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Game of Thrones (5/28/2019)

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven, and for those who can remember that Golden Age (“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive/But to be young was very heaven!”)¹ certain things ended forever at the stroke of midnight, December 31, 1969. Among these were The Revolution, being able to use the word “creativity” with a straight face, and reading Tolkien — a proscription which extended, naturally, to any and all of his numerous subsequent imitators. Which explains why though I have on occasion managed a few pages of the fantasies of George R.R. Martin before being overcome by uncontrollable yawning, their contents, by and large, remain a mystery to me.

This does not mean there is anything grudging in my admiration of his success. Nor does it contravene the rule, known to every student of the cinema, that what reads indifferently may film very well indeed. And in fact I have watched the seventy-three episodes of *Game of Thrones* more than once, some favorites several times, and though lacking the obsessive focus of the true geek on this alternative universe I cannot term myself a real authority on the details of its cosmography, I find it more than obvious why this wouldbe epic could not reach a satisfying conclusion, and instead collapsed from its own contradictions. — As Hawkeye pointed out to Nick Fury, some of us see better from a distance.

¹ The intention here may be ironic. Just saying.

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To state, first, the obvious: this was not an epic, or a tragedy; those have single heroes and restricted actions. This was a romance, in the tradition of the Arthurian legends or (a closer parallel) Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*: a multipolar narrative, very, very long, involving hundreds of characters and scores of plotlines; and the need to keep pruning this luxuriant growth entailed killing people off at a steady pace. Thus the survivors gradually acquired the aura of the chosen of the gods — indeed many of the heroes acquired superhuman powers — and, perhaps more important, the audience became deeply invested in their fate. — I cannot be the only one who swore a solemn oath that if the bastards killed Tyrion I would quit watching immediately — everyone must have felt the same, or Peter Dinklage would not have led the opening credits after the first season — and for a while near the end felt great anxiety for the fate of Arya until I discovered Martin's wife had told him it meant divorce if he let her die. — And the President himself demanded an explanation for the apparent demise of Jon Snow! — So enormous interest gradually became concentrated in a small number of characters. This had three consequences.

First, this concentration demanded *some* kind of conclusion. This is not natural to romance. The Arthurian legends are bookended by Arthur's death — which is motivated in the style of Greek tragedy, as punishment for the sin of incest — but this is inessential to what they are *about*, which is a bunch of guys in chain mail riding around fighting giants and enchanters and rescuing fair maidens — motivated, after a certain point, by the quest for the Grail, though this looks, after the fact, like the justifications for Michael Bay's car chases, a feeble attempt to make the Fun Stuff look like it Means Something; Spenser's *Faerie Queene* was left unfinished entirely, and is none the worse for it; Ariosto's backdrop was the wars of Christianity and Islam, which went on for cen-

turies — indeed some would claim they are still going on. — There is no *end* to adventure. When a romance finds a real conclusion it is because, like *Quixote*, it has transcended its origins, and become something else.

Second, it meant that the audience was invested not only in the heroes but the villains. As their numbers diminished, the inexorable law of the cinema had to apply: the biggest dies last. And that had to be Cersei.

But, third, that meant that the putative Grand Menace, the Army of the Dead led by the Night King — you have to wonder what possessed Martin to insist on this, it scans like one of those memetic joke titles: “The Wars of the Roses — with Zombies!” — had to be dealt with first. And that, of course, fucked everything up completely.

The authors’ logic was on the one hand impeccable: Cersei is a real person, played by a real and charismatic star, Lena Headey — the Woman You Love To Hate; the Night King and his minions are just cartoons, CGI, warmed over George Romero. — But the logic of cosmic menace *should* be more compelling. — And so the narrative derived a contradiction.

