

9. Spoilers, Twists, and Dragons

Popular Narrative after GAME OF THRONES

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I

"It's not TV, it's HBO" was the slightly pretentious slogan offered by the cable channel in 1997, in what now appears to have been a golden age of the TV series. *SEX AND THE CITY* (1998-2004), *THE SOPRANOS* (1999-2007), *SIX FEET UNDER* (2001-2005), *ENTOURAGE* (2004-2011), and *THE WIRE* (2002-2008) were series that have changed our way of seeing the world, as well as the social status of these singular works, which have often been neglected on account of their mass-market appeal. After a short period during which it seemed as though the channel might be overtaken by other networks (AMC with *MAD MEN*, 2007-2015 and *BREAKING BAD*, 2008-2013), HBO regained its control of the series culture with *GIRLS* (2012-2017) and *GAME OF THRONES* (2011-) – two series that are really unlike all others. However, I am discussing *GAME OF THRONES* (GoT) here, because you do not have to be a fan of medieval fantasy, bloody fights, dragons, or soft porn; you do not need to love the sagas of George R.R. Martin to be a fan of *GAME OF THRONES*. You do not even have to like "series."

Cult HBO series such as *THE WIRE*, which are comparable to the great cinematic or literary works, remained television, or even "super television" for the discerning spectator exploiting the expressive and narrative resources of the small screen. They gave the TV series its "nobility," turning a favorite pastime into an object of study, even of erudition and distinction, while also allowing for an element of subjective exploration and self-identification.

Stanley Cavell (1979, 1981, 1997, 2004) has defined philosophy as the "education of grownups," in parallel with his goal in his major works on cinema – *The World Viewed*, *Pursuits of Happiness* (on remarriage comedies), and *Contesting Tears* (on melodrama) – to give popular culture (Hollywood movies, in particular, are his main interest) the function of changing us. According to Cavell, the value of a culture does not lie in its "great art" but in its transformative capacity, the same capacity found in the "moral perfectionism" of Emerson and Thoreau. Cavell's philosophy defines growth – once childhood and physical growth are over – as our capacity to change. And this capacity is manifestly at work in Cavell's favored object of study,

the apparently minor genre of remarriage comedies, which stage characters' mutual education and transformation through separation and reunion:

In this light, philosophy becomes the education of grownups. [...] The anxiety in teaching, in serious communication, is that I myself require education. And for grownups, this is not natural growth, but *change*.
(Cavell 1979a)

Cavell (2004) also gives this philosophical enterprise the old-fashioned name of "moral education," or "pedagogy," as in the subtitle to *Cities of Words*. For Cavell, whose childhood and youth were haunted by Hollywood movies, the culture in question is popular cinema, whose productions reached the greatest number at the time. The educational value of popular culture is not anecdotal. Indeed, it seems to define what must be understood both by "popular" and "culture" (in the sense of *Bildung*) in the expression "popular culture." From this perspective, the vocation of popular culture is the philosophical education of a *public* rather than the institution and valorization of a socially targeted corpus. The way in which Cavell has claimed the philosophical value of mainstream Hollywood cinema in the 1970s, whose task was to educate adolescents and adults, has been transferred to television series, which have taken over from cinema, if not replaced it.

A genre such as remarriage comedies provides an expressive grammar for the spectator, who finds within it resources for his or her own sentiments and situations. This ordinary pedagogical aspect has been radicalized in television series, which are explicitly sites of ordinary expression. They are, themselves, fed by moments of conversation in recent or classic comedies, which make up their referential and moral universe. The spectator's ordinary expertise turns out to be a capacity for expression that comes from knowledge, even mastery, of a genre. A genre is not an essence – its worth lies in the expressive possibilities which it opens up for actors and spectators. Thus, the remarriage comedy genre proposes a grammar of moral education. The democratic nature of cinema and television series is also found in this capacity for education. This is because, as Cavell notes, popular cinema and TV show the important moments of life, when life changes imperceptibly – moments which, in real life, are fleeting and indeterminate, or whose importance it takes years or an entire lifetime to understand. In order to rethink the concept of popular culture, it is necessary to understand that cinema is not a specialized art, and that it can transform our existences by educating our ordinary experience.

