personifying the allure of the screen but also suggesting a metaphor for the allure of the commodity. The commodity too depended on a glamorous surface, attracting the eye of the consumer while erasing any trace of the labour power that had produced the product. (*Afterimages* 20)

Although it is not stated explicitly, in my reading the process identified by Mulvey includes the increasingly widespread use of the sexualized female body as an accompaniment of products in advertisements.

In her well-known 1975 analysis of women in film, Mulvey argues that "mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order" ("Visual Pleasure" 8), which, alongside the previous quotation, suggests that movie star culture is the starting point of the process which results in the objectification of the (female) body in popular visual representation. However, the visual history that preceded Hollywood movies has to be taken into consideration – for example, erotic silent films of the early 20th century as well as pornographic photographs that date back to the origins of the photographic medium. Although they have been erased from most of the well-known histories of photography, pornographic images were created as soon as the technique enabled them in the 19th century (Solomon-Godeau 222). By this time, the female nude was a widely accepted subject in visual representation due to its long traditions in painting, which established the passive and inviting attitude as standard for its subjects in Europe (Berger 53).[2]

The innovation of photography in this discourse was that due to its assumed truth-value it introduced "erotic" and "pornographic"[3] as two separate categories, marking one of them as acceptable, and the other as unacceptable. Yet, these two categories essentially represent the same set of images, with minute differences: images presenting sexual difference as spectacle. The difference lies not necessarily in the contents of the image but in their presentation. This allowed erotic photographs to be displayed on the walls of galleries,[4] whereas pornographic ones were outlawed.

---

[2] In non-European, such as Indian or African, painting traditions, the female nude is presented differently: actively engaged in the presented (sexual) activity, and not in a supine position, which establishes an entirely different image of femininity (Berger 53).

[3] The word "pornographic" was coined in the 19th century as well, and originally referred to "writings about the lives and activities of prostitutes" (Kuhn 24).

[4] Certain galleries did not permit erotic photographs to be exhibited. This obstacle was overcome by artists who insisted on producing such images with the use of draperies and posing their models with their back to the camera because backviews were deemed acceptable (since they were conventional in the tradition of the painted nude) (Solomon-Godeau 233).

The two categories are even more connected, because pornographic photography – especially its softcore branch – uses the traditions of high art in terms of lighting and the arrangement of the set (draperies, furniture) as well as the body within it (Kuhn 38, Solomon-Godeau 233).

Photography as a new medium suggested connotations that were previously not commonplace in connection with pictorial representations. As Kuhn argues, “representations are productive: photographs, far from merely reproducing a pre-existing world, constitute a highly coded discourse which, among other things, constructs whatever is in the image as object of consumption – consumption by looking, as well as often quite literally by purchase” (19). Although homosexual erotica also existed at the time, most of the pornographic photographs were “of women made by men for the use of men” (Solomon-Godeau 220). This resulted in the implication that if the photograph depicts a woman and the photograph can be purchased and consumed, the woman depicted in it can be purchased and consumed as well. Berger points out that the association or identification of a picture with the actual possessed item dates back to the traditions of Renaissance oil painting (83), so possession and consumption through images was not the new medium’s innovation.

What was new, however, was that photographs were easy to reproduce and could be sold in larger volumes; therefore, photography created a previously non-existent mass market for pornography (Kuhn 24–29). Through this it also established a wide market for consumable women, and constructed “’woman’ as a set of meanings which, once launched into the world, circulates within it and takes on a quasi-autonomous life of its own” (Solomon-Godeau 220). Kuhn adds that there are several categories of pictures of women, “each one constructing a different type of woman” (19). One such category is the pinup, which was widely used in commercials and thus took on a significant part in the promotion of the sexually attractive woman. The conventions of the pinup “work to construct the body, usually the female body, as a spectacle: and the female body is a spectacle because parts of it – the parts that say ‘this is a woman’ – are pleasurable to look at” (Kuhn 38).[5]

The pleasurable look that Kuhn refers to plays an important role in the development of advertisements, too. Solomon-Godeau says the following:

Within the realm of sexually coded imagery, there is reason to think that erotic representation demonstrates a shift from a conception of the sexual as an activity to a new emphasis on specularity – the sexual constituted as a visual field rather than an activity as such. This would suggest links to other cultural developments in the nineteenth century: the invention of department stores with their open and extravagant display of goods and sophisticated window dressing, the popularity of illusionistic spectacles ranging from the diorama to magic-lantern shows, and so forth. (233–235)

---

[5] In this light, it is remarkable that the male body has not received similar mainstream attention in advertisements until fairly recently. Since the male nude is part of a different discourse (starting from antiquity), “the male body does not in and of itself conventionally connote the erotic” (Solomon-Godeau 223); men are usually presented through the conventional roles in society – father, businessman, etc. If the (partially naked) male body appears in an advertisement, it is almost always connected to a sports activity, whereas the nudity of women semantically is usually not connected to the advertised product.

