

The Shape of Power and of Pain in *Game of Thrones*

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Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys reason; Evil is the active springing from Energy.

Good is heaven. Evil is hell.

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (A Song of Liberty)*, 1790.

Introduction

In the following essay, I wanted to explore the usefulness of Darko Suvin's concept of "antiutopianism" as a "new territory" in the fields of popular culture. Suvin argues that the hyphen which once helped distinguish anti-utopianism as that which threw itself against utopia, is no longer needed.¹ We now have antiutopianism as a thing in itself, antiutopianism without utopia in much the same way as we have anti-communism without communists. Taking this concept and the argument which lies beneath it into an analysis of the television series *Game of Thrones* may help explain its epic satisfaction with itself, its habit of withholding or denying hope in the name of a "realism" anchored in violence and suffering. Both the series' own popularity and longevity, and the turn towards darkness it epitomizes in contemporary Fantasy, position *Game of Thrones* as a useful test case for this exploration.

The following is divided into two sections, the first of which provides an analysis of the workings of “power” in *Game of Thrones*, in particular the alienation of *power* from *values*, a separation which gives power its peculiar cast in the program, and secondly, an attempt to identify how the narrative form of the TV drama could itself be described as working in antiutopian ways.

Section One: Antiutopianism as an architecture of power in *Game of Thrones*

In a 2017 interview, one given as they were creating the 8th and final season of *Game of Thrones*, the drama’s two “showrunners” stressed that what drew them to George R. R. Martin was his novels’ reliance on the enduring centrality of political realism in understanding human life. David Benioff described the pull of Martin’s *Ice and Fire* series as the centrality it accorded to “power”: Martin’s novels are “about people, and power, and the pursuit of power, and how that affects those without power.” D. B. Weiss added that there is “a reason you can still read Thucydides today and it still makes sense to you thousands of years later. Because people fundamentally haven’t changed that much in the past couple thousand years.”² The showrunners’ anchoring of the series in this Thucydidean notion of political realism serves the drama well, lending it an internal coherence and self-satisfaction in its worldview, the proffering of truths hard-won from the grip of sentimentality and idealism. In effect, this long-duration view of class-society domination based on violence transmutes every individual encounter – no matter how “micro” – into an allegory of the irresistible play of the strong against the weak, the Hobbesian “warre...of every man, against every man.”³

However it does not follow, as political science scholar Ronnie Olesker suggests, that the showrunners’ stress on power means that “the show is about politics.”⁴ I am going to disagree

with his analysis by noting the absence of “values” from the world-building project of *Game of Thrones*. Power, and the struggle for power which constitutes the plot in *Game of Thrones*, is neatly and absolutely cut off from any properly ideological struggle over values. The “realism” of this new phase of Fantasy fiction, this “grimdark” phase,⁵ is premised on an antiutopian refusal of conflictual politics, those say which might be generated between the values and interests of antagonistic societal groups or classes. I shall return to this after discussing the emplotting of power.

The popularity of *Game of Thrones* will here be taken as an important reason for considering it, though more as a problem than justification.⁶ There is nothing to be gained by dismissing *Game of Thrones* or the type of Fantasy it exemplifies as ideologically nasty or neoliberal or even unworthy of serious attention. The series’ popularity, and its own self-image as a story ripe with realism about the “human condition,” suggests that paying it closer attention might result in an understanding of the attraction it exerts which could be more helpful than a dismissal could ever be. The question we will consider is whether *Game of Thrones* can be thought of as an antiutopian narrative. It will be my argument that we can read the popularity of the series not - or not only - as an index of the resurgence of epic Fantasy in the twenty-first century but as the triumph (momentary?) of an antiutopian understanding of power.

To do this, we need to turn from the series’ commercial success to consider its narrative success. To dwell on *Game of Thrones* as a narrative is no small job, so we will only be able to touch on it here. The first thing to be noted is the complexity and bustle of that narrative. In the novels, the 1000s of named “characters” generate a narrative confidence that all life is here.⁷ The TV drama kills off most of these characters but still works with an unusually large list of 550 cast members. Its own confidence that its capacity for life – for representing all of life – is great is signalled by the opening credits’ use of a peculiar map, an aerial view of a map, rather than the faces or actions of the protagonists, to index its contents.