Cavell bases his hermeneutic work on “the intelligence that a film has *already* brought to bear in its making” (Cavell 1981, 10). The perspective he introduces with regard to popular cinema and the demand it places on criticism is, in my opinion, equally valid for television series such as *GoT*. The success of these series comes from the fact that they are polyphonic. They contain a plurality of singular expressions, stage arguments and debates, and are permeated by a moral atmosphere.

Compared to television series produced at the beginning of the 1990s (*ER*, *THE WEST WING*), a radical change took place in terms of the very form in which they are presented: viewers are initiated into new forms of life and new, initially opaque vocabularies that are not made explicit, without any heavy-handed guidance or explanation, as in earlier productions. This methodology and the new narrativity of series are what make for their moral relevance. However, this leads to revising the status of morality – to seeing it not in rules and principles of decision-making, but rather in attention to ordinary behavior, everyday microchoices, individuals’ styles of expressing themselves and making claims. Perhaps, the material of television series allows for even greater contextualization, historicity (regularity, duration), familiarization, and education of perception (attention to the expressions and gestures of the characters, which the viewer learns to know and love despite their flaws, attachment to recurring figures integrated into everyday life, the presence of faces and words on the “small screen”).

Morality is constituted by the claims of individuals, and the recognition of others’ claims; the recognition of a plurality of moral positions and voices within the same small world – hence, the polyphonic nature of television series, the plurality of singular expressions, the staging of arguments and debates, and the moral atmosphere that emanates from them.

Breaking with traditional criticism, which made the intelligence and meaning of films a by-product of critical interpretation, Cavell confirmed the importance of the collective writing of films, and the function of screenwriters, directors, and actors in creating the meaning and educational value of films. It is therefore necessary to show, within the *moral expression* constituted by television series, the moral choices – both individual and collective – negotiations, conflicts, and agreements that are at the basis of morality: the choices and itineraries of fictional characters, plot twists, conflicts, reconciliations, slips of the tongue, and repressions.

For many of us, one of the most painful personal events of recent years was the unexpected and cruel death of Eddard Stark (Sean Bean) towards the end of the first season of *GAME OF THRONES*. How many upset and indignant SMS messages were exchanged, across all generations, during

Episode 9 of Season 3, at the traumatic moment of the massacre of the rest (not quite all) of the Stark family? This wide sharing of moral emotions, the ability to arouse and release them, is one of the originalities of this series, unlike any other, which reworked our experience.

GoT changed our vocabulary and grammar, making “Khaleesi” a common name and “Hodor” an ordinary phrase. When looking around or observing themselves, everyone could see the mode of consumption of this series. At a time when we could imagine that the series would definitely be consumed in large doses, in box-sets of whole seasons, or in marathons of one or two days, GoT renewed its fan base. During the ten weeks during which it invades their lives, with the weekly rhythm of the soap opera, the imagination is set in motion with the anxious expectation of the sequel. As it is this rhythm that is the strength of the series, its inscription in the life of the spectators of both sexes, and in a human lifetime of days and weeks, in the sense of expectation that the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein noted is a basic element of our life form. For the usually voracious consumer of series, this new way of inhabiting time is strangely responsive to the temporal extension of the seasons in the series: *Winter is coming*. At the beginning of the first season, we emerge from a ten-year summer; we wait for winter; and, in the world of GoT, winters can last ten years, or even a lifetime. This temporality, at once strange, displaced, and yet so close to us, gives GoT its atmosphere and distinctive texture.

GAME OF THRONES expanded the very concept of the “TV series.” It is a series that belongs to fans, and is the most downloaded and cited of all. It revived the traditional mode of consumption of the genre when it was assumed that series would be consumed as box-sets or binge-watching. GoT swamps its viewers during the ten weeks in which it invades their lives. With the weekly rhythm of the serial, the imagination is set in motion, by that anxious, curious waiting for what comes next. It is its vital rhythm that is the strength of the series. Its mode of inhabiting time responds strangely to its rescaling of the seasons: *Winter is coming*. This temporal texture is coupled with another modality of waiting: from the first episode, the viewer is caught, enlisted in this world where *anything can happen*. The end of the pilot showed us the young Bran Stark, who had been followed with increasing interest from the outset, climbing a tower and surprising Cersei and Jaime Lannister, who throws him out of the window. From this foundational moment, GoT engages with many taboos – incest, the invulnerability of heroes, and the protection of children – that structure the hierarchies of human life. From this point onward, everything is possible.