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Let us review the situation at the end of the sixth season, then:

Setting the menace of the Undead aside, basically at this point we’re down to the Avengers versus the WWE. On the side of the Good Guys we have several authentic superhumans, whose stories we have been following *ab initio*: Melisandre, the real Scarlet Witch; The Artist Formerly Known As Bran, who Knows All and Sees All; Arya the Invincible Ninja (hands down my favorite); Jon who came back from the fucking dead and even

looks like Jesus, for Christ's sake; Daenerys Stormborn the Unburnt, the Breaker of Chains, the Mother of Dragons, the Bearer of Innumerable Additional Titles; and assisting them a dazzling supporting cast which includes the two smartest guys in the world (Tyrion and Varys), and the smartest woman (Sansa), who may be sharper than either; a perfect specimen of natural genius (Samwell Tarley, Pierre to Martin's Tolstoy); and assorted legendary warriors (Jaime, Brienne, the Hound, etc.) to fill out the bottom half of the batting order. — Maybe I should also mention that Daenerys commands an enormous fleet, three dragons, and a couple of invincible armies. — Against them we have Cruella de Vil, a cutrate Dr. Frankenstein (and Monster),² a cartoon villain (Euron) not nearly in the same league as the already-eliminated Tywin Lannister and Ramsay Bolton, and a host of expendable extras waving their swords in the air. — Give me a break. How long is this war supposed to last? — And of course they finally [8.5] admit: about five minutes, even after two of three dragons and most of the armies have been sacrificed to faux-dramatic-necessity.

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In short, any idiot could eliminate twelve-and-a-half of the last thirteen episodes in a few lines:

Daenerys: Dracarys.

(The Red Keep melts, and Cersei and her posse with it. A contingent of the Unsullied is dispatched to maintain order.)

Dany addresses the enigma of the North.

² Apparently in the novels The Mountain really does die, and his replacement is some kind of giant robot — a much better idea, very *Arabian Nights*.

Jon: Hi, nice to meet you, Breaker of the Wheel. I was resurrected by the Lord of Light for some purpose mere mortals cannot fathom, but it probably has something to do with the menace we all face from the Army of the Dead.

Daenerys: You're fucking kidding me.

Jon: Fly one of your dragons north of The Wall and have a look .

(By the temporal logic of the last two seasons this takes about thirty seconds.)

Daenerys: Wow, you're right, they're totally badass. What do we do? — Tyrion, get your nose out of that book.

Tyrion: An interesting scroll from the chroniclers of the First Age, my Queen, called *Leiningen Versus the Ants*. Have I mentioned in the last five minutes how I defeated Stannis at the Battle of Blackwater Bay?

Daenerys: You never shut up about it.

Tyrion: Well, that's it. We torch the zombie motherfuckers with wildfire. — I'm not sure about the Night King and his entourage.

Jon: Let me ask my friend Sam, who has ransacked the library of the Citadel to unearth these secrets.

(A minute or two while Sam reads a stolen manuscript and confers with Bran.)

Sam: Kill the Night King. He's coming for the Three-Eyed Raven. If you stick him with Valyrian steel in the exact spot where the Children of the Forest created him with dragonglass, he's toast.

Jon: We're on it.

Dany: Roger that.

Jon: Let's distract him and let my sister the Invincible Ninja handle the coup de grace. Pretend you're trying to fry him with dragonfire while I wave my sword around.

Daenerys: All right.

Jon: Incidentally, you wanna fuck?

Daenerys: I'm gorgeous. You're gorgeous. What does cinematic logic require, when Fire meets Ice?

Jon: I'm slow. But not that slow.

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And thus the problem was not how to conclude the narrative in a mere season or two, but how *not* to conclude it in thirty minutes.