Take a moment to dwell on those opening credits. They remain the same for each of the eight series but contain variations in terms of which power is “up” and which “down” in any particular one series. The credits open with a moving image of an armillary sphere or spherical astrolabe which has a sun as its centre, a centre which secures the orbit of the celestial bodies whose paths are tracked around it. These spheres were once used to trace out the movements of the stars and planets in ways which helped chart the turn of the seasons. In the opening credits of *Game of Thrones*, it is history which is charted or tracked by these elegant thin blades circling the interior sun, the history of the Houses of Westeros and of the larger continent to its East. That history here takes the appearance of a map. That it is history transmuted into a geography which has as its primary features borders and names, is itself telling of the series’ impatience with things which cannot be so easily figured. The astrolabe spins and as it does, it casts a light on this map, a light which tracks cities and castles appearing as clockwork mechanisms, rising and falling in three dimensions as necessary when the map is moved to focus now on Kings Landing, now on Winterfell, now on the Wall or the free city of Pentos. The design of the opening credits would thus position them as allegorical in nature: the impersonal forces of what must become destiny (a thing which transcends history) rise and fall along their predetermined orbit, their effect glancing across a terrestrial world which cannot escape them. A second allegorical level has also been created by the popularity of the series, the opening credits (and their musical articulation) standing at this level for entertainment, recognition, anticipation and success itself.

Kate Marshall wrote of the opening credits that they “contain perfectly distilled expressions” of the show’s core qualities. They are suggestive “of costly production, of the metonymic quality of the world created by the show, and of the idea that there are forces at work in this world that exceed the capacities of character.” I would suggest that this latter is too much of

an understatement. The “forces at work” compel and break characters in a manner which suggests that characters have but one capacity – to suffer or to make others suffer.⁸

In an unusual move for a HBO drama, the opening credits show no image of any of the actors who make up the core cast of *Game of Thrones*. The names of some actors appear superimposed on the credits. They are the actors who play the protagonists Bran, Jon, Arya, Sansa, Catelyn, Eddard – all members of House Stark in Westeros – and Daenerys Targaryen in Essos, supposed last surviving member of the House Targaryen. The story’s totality comes into view as the interaction of these inhabitants of a House with the actions of other Houses, principally House Baratheon and House Lannister. The Houses are the core narrative agents. They unify past, present and future, mapping the time of the epic as much as they carve out the territorial spaces of Westeros. Each House is a territorial site which is also a familial and historical relationship, and a social place or status. The Houses themselves act as history-sinks, they are the places where history is concentrated; however, that concentration happens in such a way as to render history itself unreadable except as a pattern of the rise and fall of power blocs.

The character spaces necessary to mark out room for these family individuals are not generated by the narrative as anything other than a chink, a mark within the extant map. The map of the game is composed of the Houses of the great Lords, and their lands and influence. These Houses are the institutional equivalent of feudal lordships – each has its own region and its own “bannermen” and “small-folk,” or serfs, the latter tied by proximity as much as (if not more) by allegiance. But where the absolutisms of Medieval Europe were a complex assemblage of both institutions and cultures, *Game of Thrones* discards culture and volatilizes the institutions in a game of incessant conflict over a Throne which stands only for itself, for rule, a seat to be occupied by whomsoever wins the game for it. As the Iron Throne is a centripetal force for the narrative (and the central dynamic of any allegory generated by that

narrative), there is no aspect of the totality of the game of thrones which is not governed by it – either politically or hermeneutically. Anything which does not fall within the orbit of the Iron Throne (the orbit of a shrunken notion of power) does not count in any narratively significant way. Hence, for example, the agricultural economies, the trading patterns, the elimination of slavery from Westeros itself (and the stigma associated with slavery), are there as curiosities or contexts without meaning.