In addition, what is worse is our surprise at enjoying the dalliance of Kingslayer in Series 3 with Brienne (Gwendoline Christie). The appearance of this character, a giantess with proportions more suited to the large than the small screen, is a surprise. As for Ned Stark, his character surprisingly continues to hover over the entire series so far: despite the fact that he had a hard time politically, according to Machiavellian analysis, he represents a moral figure who impresses us, as in any real encounter. GoT surprises us, but this is because we surprise ourselves, male and female spectators alike, with our reactions.

In addition, there is the diversification of characters and the subversion of dualisms (able–disabled, man–woman, old–young, even human–nonhuman, living–nonliving). The heroism of Arya Stark, Daenerys Targaryen, and Tyrion Lannister – with Peter Dinklage’s “premiere” topping the credits – makes GoT a radically democratic series: dwarfs (Tyrion), fat slobs (Samwell), the physically and mentally handicapped (Bran, Hodor), prostitutes (Shae), savages (Ygritte, Osha), hideous monsters (Clegane, etc.), all exist on the same level as more presentable heroes. GoT is also a feminist series, despite criticisms provoked by its scenes of sexual abuse, because it integrates feminist demands, creating unforgettable female role models in a world still obviously dominated by men. It is also this political dynamism (which liberates or reveals the ordinary heroism and power of action by women, the disabled, slaves and populations from the South), which is the democratic power of GoT.

“It’s not Porn, it’s HBO” is the title of a short YouTube video that points to the hallmark of HBO, from *SEX AND THE CITY* to *GIRLS*. GoT is also gloriously at the root of the neologism *sexposition* (meaning sex scenes used in the main narration). Against a background of domination, superb women characters emerge: Catelyn Stark, Brienne, Arya, and Yara. All of these illustrate the ability of such series to invent a feminine heroism, which is sometimes modest, as in *GIRLS*, where Lena Dunham created a new distorted portrayal of the brevity of being a girl. GoT and *GIRLS* are more in line with the cult series of the 2000s, such as *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER*, than with HBO classics.

In this way, GoT approaches the ideal popular culture since the beginning of Hollywood cinema as evoked by Stanley Cavell – a culture capable of being appropriated by all, thanks to an education which teaches us that heroism is within the reach of everyone. GoT releases or reveals women’s capacity for action, for the populations of the South and slaves, as liberated by the Khaleesi ... democracy is coming. There remains the essential anxiety: what will be left to tell when the series has (a long way to go) caught up with the novels of George R.R. Martin? *Winter is coming ...*

II

It was a long time ago that Montaigne said one should not judge before the end: “In judging the life of others, I always look at how the end has gone” (Essays, Book I, chap. 18). It has also been a long time since one would not have been allowed to evaluate a work – either a film, book or, in this case, a series – before having seen it to the end (or, at least one season). But from the first episodes of the second season of *TRUE DETECTIVE* (2015), fans and critics went wild, expressing their disappointment as though it were a personal insult.

This series, which was hugely popular from 2014 onward – mainly for its Bayou atmosphere and Matthew McConaughey’s accent – has now sparked harsh criticism, particularly as a result of the conformity of its view of Los Angeles, with Mafia characters and over-the-top losers, plot confusion, and so on. Yet the second season offers revelations, including the impressive performance of Vince Vaughn, an underrated actor of genius. The Los Angeles of *TRUE DETECTIVE* baffles because it is a cocktail of contemporary culture, from *SWINGERS* (1996) to *24* (2001–2010) and *L.A. CONFIDENTIAL* (1997). There are also beautiful and unusual female characters (including the policewoman played by Rachel McAdams), unlike the first season, where women were merely functional in a male story. It is these women who close the story and give it meaning in the final moment where, fleeing yet still fighting, they express the very resistance of life. The heroes are endearing in their imperfection, which leads to the self-destruction of men. Spoiler alert! After premature judgment, the terror of the spoiler is the second plague of seriphilia – if we can still describe seriphiliacs as spectators who find their enjoyment in suspense above all else. What about the pleasure of rewatching a movie, such as *GONE GIRL* (2014) or *THE SIXTH SENSE* (1999)? I am not speaking about *TITANIC* (1997) or *LINCOLN* (2012), whose outcome is known, without, I think, diminishing their intensity.

