



Analysing The Structure Of The Final Seasons Of The HBO Series Game Of Thrones

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Abstract: The genre of medieval fantasy has become mainstream for contemporary television. However, there was a time when it was catered to a niche viewer demographic. The paper analyses the impact of HBO's Game of Thrones in fuelling this phenomenon. Using Jameson's notion of pastiche and Lacan's Capitalist Discourse, the paper argues that the final season of Game of Thrones was structured like an advertisement so as to cater to a wider viewer demographic to popularise the medieval fantasy genre. However, such popularisation tends to take away the artistic content so as to profit from the mass production of such shows.

Keywords: Game of Thrones, Pastiche, Lacan, Jameson, Advertisement

Introduction

An interesting joke plays itself out in the final episode of the final season of HBO's Game of Thrones. The learned character of Samwell Tarly is seated with some of the most powerful feudal lords of Westeros. The continent is in the throes of a life-ending winter, the northern region has recently been ravaged by a supernatural army of zombies led by the in-universe equivalent of the Frost giants from Norse Mythology, and the biggest city of the continent, the capital, King's Landing, with a population of about half a million souls is destroyed by a so-called tyrant, who promised liberation. After all this, Samwell Tarly, sitting with the nobles, proposes, what he thinks is a radical idea, a form of republic, where people get the right to choose their king. He is obviously derided, made evident by the laughter of all the nobles, even the veritable protagonists, the winners of the game of thrones, of the tale. It does not seem as though the joke is meant for the characters who laughed at it, it is obviously at the expense of the viewers, who would then nod along and accept the truth of the feudal times. It is to no one's surprise that the end of the feudal times is unfathomable to those who live in it and fuelled by its subjective force. The surprising part is the acceptance of viewers, and their nonchalance towards it. The joke lands because the contemporary viewers, who would not survive the horrors of the feudal times, and live in a system that spelled the doom of such times, believe in the eternity of the said system, while considering the former to be a step in the ladder of human progress.

The joke plays out to its whimpering conclusion as the final season of the show was abhorred by the viewers who once were glued to their screens for the unexpected plot twists. An analysis of the finale reveals the shortcomings not only of the character arcs but also of the finer plot points in the tale. There are various binaries at play exhibited in the final season of the show, however, these binaries should not be confused with contradictions inherent within a totality that result in a sublation, which in turn engender a new understanding of the totality. In reality, these binaries within the final season of the show are purely identitarian as revealed in the earlier example of monarchy or democracy. Another purely identitarian binary reveals itself in the clash between the characters of Sansa and Brienne against Daenerys. The former characters, while not entirely conventional feudal women learned to find themselves some breathing room within the system. On the other hand, Daenerys could not reconcile with an inherently cruel and unjustifiable political system. The framing of the last episode is such that it seems as if the camera is

kinder in its judgement to Cersei Lannister than it is to the Dragon Queen. Both women die in the arms of their lovers and kins, however, the former dies knowing that she is loved, while the latter is betrayed. This paper analyses the portrayal of such binaries in order to understand the rhetoric the showrunners wish to connote. Using semiotic analysis, this paper argues that the final season of HBO's Game of Thrones is structured like an advertisement. The imperative therefore is to analyse whatever the show is coded to sell, for instance the inevitability that emancipation projects tend to fail is coded in the images that portray Daenerys as the Dragon Queen of ashes.

Concept and Method

Regarding the economy of advertisements, McLuhan posits,

At any rate, the multi-billion dollar, nation-wide educational programmes of the ad-men (dwarfing the outlay on formal education) provide a world of symbols, witticism, and behavior patterns which may or may not be a fatal solvent for the basic political traditions of America, but which certainly do comprise a common experience and a common language for a country whose sectional differences and technological specialisms might easily develop into anarchy (McLuhan, 1997).

Any show for that matter, in so far as it portrays a scenario is encoded with a certain meaning. This meaning is conveyed to the viewer through concepts that they have inculcated throughout their lifetime. Many of these concepts correspond to a clear and concise sound pattern, which according to Saussure, is the listener's psychological impression of that given pattern. In a pure linguistic understanding, a sign, therefore, is a combination of a concept and its corresponding sound pattern. Almost always, a sign denotes some sensory whole, a signal that signifies a thing. However, there are times when a sign is unable to denote any specific whole image or a concept. Under such conditions, when a signifier connotes instead of denoting, when free association of words apply not to specific images but only allude to them, the message becomes unclear. Like The Purloined Letter hidden in plain sight, the true message constantly eludes the receiver, while the unconscious, the framework of which for the purposes of this article is strictly Lacanian, continuously makes its free associations.