The series does have over 500 named characters but they are not scattered across their own lives but rather across the lives of these Houses. Their existence as characters is mediated strongly by the central protagonists whose own existence is contingent on their geo-social space within a system of such spaces. As the agential space of each House is organized hierarchically as well as spatially, the impression of a dense and bustling population in the *Game of Thrones* as a story-world is a sleight of hand: we are in the sparsely populated world of the noble lords and ladies of the Houses of the Seven Kingdoms. The knitting together of what remains a significant number of named characters is rendered possible by both the agency of the Houses as narrative units, and by the narrative reliance on what unifies the Houses, land or their shared existence in a territorial unit which is also a military unit. The Houses are the Kingdom and give shape to the Kingdom – as they will continue to do when the Kingdom collapses into warring Kingdoms otherwise known as warring Houses.

This is clearest in what happens in Essos, a land to the East of Westeros, and one where sovereignty is very differently configured. Yet the viewer's experience of this vast continent complete with all its internal variations, is dramatized via the centripetal force of the Iron Thrones as exercised through the Targaryens, brother and sister in exile from the King they know as a "usurper." As the last (known) surviving Targaryens either die or ascend to power, their journey through Essos winds through "free cities," "slave states" and the nomadic-warrior cultures of the Dothraki, all existing along a map strongly reminiscent of archaic

Greece and Asia Minor. None of these different orders of sovereignty and cohabitation leave their mark on the story however. They function as motivators of a plot determined to get an army – and hence power – for Daenerys Targaryen, places to be moved through without any alteration either of House Targaryen or the lands of Essos.

No one character is as important as their House in terms of narrative agency: historically and as determining narrative events, the Houses are the protagonists and each character is a “minor character” who takes on the burden or the glory of “representing” their Houses in moments of short-lived centrality. The phrase and the concept of “minor character” is taken from Alex Woloch’s *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (2003). If it is objected that a TV series as a rule will have characters who appear “flat,” then I would say that the excessive flatness of the named population of *Game of Thrones* is itself not a property of the medium of television but of a narrative which prioritizes plot over all else.⁹ This would not be worth noting if the plot was not itself abstractly about relations of domination. What is at stake in the power over which all fight or are injured by is not clear, nor is it meant to be. Rule is its own philosophy and its own politics and is signalled as such. In other words, for viewers as much as for the story itself, what “power” means is supposedly self-evident and self-explanatory. This is the thin domain of the plot: its richness comes not from anything intrinsic to itself but from the variations in its repetition, variations which, however brutally but superficially different, underline and render heavy the pattern of power itself. It is inescapable and allows of no choice except be dominated or dominate.

What does this thinness do to the series’ conceptualisation of power? The term “power” itself is rarely used across its conflicts: it is “rule” rather which is the self-image of power in the program. Rule takes two forms: rule “by right” which occurs when power passes

from one Head of a House to a “true born” heir, and rule “by conquest.” Given the plot’s dependence on challenges to the Throne (by Series Two, there are five who claim the status of “King,” and the term “usurper” is bandied around a great deal), the program’s lack of interest in what constitutes any right to rule seems studied. It is truly surprising that the series manages to evade any exploration of both rule-by-right and rule-by-conquest, of the contradiction between these two modes, and in particular of how any one rule can be more legitimate than any other. In his exploration of the capacity of Elizabethan and Jacobin tragic form to radically dissolve the legitimacy of absolutist rule, Franco Moretti argued that tragedy “disentitled the absolute monarch to all ethical and rational legitimation.”¹⁰ For Moretti, there were of course “profound historical reasons” at work to make “the conflict of ideas” so potentially lethal for European forms of absolutism: the consequent centrality of “the cultural process by which power is legitimated” was there a “decisive matter.”¹¹ Though our drama, *Game of Thrones*, emerges out of our own historical moment, one long hostile to tragedy, our series’ indifference to values – the values underpinning the legitimacy of rule in particular – is striking. The violence which power is increasingly assimilated to across the arc of the eight seasons moves between offensive and defensive violence but never moves to an arena which throws either violence, or the power in whose name it is exercised, into question.