Yet the absolute crime today seems to be to give the public some clue about coming events in a series. *GAME OF THRONES* is the one for which the pressure is the greatest, so much so that “spoilerphobia” occupies the bulk of critical energies. And yet, the spoiler is already there; no, don’t tell me whether my darling Jon Snow will die! But it’s already in George Martin’s book, as every reader knows. Such an obsession, again, even if it extends to films, devalues the series as genuine works and compromises serious criticism. But do not despise the series’ audience, I am told, for there is no misplaced elitism. The TV series *empowers* the audience, who is able, by virtue of its experience and preferences, to judge for itself. The populism of series also entails perfectionism, demanding that everyone go beyond their conformities rather than being satisfied with their own impressions.

David Simon, the author of the cult series *THE WIRE*, is not bothered by spoilers: the title of his latest work, *SHOW ME A HERO* (a 2015 series of 6 episodes for HBO) is a spoiler in itself. F. Scott Fitzgerald's adage, referred to in the title ("Show me a hero and I'll write you tragedy"), tells us in advance the end of the story. Like Wikipedia, *SHOW ME* tells the true story of Nick Wasicsko, the young mayor of Yonkers (a city of 200,000 inhabitants in New York State) who found himself engaged in a fight for racial desegregation in the decade 1980-1990, by enacting a law inspired by the planner, Oscar Newman, which dictated the construction of social housing in otherwise white districts. Here, the spoiler is a reality.

Given that this is Simon, the show is far from a biopic. In a style that is even more documentary in nature than *THE WIRE*, it presents a democratic galaxy of characters as striking as Nick (brilliant Oscar Isaac, the star who manages to stay on the same level as the others). The lesson of this series lies in its democratic aesthetic, without any moralizing: every point of view is expressed and heard. Democracy is presented, not as speech (hollow and hypocritical) or as a political system (totally corrupt), but as a form of life and social transformation; in the fate of the poorly housed (women) who will slowly benefit from desegregation and leave the housing projects (Carmen, an immigrant Dominican worker, mother of three children; Norma, a medical assistant who loses her sight; Doreen, initially clueless, who then emerges magnificently) and that of the white citizens who, like Mary (Catherine Keener), evolve from visceral and violent opposition to the arrival of foreigners to acceptance and support, out of shame for the repugnant racist behavior of their dear white neighbors.

The lesson of this experience of the last century is obviously topical. Out of tragedy – the political and personal disaster of Nick Wasicsko's trajectory – come democratic and ordinary success, however fleeting and limited it may be, for democracy is not a political game, whether tragic or ridiculous, nor is it a matter of great moralistic principles. It is the micro change of humans, slow and imperceptible and yet so visible on the screen. It involves their sense of responsibility toward strangers. What we call democratic "populism" today only makes sense (spoiler alert!) if it is anchored in the possibility of self-transformation.

III

Yes, Jon Snow is still dead. He even spent the entire first episode of the season frozen on his table, while the other characters, Sansa, Theon, Arya,



Fig. 9.1: Concern about whether the GAME OF THRONES character Jon Snow was really dead became an issue of global concern.

and Tyrion each made their mark (on us too) on the ever larger territory encompassed by the credits of GAME OF THRONES.

There is no longer the annual rite of GoT's return for a new season – in this case, Season 6, which will, of course, be the best of all, say the show runners, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, in the spirit of overbidding that characterizes the latest developments of the series. There is also the annual rite of waiting for the new season of GoT, with its procession of hypotheses, teasers, recaps, redundant commentaries, and delirium over spoilers. The rhythm of GoT, whose narration is explicitly built around a structure of waiting (*Winter is coming*) is now inscribed in our lives, this time creating the expectation of a possible resurrection of the hero massacred in the last episode of Season 5.

We are aware that in GoT anything can happen, as seen in such traumatic scenes as Episode 9 which includes the sudden beheading of Ned Stark, who had seemed to be the main hero in the first season, and the carnage of the wedding in the third season. It is this permanent threat to their lives, apart from the richness of the writing and performances, which creates our attachment to GoT's characters. This feature is shared with another popular series, THE WALKING DEAD (2010-), which has just completed its sixth season with similar suspense: who was actually crushed in the last scene?