The meanings that the images connote, the sign that they allude is not merely dependent on how the viewer receives it. In reality, it is also concerned with certain denotative conceptualisations that would then allow the viewer to make only certain specific connections. These connections can be understood through the framework of the Lacanian Unconscious, specifically the understanding that not only is the structure of the unconscious language-like but also the framing of it is primarily ethical. The Lacanian Unconscious is not a thing or an entity, that is to say, the status of it is not ontological. This means that Lacan theorized an inter-subjective dimension where thoughts become a meta-psychological entity capable of being affected by and affecting the social or the collective dimension. The focus therefore is on the symbolic dimension, where the free association of signifiers manifests into a concrete product capable of initiating and interrupting *jouissance*. The role of art in this regard is that of interruption, while the role of advertisement is of initiation and continuation.

Both art and advertisement play an important role in the make up of the contemporary society, so much so that any boundary between them seems blurred. As contemporary culture industry has become more focused on product placements, affiliate marketing and short-form content, the definition of art has been profaned and the form of advertisement has recuperated it. This is very explicit in the title and the blurb of the episodes of the Amazon Prime Video's *The Boys*. The blurb of each episode reads like an advertisement of the in-universe company Vought that the content of the show seeks to critique. However, the true aim of advertisement is the continuation of *jouissance*. It is, after all, in the maintenance of the status quo that the *jouissance* seems to be aimed at, i.e., *jouissance* is transgressive rather than revolutionary. Art, on the other hand, might suggest subversion and transgression, however its outlook is altogether revolutionary in the fact that it aims to depict a totality. Art is not a pastiche of how things are, though it may at times parody it, rather it lays bare the construction of the society. As Jameson puts it,

Modernist styles thereby become postmodernist codes: and that the stupendous proliferation of social codes today into professional and disciplinary jargons, but also into the badges of affirmation of ethnic, gender, race, religious, and class-fraction adherence, is also a political phenomenon, the problem of micropolitics sufficiently demonstrates (Jameson, 1992).

Therefore, the logic of advertisement follows that it must connote a postmodern, consumer-centric ethos that values not an upturning of, not even a truncation or interruption in the *jouissance*, but rather it finds ways for its continuance. Vanheule's (2016) reading of Lacan's Capitalist discourse offers an interesting explanation for such a phenomenon. Advertisements essentially work to produce the condition where there always exists an object that would satisfy a specific lack felt by the subject. However, like in the Master's discourse there remains no solution to ultimate lack. In Lacanian terms, art lies in the domain of the hysteric. It problematizes the oneness of the master signifier, by revealing a non-rapport with the barred subject, thereby producing some fundamental knowledge. Art comes from a place of lack, and in so far as knowledge is its product, it is a kind of knowledge that reveals ignorance on the part of the subject that considers itself to be one.

Analysis

The final season of HBO's *Game of Thrones*, on the other hand, was not well-received by the viewers. As it was based on an unfinished novel series by George R.R. Martin called *A Song of Ice and Fire*, many viewers speculated that the reason for the season's dwindling plotline was the lack of source material. However, Tufekci posits that it is more about the shift in the method of storytelling than a lack of source material. She points out,

That tension between internal stories and desires, psychology and external pressures, institutions, norms and events was exactly what *Game of Thrones* showed us for many of its characters, creating rich tapestries of psychology but also behavior that was neither saintly nor fully evil at any one point. It was something more than that: you could understand why even the characters undertaking evil acts were doing what they did, how their good intentions got subverted, and how incentives structured behavior. The complexity made it much richer than a simplistic morality tale, where unadulterated good fights with evil. (Tufekci, 2024)

In many ways, Tufekci is correct in theorizing that the chief cause of the success of the show, the reason why the storyline was considered riveting lies in its sociological narrative building. The show was truly one of those shows where the consideration of a hero and even the need for one was an anathema to its message. However, as the show progressed, the characters became less what they portrayed and more who was portraying them. It is in this relationship that one finds in it the structure of an advertisement.

The characters Varys and Tyrion Lannister are making their way to Winterfell, the castle ruled by the Starks, where they would decidedly put up their defiance against the personification of winter, the Night King. In the carriage, the dwarf Tyrion Lannister cracks a joke that insults the eunuch. The show in a bout of supposed self-awareness allows the said eunuch, Varys, to retort against the lack of creativity on Tyrion's part for relying on a feeble penis joke in the expense of an eunuch. *Game of Thrones* has never been a show that respected political correctness, in vulgar or non-vulgar sense of the term. However, while the jokes, politically incorrect though they may be, landed perfectly well in the previous seasons.