A great deal of the series’ infamous “cruelty” – a predictably reliable and indeed eventually monotonous cruelty which should point up the illusory nature of the show’s equally famed “un-predictability” – stems from the irrelevance of character. Time sunk in a character is time sunk in a failing investment: the survival – flourishing or weakening – of the Houses secures the past, present and future of the plot. This is the point at which we can see how redundant conflict, in any deeper sense, is in a series which seems to exist only in conflict. It is conflict however of a peculiar type: it is a competition for power yet a power

peculiarly severed from values. Michael Szalay comments on the disposability and the interchangeability of the series' characters when he writes of how the

ceaseless competition that is the warp and woof of the series – however visceral and brutal, however seemingly wedded to the archaic – takes place in the service of fungible abstractions. *Game of Thrones* packages its feudal houses with their own trademarks (sigils) and their own distinctive set of virtues and liabilities: the Starks are honorable if self-defeating; the Lannisters are ruthless and beautiful.

The “honourable if self-defeating” Starks, the “ruthless and beautiful” Lannisters, belong to the same cognitive and cultural universe, one in which there is no possibility of conflict over values: “No one house is intrinsically better than any other, ” concludes Szalay.¹²



Fig. 1

The image in Fig. 1 illustrates how things stand at the opening of Series One. By Series 8, not much has changed except who now has overall rule. The colors on the map change not the borders or what they indicate about the *a priori* presence of absolutist rule in the very conception of the map.

What the map does not show is the centrality of journeying to the narrative: everyone moves, voluntarily or involuntarily, and this movement marks how a plot so thin can not only keep going but keep generating the encounters, and their violence, which turns that thinness into the foundation for the appearance of a densely populated, busy and “epic” story. This constant movement and the events it entails lends itself to the show’s impression of bustle, of constant change, of unpredictability as the note subtending the whole: so many upsets on

journeys which involve so much danger. But the upsets, the journeys, the dangers, and the unpredictable events with their unpredictable consequences do not change the nature of the whole which remains grimly and darkly the same: the Houses of the “great” or “noble” families scheme, ally, battle to hold onto their power or to extend their power or to see off threats to their power. Yet this all takes place on lands which are otherwise empty of drama, including all the drama of the labor necessary for the whole to go on. Rule is its own reason, irresistible and inevitable.

Section Two: Love hurts but so does everything else

Power is used in *Game of Thrones* as something which is dynamically necessary (without the quest for power, there is no plot), yet it is a power ripped away from any set of values or social interests, a power at once fluid (anyone can make a grab for it) and absolute (no-one can escape its reach); yet all this does not yet mean that *Game of Thrones* is an antiutopian narrative. Its conceptualisation of power as irresistible and inevitable is a notion most at home in Social Darwinist understandings of history and of the humans who are, to it, the raw material of that history. But the story *form* which undertakes to set this notion of power into play as a narrative force is a peculiar antiutopianism – one which works not by disputing or maligning any form of utopia but by simply omitting it entirely. Neither in the reigns of the past nor those suggested for the future in the ascendance to rule of Bran the Broken, Bran who holds both past and future in his frail self, is utopia an echo or a hint. The invisible infrastructure which reproduces the social hierarchy, and the conceptual machinery which embeds the “high-born” and the “low-born” into a universe of suffering open to magic, and the contingencies and chances wrought by violent death, are immune to any question and any thought that things could be improved upon: things can get worse but not better.

The sheer extent, the scale and the scope of this evasion or refusal of a “better” resolution, a “happier” ending, does suggest however that what is at work here is a narrative determined to keep utopia out of the picture, precisely an antiutopian narrative. At this more abstract level, *Game of Thrones* is the most important sort of antiutopia – it renders legible and popular not a thematic anti-utopianism but rather an antiutopianism which blocks utopia from the story-world entirely by insisting that power can legitimise itself only via the efficacy of its violent exercise, and that only the getting of this power - the keeping of it, the pursuing of it - can move a plot.¹³

How does this understanding of antiutopianism relate to utopian studies? Dystopian fiction, up until relatively recently, has had a relationship with ideas of utopia. The dystopia may be “anti-utopian” in so far as it dramatizes the corruption which might occur when attempts to make a better life fall into authoritarianism and standardisation. Or the dystopia may be a future haunted by ideas of a better world, a “critical dystopia.” A fiction which has no use for utopia at all, one in which there is no object of parody or satire but only a relentless, serious, pragmatic insistence that this is the way things are, suggests a new narrative form for antiutopianism, one which acts as though it has vanquished utopia itself.