And so we are afflicted with absurd plotlines like Littlefinger's machinations in Winterfell (by now completely outclassed, he never could have intrigued for more than thirty seconds — and is finally, of course, dismissed with a snap of the fingers); try unsuccessfully to believe that Tyrion and Varys left their brains in Essos, that Bran would not penetrate Cersei's schemes, that Arya would take any longer to dispose of the Red Keep than she did to avenge the Red Wedding; waste an entire season filled with artificially enhanced sexual tension before Jon and Dany, who have been aimed at one another since episode [1.1], succumb to dramatic necessity; compromise the ensuing romance by the (entirely artificial — this is not in Martin) discovery that Jon is the true

“Targaryan” (albeit mysteriously nonblonde) heir to the throne; pointlessly mine dragonglass; condemn poor Sam to changing bedpans; teleport an enemy fleet around to make it seem a plausible menace; launch expeditions to the north and south which accomplish nothing, indeed hand the Night King the means to cross the Wall; and stage, finally, the defense of the Alamo, which clearly kills all but a handful of defenders, though the next morning half the army has miraculously been restored to life; unite and then cruelly separate Jaime and Brienne; and then pretend that Dany would be driven mad by the lust for power, a wholly arbitrary and unnatural distortion of a character arc. — After which, having long since entered Never-Never Land, we are supposed to pretend the Praetorian Guard would not have summarily executed Jon for killing their sovereign. — Yup. Makes perfect sense.

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Curiously enough the things no one seems to have been able to believe — the glorious Leni Riefenstahl moment as Dany addresses her armies and promises eternal conquest, Drogon’s political statement at the expense of the Iron Throne (“Dragons are intelligent,” says Tyrion [6.2], “more intelligent than men, according to some maesters”), the nobles’ what-the-fuck selection of Bran — are the things that make the most sense. — “The desire to destroy is also a creative desire,” said Bakunin, long before “disruption” was a malignant cliché; and he was certainly right. Riefenstahl had to work to make her tyrants seem godlike, but when they really *are* godlike, it’s kind of cool. — Maybe the point should be that the gods are scary and we worship them at our peril. As Susan Sontag pointed out a long time ago, fascism would not be dangerous if it were not so beautiful. — Clearly here we should be thinking of Homunculus posed above the masses, of Maria rousing the crowd in *Metropolis* — of Ivan the Terrible receiving the petition of the people, a curving line of

ants beneath the tip of his beard, projected on the plain — and admiring the abstract Expressionist geometry of Man in the Mass, paying homage to the deities arranging them with their compasses.

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Though this is not *supposed* to be the point. The point is *supposed* to be that this was the world's longest Greek tragedy, and the flaws of our heroine must inevitably have led her to her doom; that (Varys and Tyrion argue the point) even though she walked into a fire with three stones and walked out with three dragons this didn't really mean she was the instrument of destiny.

But of course we have heard this before, in a far more brilliant (and sixty hours shorter — brevity is the soul of wit) portrayal of medieval life, from a peasant accosted by King Arthur:

— Well how'd you become king then?

— The Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite, held aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water. Signifying by divine providence that I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur. THAT is why I am your king.

— Listen, strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony. ... You can't expect to wield supreme executive power just because some watery tart threw a sword at you.³

— upon which Arthur in a fit of rage seizes the peasant, who declares “Now we see the violence inherent in the system!” — in

³ *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

truth once we begin quoting this masterwork, it is hard to stop — could swallows have carried CGI to Westeros, and if so were they indigenous or European? oh never mind — but at any rate if Arthur must abdicate, and the shellshocked survivors of an endless series of wars of succession have to choose a king, why not Merlin? At least he'll see the next disaster coming.

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Or perhaps the point was *supposed* to have something to do with political philosophy, as Martin claimed: that happy endings to epics are deceptive and we should be asking questions like what Aragorn's tax policy turned out to be after the defeat of Sauron.

But all that was answered at the outset, when Ned arrives in King's Landing and discovers the great warrior whose rebellion he supported has turned out to be an incompetent ruler, fat, drunk, lazy, and addicted to whores; and then further deconstructed as we gradually discover the stated reasons for the rebellion were phony, and that basically the whole thing came down to a fit of jealousy by a spurned lover.