To juxtapose a scene from the first season, King Robert Baratheon, with his youngest brother Renly, his cupbearer Lancel, and Kingsguard Barristan Selmy, is on a hunt. On the way, he is drinking copiously, talking about the good old days, while lecherously mocking the youth of today. If the jibe was aimed at his homosexual brother, if he even knew about his homosexual brother is not known or implied. This scene, however, is explicit in depicting Renly's discomfort, the homosexual brother in question. He retorts against his brother, reprimands his glory days, and runs away from the hunt. The tension in the scene is palpable, pronounced only by the fact that Robert was gored by a boar later.

Tyrion's verbal joust with Varys, on the other hand, has no such tension. The scene is simply there as a conversation between two actors liked by the viewers, characters whom the viewers have seen previously interact, and have grown to love their verbal jousting. Such scenes are staple in the contemporary advertisement industry, where major A-list actors interact with each other, as the camera focuses specifically on them rather than the product. The aim of such advertisements is not to sell a specific product but to build a brand image and consciousness.

In shows like the *Game of Thrones*, such an image and consciousness were already built, however the lack of written material and pressure from the executives acted counter-intuitively. The lack of written material meant that show must go into a hiatus until Martin produced the next book. However, since the show was

selling well, the executives did not wish to do so, lest the fans lose interest by the time Martin manages to write the last couple of books of the series.

Thus the show fell back on the usual Hollywood tropes where the fan favourite characters assemble under one roof discuss their past traumas, their present situation, and if permissible, their future. The scene is filmed, the dialogues delivered, but the content is dead. The entire production team finds itself running ragged to produce some of the most beautiful sceneries ever filmed, natural or CGI, however, nothing stimulates the senses as the authenticity of the previous seasons.

As the show must sell, it falls upon the erstwhile Hollywood tropes that reduce it to the image of an image thus negating what the earlier seasons stood for and affirming the victory of production moguls. However, D'hondt believes that the narrative and the content of Game of Thrones is capable of criticizing the neoliberal ideology. The erroneous matter of such hypothesis can be easily refuted by the character arc of Daenerys Targaryen. The image of Dragon Queen promised liberation not only to the slaves of Essos but to the peasants of Westeros. However, her army of former slaves and Dothraki, dubbed as eunuchs and barbarians was not popular among the lords of Westeros. They argued that peasants of Westeros did not need liberating as they were free to choose. The same lords practiced the rite of prima noctis and forced their peasants to pay taxes and conscript in their wars. The earlier few seasons of the show has many such scenes that elaborate upon this fact. From the interaction about entitlement that Tyrion has with Jon Snow, to the horrors of war depicted during the second season.

However, in the final season the image that is supposed to solidify Daenerys as a tyrant is her addressing the unsullied and the Dothraki in a language foreign to the nobles of Westeros. According to the showrunners, the images of devastation caused by dragon fire is enough to solidify her as a mad tyrant. The show, in this vein, does not shy away from depicting the parallel fates of Daenerys and Cersei. Cersei, who from the beginning never shied away from her unsuccessful and foolhardy Machiavellian plots. Cersei pushed her childhood friend from a cliff, cuckolded the king with her brother, punished her youngest brother for being a dwarf, and burnt the entire city of King's Landing for having seen her shame. It is beyond the scope of this paper to be concerned with Cersei's motivation; however, it can be posited that the semiotic comparison between Cersei and Daenerys as two mad queens is not only an oversimplification but also erroneous.

To posit that while Cersei and Daenerys were similarly mad, but Sansa had the potential to be a great queen is similarly erroneous. The precise reason for such misrepresentations is clear. The final season structured like a long advertisement of Hollywood's reputation and precisely because of this reason, the show fell back on the usual liberal Hollywood tropes.

Conclusion

The argument, that the final season of Game of Thrones is structured like an advertisement, rests on Jameson's concept of pastiche and Lacan's concept of the capitalist discourse. Analysing various scenes from the final season of the show makes it clear that as the showrunners ran out of content they focused primarily on "speech made in a dead language", a "blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs" (Jameson 65). The paper also focused on the fact that Hollywood's insistence upon raking in the profits of an already existing asset is clear indication of the capitalist discourse taking over, as the showrunners were more concerned about filling in the gap of medieval-themed show than creating a work of art. The latter is still practiced as the spin-off show House of the Dragon has already aired two seasons. The final season of Game of Thrones was a successful advertisement because it paved the way for the media moguls like Amazon and Netflix to invest in the niche genre of medieval fantasy. Mass production of shows like Rings of Power, The Wheel of Time, House of the Dragon and its other spin-offs have become commonplace, taking their place on various streaming platforms, without showing any signs of slowing down despite terrible reviews.

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