Game of Thrones: Olde-Style Catharsis or Bloody Good Counsel?

This article will contain spoilers for those who have not seen the series yet

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Theme: [History](#)

Introduction

Game of Thrones is a television series based on the storylines of A Song of Ice and Fire, set in the fictional Seven Kingdoms of Westeros and the continent of Essos. The series chronicles the violent dynastic struggles among the realm's noble families for the Iron Throne, while other families fight for independence from it. The [final](#) season depicts the culmination of the series' two primary conflicts: the Great War against the Army of the Dead, and the Last War for control of the Iron Throne. Game of Thrones is not typical of contemporary fantasy, with more emphasis on battles and political intrigue and less emphasis on magic and sorcery.

Battle of the [Goldroad](#) from Game of Thrones – Season 7 Episode 4 on the official tapestry produced in Northern Ireland.

As the series drew to a close many fans of the show complained bitterly about the final season and finale. As Ien Ang wrote in Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination, another show with a huge worldwide viewership in the 1970s:

> "It is wrong, however, to pretend that the ideology of mass culture exercises dictatorial powers. The discourses of this ideology are very important, culturally legitimized organizers of the way in which the social meaning of Dallas is constructed, but alternative discourses do exist which offer alternative points of identification for lovers of Dallas." [2]

People construct their own meanings that the show's producers have no control over. They may agree or disagree with the decisions of the producers but they will still find a meaning

that is satisfactory for them. Even the violence and bleakness of the show can be interpreted in a positive way. I will take Game of Thrones at face value and look at what was actually produced and transmitted and examine possible meanings. I will argue that the series has subconscious elements which satisfy audiences frustrated with modern society, and even though good forces generally prevail, ultimately the moral of the tale is that one should not hand one's destiny over to 'great' leaders.

In this essay I will examine three questions: why do people watch Game of Thrones, is Game of Thrones an historical allegory? and, does Game of Thrones rise above being pure fantasy?

Why do people watch Game of Thrones?

Image on the right: Emilia Clarke as [Daenerys](#) Targaryen

One friend with the Game of Thrones box set revealed to me that she cried after watching the first episode of Season one because of its unremitting bleakness and didn't watch any more episodes after that. She couldn't find anything positive in the show, yet millions of people all over the world watched the show apparently finding it a worthwhile experience. The interest in Game of Thrones is similar to the interest in Romanticism in the mid nineteenth century. Disillusionment with society, a desire for a simpler life and a closer relationship with nature became the basis of a new Romantic culture and philosophy that spread across Europe.

What could a modern audience find positive in Game of Thrones in an era of mass production and international trade, alienation, disillusionment, ennui, gender confusion, and general dissatisfaction with governments, politicians and legal systems? In other words, in a world which is depressing enough already.

While the dramatic and sometimes very violent narrative holds the audience's attention, there are subconscious elements that add to the fascination with the show. These are taken-for-granted elements which add to the background authenticity of the drama. And authenticity seems to have been high up in the objectives of the show runners. There is an earthiness in the production values that make one constantly aware of faeces, dung, dirt, urine, blood and mud. Indeed some scenes seem to try and incorporate all these aspects in to one scene (like when Jaime is tied to a pole in captivity). These elements I will look at under the headings of (1) small scale production, (2) gender roles, and (3) justice and politics.

Small scale production – ('yesterday's bread and a "bowl o' brown"')

We are slowly drawn in and made aware that nothing in Game of Thrones can be taken for granted. There are no supermarkets or hardware stores. Small scale production is everywhere. Everything is made, grown, baked, forged, sewn, cooked, brewed or built before our eyes. This produces joy when made well and disgust when done badly (wine, bread, clothes, swords etc.) in the characters in the drama. However, when the characters are used to something bad they appreciate when something is good. In modern society the skills necessary to make things is taken out of our hands as production becomes more complex, standardised and automated.

We are alienated from production and are becoming more and more distant from the harvesting, gathering and production of our food and manufacture of our goods. It is really only at Christmas time that some of that sense of medieval production operates with baking, setting the fire, decorating the tree, wrapping presents and family games. Even then, consumption still plays a much larger role than production. However, the Romantic desire for a closer relationship with Nature and indigenous production is still strong and reveals itself in the burgeoning interest in nationalist ideas and politics.

Gender roles – ("I'm no Lady" – Brienne)

While the World Health Organization (WHO) defines gender roles as "socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women", we live in a society where traditional roles have been breaking down and definitions of masculinity and femininity are constantly changing. In Game of Thrones we follow the actions of men training, fighting and dying for 'causes'. We see women training and fighting too (Brienne and Arya), as exceptions, but in the main women are there to be protected, or in particular, through oaths taken by knights.