This process was undoubtedly aided by the invention of film and the subsequent emergence and spread of Hollywood movies, which indeed helped to bring the erotic out from among the walls of (high art) galleries and establish it as part of mainstream culture, as Mulvey argued, although the process started earlier than she suggests. With the help of the cinema, the erotic presentation of women became an integral and natural part of publicity images. Moreover, the process Solomon-Godeau presents draws attention to a parallel between the psychological workings of sexual images and those of adverts in their capability to trigger spectatorial desire (270).

The girdle advertisement in *The Edible Woman* uses the female figure in a particularly erotic way to sell its product. The description of the poster is not detailed but it is likely that the woman in the picture is a pinup. She has three pairs of legs which fragment her body and invite a spectatorial look. This look, however, differs based on the gender of its owner: the picture is supposed to be erotic for the (heterosexual) male gaze and anxiety-inducing for the (heterosexual) female gaze, by making women feel in need of improvement. This is reflected in Marian's concern that her body requires alterations the girdle can offer. It is also notable that after encountering the girdle poster on the bus and hearing about "the Underwear Man" – a man who uses Marian's company as an alibi to phone women and ask them sexually charged questions – Marian arrives at the conclusion that the man is "a victim of society" (Atwood 117). She creates a mental scene, in which the man came upon the same advertisement, but after "society flaunted these slender laughing rubberized women before his eyes, urging, practically forcing upon him their flexible blandishments, [it] refused to supply him with any. He had found when he had tried to buy the garment in question at store counters that it came empty of the promised contents" (Atwood 117). The "promised contents" are of course the women *in* the garments promoted by the advertisement. The parallel Marian draws between the advertisement and the Underwear Man, again, emphasizes the conventional view of women as commodity (Bouson 19).

The construction of the female body as spectacle helped to establish the subject positions in visual representation that – also with the help of cinema – became standard by the 1960s: the one who looks is understood to be male, whereas the recipient of the look is female (Solomon-Godeau 220). For this reason, women as photographic subjects receive a more intense "investigation-by-scrutiny" (Kuhn 34) than men; and they receive more intense scrutiny regarding their looks *outside* of photographs, as well. This might be another cause of Marian's insecurity, and of finding her life as a marketable product frustrating. As her worries about middle-aged spread suggest, she is uncertain about her ability to live up to the expectations publicity images are communicating to her. She differs from the advertised female image in many respects: she does not style her hair according to the current fashion, does not wear make-up, and does not dress to impress others. Although she feels reluctant to change, her efforts to please those around her and, most importantly, Peter, culminate in a complete transformation for Peter's party. She goes to the hairdresser to get her hair done, lets her roommate Ainsley make her face up and polish her nails, and puts on a freshly bought red dress, complete with a girdle underneath it.

Following her previous identification with objects that would supplement Peter's life, Marian regards her involuntary transformation as a form of objectification, too. She perceives her visit to the hairdresser as if she was either in a factory – noting the fellow clients beside her as "the assembly-line of women" (Atwood 209) – or in a hospital – the hairdresser is regarded as "the doctor," his assistants are "nurses," the hair washing sink is an "operating table," and she remarks wryly that "it would be a good idea if they would give anaesthetics to the patients" during the process (Atwood 209). She passively accepts Ainsley's offer to do her makeup, too, viewing the result as being "afraid even to blink, for fear that this applied face would crack and flake with the strain" (Atwood 222). She finds her new look unsatisfactory, because she "has always thought that on her body these things looked extra, struck to the surface like patches or posters" (Atwood 209). As a result, she is completely alienated from herself: at different stages of her transformation she is offered to look at herself in mirrors – at the hairdresser, by Ainsley, and she catches her reflection in the tub while she is bathing – and she expresses her inability to recognize herself on every occasion.

The girdle is a noteworthy detail of Marian's outfit because it shows another aspect of her willingness to fulfil desires and expectations that she assumes to be set for her. When she muses about the Underwear Man, she arrives at the possibility that the mysterious man is Peter, who finds the fake calls "his only way of striking back at a cruel world that saddled him with crushing legal duties and prevented him from taking her to dinner" and "perhaps this was his true self, the core of his personality, the central Peter" (Atwood 118). At this point it seems that in Marian's perception, his motivation is not of a sexual nature, and the calls are read by her as mere revenge, or an outlet of his frustration. After this short contemplation, the parallel between Peter and the Underwear Man is not mentioned anymore; however, Marian lets herself be persuaded into buying a girdle by the saleslady and decides to wear it under her red dress to the party. The transformation process and her new accessories bring Marian closer to the ideal woman of publicity images, which makes her uncomfortable because she perceives her transformed self as being highly sexualized. She remarks to herself at the hairdresser's that the new hairstyle "made her look like a call girl" (Atwood 210); and later realizes that her usual smile does not fit her current look and attempts to perform one that she associates with sexually provocative behavior. She feels a heightened self-consciousness, perceiving unwelcome attention and scrutiny from others.

