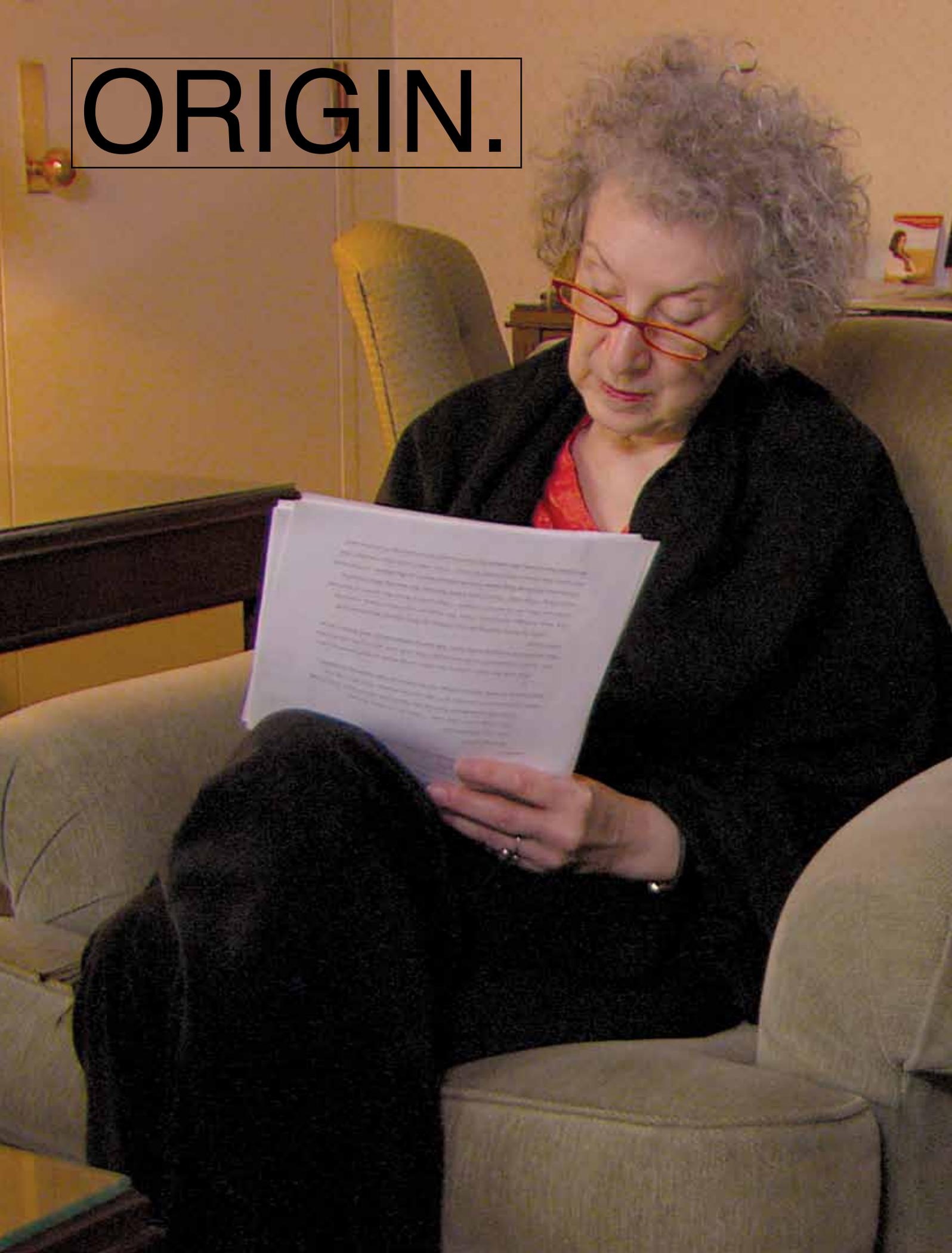


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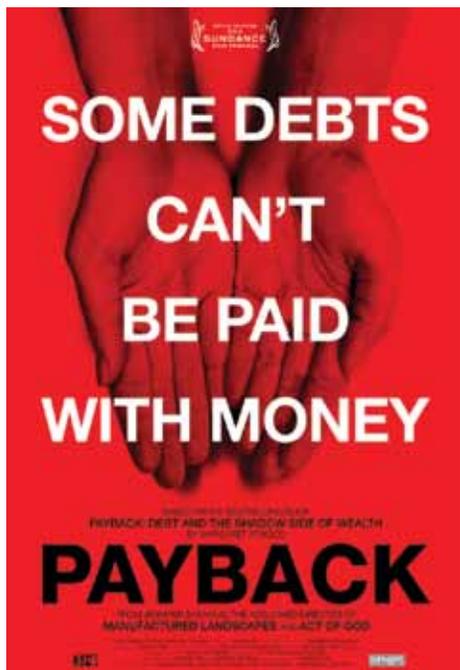


Unscripted

Margaret Atwood on life, literature, and a new film exploring her book *Payback: Debt and The Shadow Side of Wealth*, directed by Jennifer Baichwal.