Again a simple and Romantic notion but one that is obviously appealing on a subconscious level as it is a consistent theme throughout all eight seasons. The main characters also have a sense of destiny, objectives and direction in their lives. In our society unemployment, alienation and high suicide rates among men, show that at the very least something is broken and people do not have the same sense of control over their own lives.

Justice and politics – (serving up oats and oaths)

Oaths are a big thing in the Game of Thrones. The taking and breaking of oaths will get you lauded (Brienne of Tarth) or hated by everyone (Jaime the Kingslayer). The seriousness with which oaths are taken is a sign of the importance given to personal integrity in the show. In real life oaths are also taken, e.g. in the USA members of parliament 'solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States' and in the UK members 'swear by Almighty God that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty'. However, we live in a society where MPs, committees, and task forces, do not take oaths seriously and are constantly found to be diluting bills, lying, and abusing the political system for self gain. This breeds much cynicism with politics and politicians especially as the justice system also seems to be loaded in their favour.

Not so, however, in the Game of Thrones, were justice is often meted out deftly and swiftly at the pointy end of a sword. Instant justice here may seem refreshing and satisfying compared to the real world of procrastinating judicial systems which breed cynicism regarding the 'lack of a death penalty', sentences perceived to be 'too light', or never-ending court cases.

Thus, Game of Thrones has many pared down and simplified aspects that give a temporary relief from complex, modern society. In Game of Thrones everyone is an artisan because everything has to be done or learned directly (swordsmanship, horse riding, copying books) or got from somebody with the necessary skills (wine, bread, smith).

Is Game of Thrones an historical allegory?

While it is known that Martin takes examples from history such as "Hadrian's Wall (which becomes Martin's Wall), the Roman Empire, and the legend of Atlantis (ancient Valyria), Byzantine Greek fire ("wildfire"), Icelandic sagas of the Viking Age (the Ironborn), the Mongol hordes (the Dothraki), the Hundred Years' War, and the Italian Renaissance", Game of Thrones is not a mish-mash of historical dramatic incidents. A certain logic is imposed on the narrative which is similar to a broad overview of human history. At first we have primitive society, then a combination of feudalism and slavery, then Enlightenment and bourgeois concepts of freedom and democracy with the future being left open to speculation.

Primitive society – ("We don't kneel for anyone beyond the Wall." – Mance Rayder)

Image below: [Martin](#) at LoneStarCon 3 (the 71st World Science Fiction Convention), 2013

The people who live north of the wall, called Wildlings, worship the Old Gods of the Forest which consist of nature spirits. Their sacred places were 'weirwood' trees, a deciduous tree similar in shape to the Oak tree. In Game of Thrones many of the weirwood trees were cut down during the violent invasion of the Andals who killed and replaced the First Men. These ideas are similar to the ancient traditions of the Celtic and Germanic people who worshipped sacred oaks, and also the modern concepts of the Kurgan peoples who are believed to have expanded throughout the Pontic–Caspian steppe and into Eastern Europe by the early 3rd millennium BC. These expansions are believed to have been violent military incursions that imposed a patriarchal warrior society on what were essentially peaceful matriarchal, egalitarian, nature-based communities. This resulted in slavery, extractivism and eventually the appearance of fortified settlements and hillforts and the graves of warrior-chieftains.

These early communities were destroyed but their culture survived down the centuries in remnants of nature-based traditions, stories and mythology. One story focuses on Saint Boniface, an Anglo-Saxon missionary, who cut down a sacred tree of the Germanic pagans, Donar's Oak. To add insult to injury the wood from the oak was then used to build a church

at the site dedicated to Saint Peter. In Game of Thrones, the awareness of the Old Gods survives as an active religion ("I swear it by the old gods and the new") whereas in real life the old gods are relegated to mythology, but their nature-based rites have survived until today as traditions (e.g. wassailing the apple trees, the Christmas tree, festivals of light, Easter eggs, bonfires etc.).