Can Fantasy fictions be antiutopian? Not in the same way as dystopian fictions whose historical existence is premised on the possibility of utopian politics – to be feared or fiercely engaged or yearned for. But Fantasy fictions have their own “critical” moment, their own internal variegation of generic movements. *Game of Thrones* situates itself in the “epic” mode, alongside but in opposition to *The Lord of the Rings*. As with the latter, it has a whole world to be explored, unlike the latter, it refuses any reconciliation or redemption of that world as a whole in favor of a “dark realism,” a generic position which has been called “grimdark.” *Game of Thrones* as an iconic piece of grimdark fiction suggests that we live in a time where a utopian story might be thought of as incredible, as utterly unbelievable in other

words and unthinkable, but an antiutopian story is a “realist” one. In this final section, I wish briefly to draw attention to both how the purported “realism” of the series works, and to offer a suggestion as to how we might read this realism as antiutopian.

The admired “realism” of *Game of Thrones* rests on the story-world’s easy way with unpredictability. In this story-world there is a reliance on a very predictable *realpolitik* to create the plausibility of the text’s premise that life itself is hard, cruel, unfair. Trust no-one. If you love, know that love will bring you pain. Anything not visibly and always instrumentalized in the pursuit of power is suspect: these things – loyalty, honor, duty – are too easily the covers for darker things to crawl under. “Family” is the name for those relations most to be relied on, to be trusted, but remember, love will bring you pain. Familial love also weakens you, provides your enemies with a map to your weaknesses, and provides you yourself with reasons to ruin yourself.

One example: in their introduction to their edited collection, *Women of Ice and Fire* (2016), Anne Gjelsvik and Rikke Schubart write that Martin drew on

both social realism and historical fiction, turning his genre writing into pitch-black fantasy, which holds torture, terror, sexual abuse, murder, and suffering; elements that are accentuated and expanded in the HBO adaptation ... Dark fantasy is commonly understood as fantasy with a horror-like atmosphere, or horror with supernatural elements. Here, however, “darkness” is in excruciating realism, in the numerous, overwhelming facts and details, and the undeterred focus on pain, pathological behavior, and death.¹⁴

What is important here is the “excruciating realism” Gjelsvik and Schubart find a property of the program (they are not alone but I will let their words stand as exemplary rather than list more examples). The key question here must be how this “realism” gain its effects? This is a question which cannot be answered solely by a textual examination. It must look to the world in which this text found so much purchase: what are the logics of transmedia or multimedia cultures, and of the cultures of celebrity and of success, in which a story so brutally shorn of anything resembling “hope” or even “happiness” was yet so successful?¹⁵ We do however need to start inductively, we need to start with the text itself.

I would suggest that the narrative works as the intertwining of two levels: the intimate or personal level is the level at which decisions are made from love, from moral codes, from a drive for vengeance, or from the acknowledged cruelty of personal whim. Level one is where the frequent violence of sexual relations and the ceaseless pain of family relations have their primary place. Level two is where the same decisions are caught up and transformed by the forces and relations of power-bases to become earth-shaking, to become history. Robert Baratheon loved Lyanna Stark. She didn't love him but loved another. This is also the story of Robert Baratheon's rebellion, his defeat of the Targaryens and the institution of his rule, a rule which collapses in a new round of strife, war and carnage.

Again, Eddard Stark shows mercy to Cersei Lannister and gives her time to flee with her children before King Robert is told that they are not his children. Would that Stark have not given her time: his own children and many more may have lived. When at the close of episode one, Series One, Jamie Lannister pushes the child Bran Stark out of a window, he mockingly calls attention to “ ‘the things I do for love.’ ” He may mock but he does push the child, and as the episodes and series mount up, so too do the examples. The things done “for love” are but one measure of the brutality people are capable of – especially parents and lovers – but it is a particularly rich or blood-soaked measure.