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Or perhaps the moral is *supposed* to be theological: that the fault is not in the way that mortals interpret the intentions of the gods, but with the gods themselves: the evidence suggests that they are inconsistent, at best capricious, at worst malicious, and not necessarily sane. — Why couldn't the Lord of Light make up his mind? — Well, what if God smoked cannabis? as the old song put it.

But this doesn't work because we *know* who the men behind the curtain are — indeed in the final season they kept stepping out to take their bows and faux-explain their motives to the audience —

and the source of all the inconsistencies is obvious: the Lord of Light kept spacing out his Master Plan because he was just a sockpuppet for Martin, Benioff, and Weiss; and none of them could come up with any rational scheme that would exhibit the wisdom of the gods, because the wisdom of the gods was just the wisdom of the writers, who had all run out of gas. So they finally just had to throw their hands up in despair and splice an arbitrary ending onto the narrative, which could have no grand conclusion. — No, worse: they realized they had backed themselves into a happy ending; and, horrified, had to negate the logic of everything that had gone before: go back upon their word, and turn the whole story into a lie. — “Don’t just stand there,” they said to themselves. “Kill somebody.”

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But the fatal goodbye of Jon and Dany leaves something incomplete, perhaps because it reminds me of another vividly realistic tale of political intrigue, Tobe Hooper’s *Lifeforce* [1985], in which naked vampires from outer space conquer London, and only a severely conflicted (indeed half-mad) exastronaut paramour can get close enough to Mathilda May to run her through with an iron sword; running himself through in the process, and setting up a spectacular but beautifully illogical denouement in which the two of them, sans clothing and still shishkabobbed, ascend on a beam of fire into the heavens to be carried off on Halley’s Comet. Whence we can rest assured the betting markets are already saying they shall return when it comes back round the sun.

So the final impression with which I am left — one more thing the authors apparently did not realize — is that nothing is really over; indeed the overlooked ending is so obvious that only some unconscious block can explain its omission — the giveaway, surely, is that green shoot sprouting in the arctic wilderness, the

reminder that when Merlin takes the throne, Arthur is en route to the Isle of Avalon

Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard lawns
And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea,
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound —

[Tennyson]

— and that there is a missing scene, the one Marvel would have run after the conclusion of the credits: the one in which Drogon, his flight over the sea concluded, gently drops the body of his mother at the feet of Kinvara, whom we encountered in Meereen [6.5] — High Priestess of the Red Temple of Volantis, the Flame of Truth, the Light of Wisdom, the First Servant of the Lord of Light — the one who said to Tyrion “Daenerys Stormborn is the one who was promised. From the fire she was reborn to remake the world.” — More powerful even than the red priestess Melisandre of Asshai, mistress of resurrection. — The one who will at this pregnant moment look up from the gorgeous corpse lying at her feet. — Exchange a significant look with the dragon. — Look into the camera. — And smile.

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— Well. — Clueless as always, they don't know they should have done that. — So instead, a final bit of advice for Emilia Clarke: hang it up. — Go back to school: study molecular biology, find a cure for cancer; become the engineer who builds the Beanstalk; sell out to Harvard Law and ascend to the Supreme Court. — Or just flutter your eyelashes at Elon Musk, let him make you Princess of Helium and seat you on the throne beside the (clearly superfluous) Warlord of Mars. — Sarah Bernhardt got to play Hamlet, Garbo got to play Queen Christina, Dietrich got to play

Catherine of Russia, but no chick in the history of the world ever got to play Alexander the Great, and now you have retired the role so completely that no dude can touch it for all time to come; somewhere Colin Farrell drowns his sorrows before a television screen, cursing the fate that left him at the mercy of that fatuous poseur Oliver Stone and wishing he had held out and undergone a sex change. — You did it, you owned it, no matter that these idiots rewrote your role at the last minute no one can ever take this away from you, and now you can retire. — Acting is over. You won.