Feudalism and slavery – ("No man wants to be owned" – Daenerys Targaryen)

The Wildlings described themselves as free folk, not bound by the oaths and loyalties of the feudal hierarchical structure of society in the Seven Kingdoms. The 'turreted walls' described by Ovid above became associated with ideas of honourable monarchies and chivalry throughout feudal Europe. Yet they were essentially the descendants of the earlier hostile invaders. Bronn breaks this Romantic vision with more than a touch of historical realism when Jaime reacts to his request for Highgarden castle:

> "Jaime Lannister: Highgarden will never belong to a cutthroat. Bronn: No? Who were your ancestors, the ones who made your family rich? Fancy lads in silk? They were fucking cutthroats. That's how all the great houses started, isn't it? With a hard bastard who was good at killing people. Kill a few hundred people, they make you a lord. Kill a few thousand, they make you king. And then all your cocksucking grandsons can ruin the family with their cocksucking ways." [4]

Bronn's view of the rich echoes Jean Jacques Rousseau's Enlightenment analysis on the origins of inequality in society. In Discourse on Inequality, Rousseau writes:

> "The rich, in particular, must have felt how much they suffered by a constant state of war, of which they bore all the expense; and in which, though all risked their lives, they alone risked their property. Besides, however speciously they might disguise their usurpations, they knew that they were founded on precarious and false titles; so that, if others took from them by force what they themselves had gained by force, they would have no reason to complain." [3]
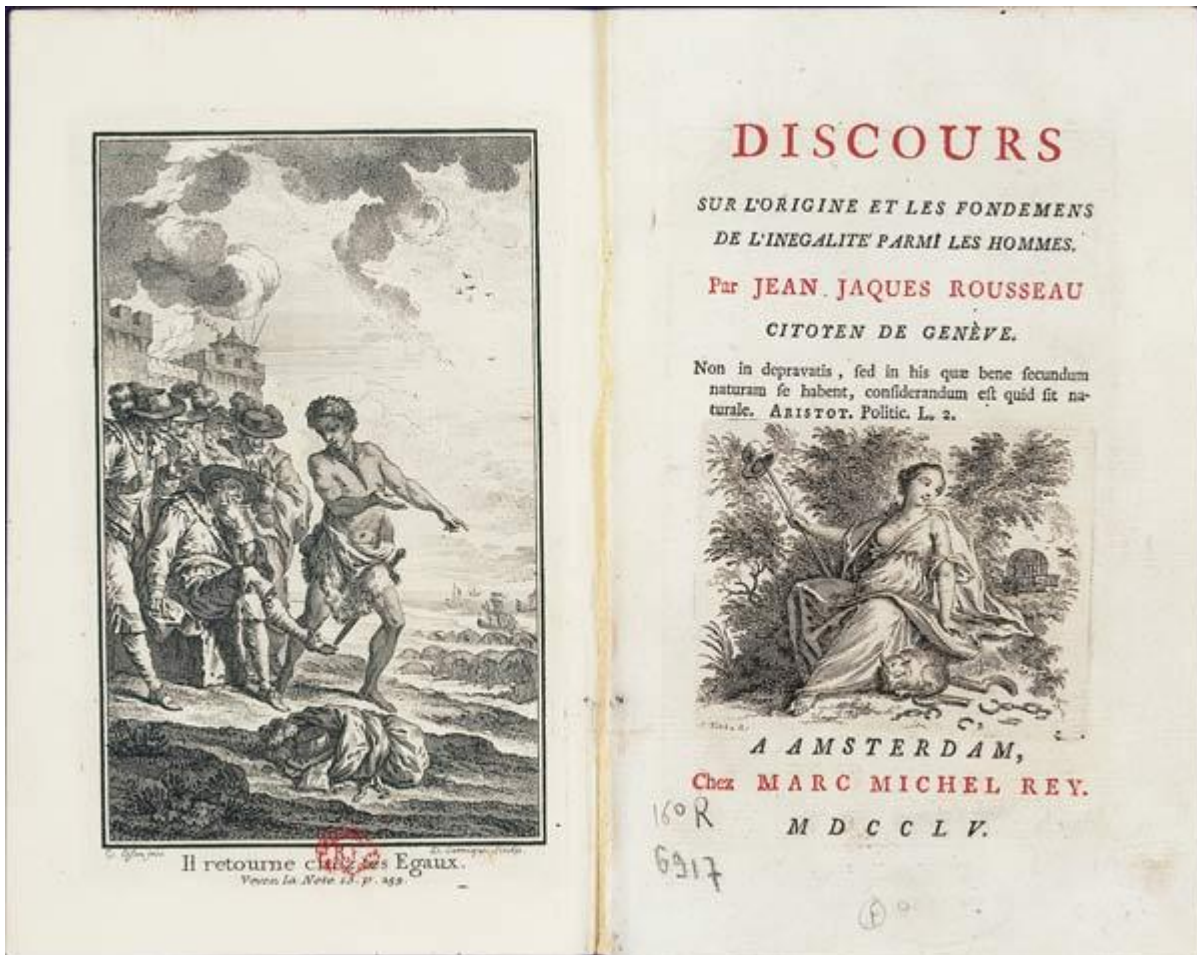
Rousseau (1755), *Discourse on Inequality*, Holland, frontispiece and title page