Jamie Lannister's position is unambivalent: he loves his sister and has fathered her three children behind the back of her husband, the King. Any discovery of their relationship would destroy his sister and their children. Cersei Lannister's repeated phrase – "He saw us" – indicates her need for her brother to act. The two of them push the child out the window. Thus begins the breach between House Lannister and House Stark, a breach which will be part of the cause and consequence of the series of disasters at King's Landing, the Capital of the Seven Kingdoms, a series which ends in civil war. "Love," whether romantic or familial is both vehicle and tenor at key moments, and thus "humanizes" the motor of the plot, a motor which if left to itself might become an unbearably naked reiteration of the premises of Social Darwinism: the weak suffer, the strong survive.

An intertwining of the private and the political is not unique to the narrative work of Fantasy nor to fiction itself but when the political is anchored by the personal, when it becomes always the expression, never the goal, then we are in the realm of something odd. In *Game of Thrones*, people are at heart hard in pursuit of what they desire or wish to protect from the desires of others. If politics is an expression of people, then there is only hardness.

Is this narrative twinning, knitting, plaiting the source of the famed instability? An instability or unpredictability which is thin but effective. Everyone will die, nearly. See John Lanchester's claim: "What this all boils down to is that in the world of these stories, you are given something that is extremely rare in a mass-market form: you genuinely don't know what's going to happen next."¹⁶ The question might be "does this matter?" The answer would have to be, no: this is not a programme interesting in mattering. It is cynical about itself. But because of that, that pervasive cynicism, it does indeed matter. Care for people, culture in a deeper sense, does not matter. Revel in it. This is the success of *Game of Thrones'* antiutopianism. Think for a moment of how viewers cannot but see the resemblance between House Stark and House Lannister as it is brought into play when confronted with its limit: the

Brotherhood on the Wall. On the Wall, there are only brothers and an austere duty without trappings. The saying of the Brothers on the Wall that “love is the death of duty” is an explanation of why they are not allowed to marry, father children or see their old families. It is also an inflation of the self-image of the series itself: love hurts. More critically the hurt of love “explains” how humans are “weak” and how the strong both can exploit that “weakness,” and themselves be made weak.

This is key to understanding the true antiutopianism of the series as the key to its success in the world: love hurts and love is dangerous. Love weakens you. Love is a burden: it must be used sparingly. It is in the relationship of Cersei and Jamie Lannister, however, that the taboo on loving recklessly or carelessly becomes most tangible. Their incestuous relationship – though given vague historical precedence in the notorious incestual relations of the Targaryens – is the perfect embodiment of the careful hoarding of love as a resource. That both Lannisters get to die without one having killed the other, that they die moreover together, in each other’s arms, is the closest *Game of Thrones* gets to the shape of a “happy ending.” That such a resolution – or avoidance of a reckoning – was possible to these two suggests the program’s own scorn for love. This merging of the sexual and the familial into a singular relationship which cannot speak itself but is all the more potent for that, a relationship which has in it as much brutality as it has desire, as much shame, despair and fear as it has sexual satisfaction, richly summarizes the stunted, broken notion of love the program must work with to make its realism plausible.

Conclusion

The hoarding of love and of care, the careful rationing of these human capacities so that any leakage of them into areas of vulnerability or weakness may be avoided, is part and parcel of

the drama's understanding of the fragility of human life and the dispensability of human relations. Viewers are positioned as knowing this: a grim nod of recognition is the expected response to each escalation of horror, to the "unexpected" death of each major character or the gross, frequently senseless violation of the bodies and lives of innumerable unnamed others. *Game of Thrones* "makes an art out of audience heartbreak" is the opening statement of one of the many blog-posts on the series.¹⁷ Whilst there are indeed multiple opportunities to be "heartbroken," it is questionable if the breaking of hearts is as desired by the series as the hardening of hearts. If that hardness is its own form of heartbreak – holding back from the suffering of the world was the one type of suffering Kafka told us should be avoided – the series has no vocabulary for that or is entirely indifferent to it.¹⁸ In his brief analysis of the series' easy way with violence, its "nihilistic refusal of meaning," Gerry Canavan describes the series' conclusion thus:

[i]n the end there was no moral order to any of this, no extratextual logic of "good guys" and "bad guys" to make some war crimes holy and others devilish; instead, we saw how believing in the nonsense of nations and leaders and destinies and heroes compromises us, deranges us – turning people into fools who will not only support murder and torture and mutilation and death-from-the-skies and every other conceivable atrocity in the name of the lie they have bent the knee too, but who will become furious with you when you show incontrovertible proof that the Great Men and Women they've been cheering for were monsters all along.¹⁹

Foolish indeed to “believe in” the necessity of “nations and leaders and destinies and heroes” but the program does not thereby release us from that necessity: nations and leaders will disappoint, destroy or abandon you but that does not mean they can be dispensed with. Only “belief in” these things is dispensable and arguably easily disposable. The program leaves the things themselves, above all the immutability of rule, terrible but inescapable, inevitable. None of these things require “belief” that is, they just are, things extant but without value, and in no real need of anything from those who have no choice but to exist in their orbit. This indeed is the converse of utopia: utopia is the thing which is precisely not extant and which is saturated in value, contingent on those beliefs we term political for its very existence no matter how faint that latter might be.

¹ In the essay, “Utopia or Bust” (2019) Suvin writes “Antiutopia is a targeted ideologico-political use of a closed horizon not simply to refute or ridicule, but to render unthinkable both the eutopia of a better possible world and the dystopia as awful warning about the writer's and readers' present tendencies, thus to stifle the right to dissent and to strive for radical novelty, to dismantle any possibility of plebeian democracy.” Suvin, *Disputing the Deluge: Collected 21st-Century Writings on Utopia, Narration and Survival*, ed. Hugh C. O'Connell (London, Bloomsbury, 2022), p. 301.

² The TV series creators, D.B. Weiss and David Benioff, in an interview with *Time Magazine* (July 11, 2017), <https://time.com/4791793/game-of-thrones-season-7-david-benioff-d-b-weiss/>

³ Gregory Cranes notes that Thucydides’ “influence on modern political thought begins already with Thomas Hobbes, whose first major work was a translation of Thucydides, and on whose thought Thucydidean influence was substantial. The famous “Athenian thesis” of Thucydides 1.76—that “honor, fear, and profit” (as Hobbes translates *timê*, *deos*, and *ôphelia*) drive all human beings—reappears in the most influential passage that Hobbes ever wrote. The thirteenth chapter of *Leviathan* varies the language, but not the substance, of Thucydides, citing “competition,” “diffidence,” and “glory” as the three primary human motivations. Hobbes attributes to this triad his famous war of every man against every man, which is the natural state of humanity.”

Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: The Limits of Political Realism* (Oakland, University of California Press, 1998), p. 62.

⁴ Olesker, Ronnie (2020), “Chaos is a Ladder: a Study of Identity, Norms and Power Transition in the Game of Thrones Universe,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 22 (1), p. 48. DOI: 10.1177/1369148119885065

⁵ “Grimdark” is a term frequently used to name a type of Fantasy writing which puts itself into a hostile position to Tolkienian fantasy. George R. R. Martin’s novel sequence, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996 - ongoing) is usually given as one of its founding texts. It is well enough established in 2023 to both have a magazine dedicated to it - <https://www.grimdarkmagazine.com/> - and for its death to have been announced. See Aidan Moher’s short essay “Thinking out loud about grimdark,” (Feb. 27th, 2015), <https://medium.com/a-dribble-of-ink/let-s-unpack-grimdark-8aedb13a5e9f> Whether the term will survive as the name for a specific sub-genre is not yet clear but what is clear is the specificity of the tendency it describes. René Schalleger traces the development of that tendency in his essay “The Nightmares of Politicians: On the Rise of Fantasy Literature from Subcultural to Mass-cultural Phenomenon,” in Lars Schmeink and Astrid Böger (eds) *Collision of Realities: Establishing Research on the Fantastic in Europe* (Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2012).