Peter's reaction to Marian's transformation is a positive one, which nevertheless only strengthens Marian's discomfort. If Marian's job at the advertising company was a suggestive choice from Atwood, it is no less suggestive that Peter is a hobby photographer and a collector of weapons. Atwood draws a parallel between the two: it is pointed out by several analyses of *The Edible Woman* that in the novel photography is explicitly associated with hunting (Hutcheon 20, Wilson 33, Rigney 25, Bouson 28). Peter's cameras hang next to his weapon-collection in his bedroom (Atwood 59), and the hunting story he tells Len Slank concludes with taking a photograph of a disembowelled rabbit (Atwood 69). The parallel is not Atwood's invention, because by the 1960s photography had already developed a remarkably aggressive vocabulary to describe its actions – to shoot, to capture an image, to take a picture, to aim the camera (Solomon-Godeau 222) – and the impact of this vocabulary is widely acknowledged in the critical discourse. For example, Sontag defines photography as "the gentlest of predations" and the photographer as "the armed version of the solitary walker" (55). In Marian's fantasy the association is even more explicit: she frequently muses on Peter's behaviour in connection with aggression, and although at the beginning she thinks that "violence in connection with Peter seemed incongruous to her" (Atwood 150), by the end of Peter's party he is transformed into "a homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands" (Atwood 246), and she has to flee from him "through the thicket of people, keeping behind the concealing trunks and bushes of backs and skirts" (Atwood 245).

As her previous speculation about the Underwear Man suggests, Marian's association of Peter with a dangerous predator has a particular function in the novel. Atwood states in an interview that Peter and "the restrictive society are blended into one" (qtd. in Bouson 17), which is reflected in the previously mentioned scrutinizing look that Marian perceives from him. Due to her insecurities, for Marian, Peter becomes the focusing lens of societal expectations that overwhelm her. The tension that builds in her towards him culminates in the party scene, when he attempts to take her photograph, which Howells refers to as a "traumatic moment" (52). This scene reenacts a conventional photography situation in terms of subject positions and gender roles, which reflects the standard subject positions in visual representation that I mentioned earlier. Although there were numerous female photographers from the beginning of the spread of the new medium, their existence was not recorded in the traditional histories (Solomon-Godeau 268). Women were understood to be the subjects of images and not the operators of the camera – which is demonstrated by the manuals that were attached to cameras marketed for popular use: in the illustrations “the man holds the camera and the woman holds the pose” (Solomon-Godeau 269).[6] It can be seen from this example that the conventional view of visual representation understands the spectator to be male partly because his gaze is aligned with the camera, which is also believed to be held by a male.

The scene in the novel in which Peter attempts to take Marian’s picture is furnished with every prop necessary to reflect this conventional setting. Peter, the photographer, is holding a camera towards the female model, Marian; on his desk an open magazine with an article on “Indoors Flash Lighting,” with an advertisement next to it showing a child (the second most popular subject of photographs after women (Solomon-Godeau 266)) to be “treasured forever” (Atwood 231). Photographic customs presuppose that women do not understand the workings of the camera, so the power of operating it and the knowledge that entails the taking of the picture lie with the male photographer (Solomon-Godeau 266). In accordance with this, Atwood uses a vocabulary to reflect Marian’s ignorance when describing her noting that Peter “began doing things to his light meter” (Atwood 231). To conform to the visual norms that dominate mainstream images and thus create a “good” photograph of his bride, Peter requests a conventional pose from Marian that provides a more complete display of her body. He asks her to stand by his guns (possessions he is proud of), lean back against the wall, relax and “stick out [her] chest” instead of “hunch[ing her] shoulders together like that” (Atwood 232). To achieve better lighting, he turns the desk lamp towards Marian, who “backs against a wall” as if at gunpoint, which prompts Peter to request a more presentable attitude from her: “don’t look so worried darling, look natural, come on, *smile*…” (Atwood 232, italics original).