The Game of Thrones essentially echoes the medieval battles of different families in Europe for power and supremacy: forming alliances and borrowing money, as well as risking the perils of getting the church involved, as the Inquisition-like 'sparrow' movement demonstrated, working its way up the hierarchy to the very top. Having the Iron Bank, 'the most powerful financial institution in the Known World', backing you is also extremely important for survival. As Tywin Lannister states:

> "One stone crumbles and another takes its place and the temple holds its form for a thousand years or more. And that's what the Iron Bank is, a temple. We all live in its shadow and almost none of us know it. You can't run from them, you can't cheat them, you can't sway them with excuses. If you owe them money and you don't want to crumble yourself, you pay it back."

The Iron Bank always gets its due by switching sides to new kings who pay back the previous debt as well as the new loans given to them when claiming power. Similarly the central banks and the BIS (Bank for International Settlements) are looked after with bail-outs and bail-ins by generation after generation of politicians.

Image on the right: John Bradley as [Samwell](#) Tarly

Like the rise of humanism through the Renaissance and groups like the Florentine Camerata, Samwell Tarly goes to the ancient libraries and books for knowledge to solve fundamental problems in the face of dogma and ignorance. While in Europe the Enlightenment came through the ancient Greek texts, in the Game of Thrones, Enlightenment comes literally from the warm light of the south in the form of Daenerys Targaryen (who is known as the Breaker of Chains) as she brings mercy and freedom from slavery northwards, one town at a time. Known also as the Mother of Dragons, she has in her control an awesome source of power which aided her rise to power but was also her undoing: her three fire-breathing dragons. Thus we see the almost socialist continuum of the primitive communal ('old free') free folk, slavery, serfdom, and then the newly liberated ('new free') freed slaves who scrawled 'Death to the Masters' on their city walls.

Enlightenment and democracy – ("Chaos is a ladder" – Petyr Baelish)

Victory comes to Daenerys in the battle for King's Landing as she uses the dragons to destroy the city and burn the inhabitants alive even though the city had surrendered to her. Her liberated slave army also killed many citizens under her orders. When the war is finished she [rallies](#) her troops "proclaiming that they will continue to 'liberate' the rest of the world as they did for King's Landing and "break the wheel" to free all the common folk from their rulers, whom she perceives as tyrants."

Daenerys Targaryen's black leather costume and blond hair are reminiscent of the Nazi leaders' uniforms and Aryan ideology (Targ-Aryan?). After her speech she is confronted by Jon (lover, nephew and competitor for the Iron Throne) about the genocide she has carried out. They disagree on what is good: to build a new world, Daenerys wants to destroy the old one, while Jon argues for mercy and forgiveness. Realising she was not going to change, Jon plunges a knife in her heart and kills her. The burning of the city using overwhelming firepower is reminiscent of Hitler's bombing campaign against the United Kingdom in 1940 and 1941. However, the 'democratic' countries were not immune to similar strategies as the British/American aerial bombing attack on the city of Dresden in 1945 – 3,900 tons of high-

explosive bombs and incendiary devices were dropped on the city killing an estimated 22,700 to 25,000 people. Thus it is shown that even the 'good' can be guilty of extreme measures to achieve political aims.

The surviving main leaders of the the Kingdoms gather and Tyrion proposes that all future monarchs be chosen by Westerosi leaders. They elect Bran the Broken to be leader as he cannot have children, thus finally breaking the wheel of hereditary titles and bringing in democracy of the nineteenth century type where only the elites can vote. Samwell Tarly suggests a much broader base for the voting:

> ""Maybe the decision about what's best for everyone should be left to … well, everyone."
> "Maybe we should give the dogs a vote as well," laughs Bronze Yohn Royce."

This disrespect for the masses echoes modern democracy whereby the gap between the people's desires and their elected representatives' promises always remains very wide.

The series ends with the new cabinet squabbling, while Jon heads north and the Danaerys' Unsullied army sails away.

So, this historical time track is truncated in the narrative of Game of Thrones, which allows them to work together and learn from each other (e.g. unity in the Great War against the Army of the Dead, the Wildlings slagging off the others as 'kneelers').

Does Game of Thrones transcend fantasy?

The constant push for shocking drama in each episode, especially as the series headed for its grand finale could lead one to believe that the overriding mantra of the show was that effect was more important than affect. Much science fiction and fantasy literature stays within the narrow worlds created, and encourages never-ending adolescence and nerd-like awareness of every detail, accompanied by board games and comic cons.