INTERVIEW: PAUL D. MILLER/DJ SPOOKY

The term “credit” comes from a simple root, the Latin word “credere,” which simply translates as “belief or trust.” It’s one of those terms that resonate in our modern life where we invest so much in systems - operating systems, credit systems, nation states - without much real thought into how much they reflect the transient and imperfect relationships that hold together modern life. Margaret Atwood is a towering figure of modern global literature precisely because she navigates the fault lines between poetry, film, and what Borges once simply called “the literature of the possible.” On the occasion of the release of the film adaptation by Jennifer Baichwal that traces some of the themes Atwood explored in her recent book *Payback: Debt and The Shadow Side of Wealth*, I caught up with the author.



Science fiction and tech-oriented narratives have long been a “boys with toys” club. You and other writers, as diverse as Ursula K. Leguin, Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, and Pat Cadigan, have dramatically changed the landscape. What sent you on this path?

Science fiction went through a period that was mostly object-oriented (space tools, robots, and so forth) or inventions for distant galaxies (Star Wars, Star Trek, cyborgs, and more). But when we cracked the genetic DNA code, opened the big Pandora’s box, and it really did become possible to produce chimeras, my ears shot up. Having been brought up among the biologists and having followed various debates about ways to improve the human template and other debates about the true nature of our nature, I began seriously to wonder: What if? We hold in our hands a tool that is more powerful – for good or ill – than any we have wielded before.

The book that sparked a tremendous amount of interest in your work was *The Handmaid’s Tale*. This is speculative fiction that was highly influential. Canada has long had a deeply ambiguous relationship to America, and your writings have helped theorize Canadian literary life. If there’s anything you think of as a core issue in Canada, “surviving” seems to keep popping up. What’s your take on Canada these days?

Canada. Let’s just say that we’ve been concerned with it for a while. Canada, at the moment, is going through a Lord of the Rings moment. Having been a lowly Hobbit with furry feet and fun parties, with fireworks and beer, it has now been handed the Ring of Power: a large supply of fossil fuel, in the form of oil/tar sand and coal. Will it shrivel into an evil RingWraith? Will it become an addicted Golum? Will it refuse the Ring, like Galadriel, fearful of what So Much Power (in both senses of the

PHOTOS: TOP: GULF OIL SPILL DETAIL, COURTESY NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA



"One good maxim to keep in mind, and I can't remember who said it, 'You meet the same people on the way down that you meet on the way up, but you're going the other way.'"

word) will do to its inner being? Will it try to deal with the Ring responsibly, like Gandalf? Will it side with the Ents? And let's say for the record: if all fossil fuel were to go POOF! tomorrow, the result would be a cataclysmic social upheaval, with food riots, warlords, shutdowns, breakdown of social order, water shortages, and outbreaks of bloodshed and disease.

So the responsible treatment of this particular Ring of Power is not necessarily to toss it into the Cracks of Doom. But we have to come up with something rather quickly, or what we'll get is the Land of Mordor.

I won't be around for the answer. It's around the corner, and I won't get that far. But I doubt that Canada will be seen forever on the international stage as Mr/s Boring Niceperson, as has been the habit. Maybe it will change to Mr/s Boring Badperson, lose its considerable

sense of humour, and stop exporting comic actors to the US.

Your recent film collaboration with Jennifer Baichwal's *Payback*, along with fellow Canadian Mark Akbar's *The Corporation*, makes a really intriguing connection between the way corporations have shaped modern life and the role that finance scripts for itself in the "theater of the everyday." Your fellow Canadian director Mark Akbar's film, *The Corporation*, used psychoanalytic techniques to look at how modern international companies function. The ideas driving your film-collaboration with Jennifer Baichwal led to everything from an analysis of Rousseau's concept of "the social contract" that holds societies in a Western context together, to the ways that debt creates an almost mythic sense of participating in the production of

culture. I'd love to hear how you got to this point.

It was exciting to work with director Jennifer Baichwal, who made *Manufactured Landscapes* and others, on the film of *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*. It's called, simply, *PAYBACK*. Jennifer didn't want to do a transliteration of the book, a kind of illustrated version, but to go into the core of the book: owing and being owed, paying and paying back, on all sorts of levels. So she found real-life, visceral stories that embodied the themes of the book. The film opens with an Albanian blood feud and goes on to delve into, for instance, prison systems, underpaid tomato pickers, the gulf oil spill. It's all woven together in a sensuous, oblique way that's not the same as the single-message kind of documentary we're used to, with an "answer" at the end. It's more like an exploration. Sort of like what you do with *Birth of a Nation*. I

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