Marian expresses her hesitance about being the subject of the photograph, which Peter dismisses as a sign of modesty. However, Marian’s anxiety is more complex, and when she escapes the flat while Peter is organizing the guests into a group portrait, she is able to formulate her worries: “Once he pulled the trigger she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change” (Atwood 245). In my reading –besides reflecting common anxieties in connection with photographs – Marian’s reluctance to be photographed reflects her fear of stagnating in her transformed state, which she finds alien to her. Bouson refers to Marian's transformation as "feminine masquerade" (28); however, it does not only involve her looks but also her behavior, which she has gradually adjusted since she accepted Peter's proposal. Marian learns to silence her oppositional voice against Peter (Bouson 18), which she nevertheless sustains inwardly. When Peter asks her about a possible wedding date, she considers an offhand answer, then says: "I'd rather have you decide that. I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you" (Atwood 90). At the same time, she is detached from this passive self and perceives her own voice as if it was someone else's: "I heard a soft flannelly voice I barely recognized […]. I was astounded at myself. I'd never said anything remotely like that to him before"; nevertheless, she adds: "The funny thing was I really meant it" (Atwood 90). She develops a similar passivity in other situations, too, and towards other men: when Duncan asks her to remove her blouse so he can iron it, she "found herself undoing the buttons" (Atwood 143), and later she realizes about her relationship with Duncan that "her motives eluded her; as all her motives tended to these days" (Atwood 183).

---

[6] It is worth considering in connection with this argument that in 1928 Kodak released its Ensemble model, which specifically targeted women and thus advertised photography as a practice for middle-class women. The extent to which the model promoted the necessity to adhere to existing beauty standards with its case containing a compact, a lipstick and a small mirror is open to debate; however, its presence on the market is noteworthy. See more on the Kodak Ensemble in: Arnold, Rebecca. “The Kodak Ensemble: Fashion, Images and Materiality in 1920s America.” *Fashion Theory*, vol. 25, 2019, 687–713.

Nonetheless, although several analyses emphasize her passivity, I would argue that Marian sustains her oppositional voice throughout. The fact that she notices her own passivity and makes a mental comment on it reflects this, and it also shows in her frustration about her transformation and her reluctance to be photographed. Howells quotes Friedan when describing Marian's battle with herself: "In North American society of the late 1950s and 1960s where 'adjustment' for a woman meant accepting a dependent 'feminine' role, it was as Friedan says, 'very hard for a human being to sustain such an inner split – conforming outwardly to one reality, while trying to maintain inwardly the values it denies'" (48). Indeed, it is visible that Marian finds becoming a publicity image unsustainable, and she is convinced that being photographed would be the final step in this process. When she mistakes a "blinding flash of light" aimed at someone else for a picture taken of her, she "sense[s] her face as vastly spreading and papery and slightly dilapidated: a huge billboard smile, peeling away in flaps and patches, the metal surface beneath showing through" (Atwood 244). This fantasy reflects Marian's belief that even as a publicity image she would be unsatisfactory and flawed, because her true self would be exposed even under the artificial layers arranged over it.

Remarkably, Marian manages to avoid her picture being taken, which proves to be a unique achievement among Atwood-heroines who find their own photographic portraits problematic. All the other women presented in the novels have to work out a method to subsequently destroy, modify, or make acceptable their photographs. It is debated whether Marian's return to consumer culture via eating the cake woman at the end of the novel is a successful act of liberation but I find it important that she manages to make this decision at all. Her struggles reflect the difficulties that societal expectations impose on people, which continue to be relevant in the 21st century.

Works cited

Arnold, Rebecca. “The Kodak Ensemble: Fashion, Images and Materiality in 1920s America.” *Fashion Theory*, vol. 25, 2019, 687–713.

Atwood, Margaret. *The Edible Woman*. Virago Press, 1989.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin, 1977.

Bouson, J. Brooks. *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1993.

Howells, Coral Ann. *Margaret Atwood*. Macmillan Education, 1996.

Hutcheon, Linda. “From Poetic to Narrative Structures: The Novels of Margaret Atwood.” In *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text, and System*, Sherrill E. Grace and Lorraine Weir (eds). University of British Columbia Press, 1983, 17–31.

Kuhn, Annette. *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*. Routledge, 1985.

Mulvey, Laura. *Afterimages*. Reaktion Books, 2019.

————. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, 6–18.

Rigney, Barbara Hill. *Margaret Atwood*. Macmillan, 1987.

Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*. University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Picador, 1977.

Tolan, Fiona. *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*. Rodopi, 2007.

Wilson, Sharon R. “Camera Images in Margaret Atwood’s Novels.” In *Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality*, Beatrice Mendez-Egle (ed), Pan American University, 1987, 29–57.

KATINKA KRAUSZ / is a doctoral candidate at the Department of American Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary. She finished her MA studies at the Department of English Studies, ELTE, in 2017. She has taken part in several international conferences centered on Canadian studies, American studies, and photography in literature. Her academic interests include contemporary Canadian Studies, visual culture studies (the cultural perception of photography, ekphrasis), and psychology (memory and trauma studies). She is doing her PhD dissertation on Margaret Atwood’s fiction, studying the role of photographs within Atwood’s novels.