Storytelling – (Stark raven madness)

While effect is an important aspect to the excitement generated by Game of Thrones, Martin believes in the power of story telling. Within the narrative many of the characters tell stories to explain their ideas or situation. There is also a meta element to the narrative as Martin uses the idea of storytelling in three different ways. At first, there is the play-within-a-play, with the medieval retelling of the poisoning of Joffrey and Tyrion's patricide, called The Bloody Hand. The play is a farce and Arya, who happens upon the play, is disgusted at the humorous portrayal of the beheading of her father. The play allows Martin to have a little bit of fun with his own serious narrative, while at the same time showing how recent elite events can be satirised 'from below' by rebellious commoners, or become 'false news' propagated by elite competitors. It is also possible he is satirising the po-faced pretentiousness and egoism of many fantasy and science fiction narratives.

Image on the left Peter Dinklage as Tyrion Lannister

Secondly, Martin has Tyrion extol the importance of storytelling as the memory of society itself:

> "Tyrion Lannister: What unites people? Armies? Gold? Flags? Stories. There's nothing more powerful than a good story. Nothing can stop it. No enemy can defeat it. And who has a better story than Bran the Broken? The boy who fell from a high tower and lived. He knew he'd never walk again, so he learned to fly. He crossed beyond the Wall, a crippled boy, and became the Three-Eyed Raven. He is our memory, the keeper of all our stories. The wars, weddings, births, massacres, famines. Our triumphs, our defeats, our past. Who better to lead us into the future?"

Thirdly, the power of storytelling is also demonstrated by the power of inclusion or exclusion in a funny scene where Tyrion is presented with a large book describing recent history (and an ad for the Martin's book, *A Song of Ice and Fire*):

> "Tyrion Lannister: [sees a large book placed in front of him] What's this?
> Samwell Tarly: A Song of Ice and Fire. Archmaester Ebrose's history of the wars following the death of King Robert. I helped him with the title.
> Tyrion Lannister: [flips through pages] I suppose I come in for some heavy criticism.
> Samwell Tarly: Oh, I wouldn't say that.
> Tyrion Lannister: Oh, he's kind to me. Never would've guessed. [Sam doesn't reply] He's not kind?
> Samwell Tarly: He…
> Tyrion Lannister: He what? What does he say about me?
> Samwell Tarly: …I don't believe you're mentioned, ahem."

The tragic ending for Daenerys Targaryen, who audiences believed to be good, was an important moment for George R.R. Martin's views on good storytelling.

Genocide – ("the true horrors of human history")

Martin talked about fellow fantasy writer Tolkien's less than critical attitude towards his own characters:

> "George RR Martin pointed out that Tolkien believed if there was a good ruler, like King Aragorn at the end of The Lord of the Rings, then things would be okay. However, Martin disagreed saying: "You can be a really decent human being … you can have the noblest of intentions, and your reign can still be horribly screwed up. He did what he wanted to do very brilliantly but … I look at the end and it says Aragorn is the king and he says, 'And Aragorn ruled wisely and well for 100 years'. It's easy to write that sentence…but I want to know what was his tax policy and what did he do when famine struck the land. And what did he do with all those Orcs? A lot of Orcs left over. They weren't all killed, they ran away into the mountains. Did Aragorn carry out a policy of systematic Orc genocide?"

Martin believes that "the true horrors of human history derive not from orcs and Dark Lords, but from ourselves." He writes in a genre in which there is the constant, predictable battle between good and evil. However, in Game of Thrones we see, among others, the demonisation of (the good) Daenerys and the valorisation of (the bad) Jaime, demonstrating that questions of redemption and character change are an important part of Martin's stories. The changes we see in the main heroine of the show demonstrate Martin's reluctance to have only worn-out black and white, good and evil depictions of morality and instead he depicts the human psyche in all its dialectical processes.

Conclusion

This makes the series ending narrative perfectly logical, except for the fans who invested too much in the concept of a 'good' leader. Our leaders promise everything from employment and better social welfare to resolving the climate change crisis, yet when elected, continue with economic and political agendas which benefit only a tiny elite. George R.R. Martin's point is to get the legions of superhero fans to stop looking for a 'saviour' and start looking to themselves to solve society's problems. How much more plainly can it be put?

*

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Notes:

[1] Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (John Hopkins: Baltimore, 1997) p.63

[2] Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (Routledge: London, 1991) p.111

[3] Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality* (Oxford Uni Press: Oxford, 1994) p.67

[4] Game of Thrones – Season 8 Episode 4: 'The Last Of The Starks'

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