⁶ *Game of Thrones* has benefitted both from positioning itself as part of the transmedia story-telling world of the twenty-first century, and as a long-form television serial drama, a mode which was new to that world. See Alexander Sergeant (2021), “Across the Narrow Screen: Televisual World-Building in *Game of Thrones*,” in *Screen* Vol. 62:2, pp. 193- for more details on the astronomical commercial success of this cross-over. doi:10.1093/screen/hjab020

⁷ Thomas Gessey-Jones, Colm Connaughton, Robin Dunbar and Joseph Yose, (Nov. 2020), “Narrative structure of *A Song of Ice and Fire*” in *National Academy of Sciences Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2006465117>

⁸ Kate Marshall, “Atlas of a Concave World: *Game of Thrones* and the Historical Novel,” in *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 1, p. 61.

⁹ There is an interesting overlap between twenty-first century understandings of what the nineteenth-century European realist novel achieved, and what Dan Hassler-Forest describes, drawing on the narrative structure of *Game of Thrones*, as the “meta-genre” of “quality” television drama. Hassler-Forest notes that this “meta-genre should ... be read primarily as a form of adaptation, successfully “remediating” the aesthetics of cinema on the one hand, and the narrative structure of the 19th-century realist novel on the other.” Dan Hassler-Forest, “*Game of Thrones*: Quality Television and the Cultural Logic of Gentrification,” *TV Series* [Online], 6 | 2014, p. 163.

<http://journals.openedition.org/tvseries/323> ; DOI : 10.4000/tvseries.323. See also Dan Hassler-Forest, “Fantastical Capitalism and Postideological World-Building: *Game of Thrones, Battlestar Galactica*,” in Hassler-Forest, *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics: Transmedia World-Building Beyond Capitalism* (London, Rowman and Littlefield, 2016). To demonstrate that character in 19th-century realism, including “minor characters,” occupy very different spaces, and why they need to do so, would be an important part of exploring why “character” in *Game of Thrones* is so peculiarly subordinate to “plot.”

¹⁰ Franco Moretti, “The Great Eclipse: Tragic Form as the Deconsecration of Sovereignty,” in *Signs Taken for Wonders*, (London, Verso, 1998/2006), p. 42.

¹¹ Moretti, p. 44.

¹² Michael Szalay, “HBO’s Flexible Gold,” in *Representations*, Vol. 126, No. 1, Special Issue: Financialization and the Culture Industry (Spring 2014), p. 115.

¹³ We should note though that by the series’ end (Season 8 (2019), with Daenerys Targaryen dissolving into the tyrant-savior figure who must be ousted by those with a more pragmatic understanding of power, an understanding which has no word for emancipation, the series has become in its own strangely twisted way, thematically antiutopian too.

¹⁴ Anne Gjelsvik and Rikke Schubart, *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones and Multiple Media Engagements* (London, Bloomsbury, 2016), p.3.

¹⁵ On the series’ intervention into the overlapping paratextual realms of digital and celebrity cultures, see Dan Hassler-Forest (2016) *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics: Transmedia World-Building Beyond Capitalism*. In their exploration of viewers’ varied relationships with *Game of Thrones*, Martin Barker, Clarissa Smith and Feona Attwood complicate the commercial logic at work in the television series’ marketing of itself: Barker, Smith and Attwood, *Watching Game of Thrones: How audiences engage with dark television* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2021)

¹⁶ John Lanchester (11th April, 2013), “When did you get hooked?” *London Review of Books*, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2019/may/you-win-or-you-die>

¹⁷ Anna Nordberg, “The Unconventional Cruelty of *Game of Thrones*.” <https://www.annanordberg.com/article/the-unconventional-cruelty-of-game-of-thrones>

¹⁸ *Du kannst Dich zurückhalten von den Leiden der Welt, das ist Dir freigestellt und entspricht Deiner Natur, aber vielleicht ist gerade dieses Zurückhalten das einzige Leid, das Du vermeiden könntest.* [You can hold yourself back from the sufferings of the world, that is something you are free to do and it accords with your

nature, but perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering you could avoid.] Reiner Stach (ed) *The Aphorisms of Franz Kafka*, Trans. Shelley Frisch (Oakland, Princeton University Press, 2022), 104.

¹⁹ Gerry Canavan (31st May, 2019), “*Game of Thrones* and the Art of the Anticlimax.”

<https://www.frieze.com/article/game-thrones-and-art-anticlimax>