The potential loss and constant vulnerability of their heroes (which also structured its precursor, 24) builds a special relationship with the public, especially in a century replete with threats to human life.

Each in a kind of excess and adapted from other works, GoT and TWD have, in fact, rehabilitated two of popular culture's most underrated genres,

namely fantasy and the zombie movie, giving them an epic dimension as well as a particular realism, built on our attachment to characters who are imperfect yet striking, and who become part of our own stories. So much so that their loss, possible or realized, becomes personal, yet mourning is impossible because they are still there, even if they are dead – and not just because they are fictional characters! Ned and Jon Snow, like Shane, Beth, or Tyreese, are still alive, even when dead, and this makes their loss irremediable and melancholy. They are the walking dead.

No one outside the show knows about Jon Snow, except President Obama who negotiated advance viewing of the precious episodes. The 5th season (which was not completely successful) was a turning point in this respect as until then there were at least two GoT audiences: those who had read George R.R. Martin's five volumes and were more or less forewarned, and those who discovered the story on TV and were regularly in shock ("Aargh!," "No!"). The democratic nature of GoT puts an end to this ultimate segregation. The series is no longer an adaptation, having caught up with Martin. In going live, "off the page" it has become independent of the written saga, perhaps losing in narrative as it takes off, while developing its hold as a pure TV series. As Andy Greenwald stated on ESPN's blog *Grantland*, it is possible that "what we took for an exercise in adapting a book for television has led to making a book from television." Furthermore, there is the question about how to continue writing novels, with a new threat constantly looming, despite the protests of the followers: the series might spoil the books.

The tyranny of the spoiler ("spoilerophobia" which is nothing but the obsessive quest for spoilers) is certainly the dark side of the GoT phenomenon. Certainly GoT infantilizes, achieving the paradoxical feat of taking us back to childhood by means of a very adult TV series. The terror of the spoiler, however, blocks reflexivity and introduces unbearable constraints into an area that has liberated its audience. How is knowing what will happen (and which is known anyway) a problem? What conception of vision and criticism justifies such a normative delirium? One would come to appreciate the rude behavior of the actor, Ian McShane, a magnificent Swearngen in the cult series *DEADWOOD* (2004-2006), scheduled to appear in Season 6 of GoT, who spoiled a character's return from the dead, responding to the indignation of GoT fans on the Net with "get a life," adding, crassly, "It's just tits and dragons."

Neither breasts nor dragons, however, are what captivated audiences in the first episode of Series 6. Rather, it is the pure pleasure of finding Brienne and hearing her once again pledge allegiance to a woman: Stark. The strength of GoT, beyond its ability to make everything fit onto a small screen, lies in the moral aspiration and life force that carries it in such moments, and in the

ability to gradually bring together the characters spread over its territory. It is women, at least as much as men, who represent this form of perfectionist aristocracy: Catelyn, Brienne, Arya, Yara, and, of course, the Khaleesi, are the true moral successors of Ned, holding high the values of an imperfect world. Yet bravery and perseverance are not everything. Moral resources are also found among the humble, the vulnerable, and children – Samwell, the coward (a role comparable to that of Hugo in *LOST*, 2004-2010); Bran, the cripple; and Shae, the maid. These characters create new and unprecedented formulas with regard to heroism. Given the fact that *GoT* is more realistic in doing so than historical series, it finds its realism in proximity to humans, its emotional strength in humanity, and the modest heroism of characters doomed to death (“Valar morghulis,” S2, E10¹), but who in the meantime, as the late Ygrette told Jon Snow, must live.

Meanwhile, Jon Snow lies on his table. Do something!

*Adapted from newspaper columns originally published in Libération, 2014-2016.
Translated by Ian Christie.*

Notes

1. “*Valar morghulis*” apparently means “all men must die” in High Valyrian. “Jaen H’ghar teaches it to Arya Stark when he departs. Although he does not explain its meaning to her (nor does anybody else), she begins to use the words in her prayer of people she wants dead” (“*Valar morghulis*,” *A Wiki of Fire and Ice*, last modified February 23, 2018, http://awoiaf.westeros.org/index.php/Valar_morghulis).

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