

A VIRTUAL WINTER: ON THE ABSENCE OF ECOLOGY IN *GAME OF THRONES*

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The plant stalk in the foreground goes by almost too quickly for me to see. This is the last episode of *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011–19), and after battles with both human and supernatural enemies, dragon attacks, destroyed cities, and dead lovers and rivals, the people of Westeros may finally have peace. The scene focuses on Jon Snow (Kit Harington), now assigned back on the Night's Watch, following the Wildlings as they move to their old territories beyond the Wall. The single blade of grass, or wheat, or some kind of reed, implies a promise of spring and new beginnings, and the shots of characters walking into the woods include several children, their mere presence also signaling an imagined extension of time.

But these hints of new beginnings are undermined by the return of the characters to old social structures and old territories. The Wall looks repaired and the gate works fine, as it ceremonially opens and closes again to let the Wildlings through. Jon Snow is back where he started, an exile and outcast despite his now-known royal heritage. Is that it? What was all the turmoil and bloodshed for if not to enact some form of change?

Ending with Questions

It is of course to be expected that no ending could do justice to the narrative complexities of *Game of Thrones*, to its many characters, strands of intrigue, and richly elaborated kingdoms. As critics note, the writers and creators of the show, David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, were dealing with a sprawling and incomplete text in adapting George R. R. Martin's multivolume series *A Song of Ice and Fire* for the screen.¹ With only five of the seven planned novels published, the screenwriters had to bring closure to story lines that were still uncharted in order to conclude the narrative of *Game of*



A promise of spring and new beginnings?

Thrones.² Their task was further complicated by the decision to split the final season into two, which ran the risk that the plot developments of the final episodes would feel rushed, insufficiently resolved, or unmotivated.³

In addition to these issues, the show uses the language of revolution so intensely in its plotlines, deploying the promise of social transformation to propel the action over a number of seasons, that it feels strange to see the ending present the restoration of things almost as they were before. The fact that the show does not deliver on its promises of social and political change in Westeros accentuates problems with its narrative unfolding, and perhaps also functions as an implied critique of the very fantasy of change. Even the hopefulness of the green plant betrays narrative expectations: after so many warnings about the effects of this unprecedented Winter, was it just a regular season after all? Or has the demise of the Night King facilitated the end of Winter now?⁴

There is a narrative and emotional conflation of weather, politics, narrative closure, and temporal extension here, one that has important implications for understanding the show's cultural and political impact. Hopeful as it may be, the little plant activates a logic of change as seasonality: cyclical, repetitive, indifferent to human actions and needs, and quite separate from the desire to imagine change as a redirection or reorientation of the social sphere through human actions. And it is precisely because the show has exaggerated the

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power and impact of human action that the return to seasons might feel like a problem. Interpreting the depiction of politics and change in *Game of Thrones* hinges on the show's handling of these two scales—the scale of human actions and the larger scale of contexts and totalities, of fuller environmental and political ecologies.

The most visible reference to an ecological scale in the show lies in its deployment of Winter as a threat, one that both activates and disables questions of environmental danger. “Winter Is Coming,” announced the famous tagline of the show, intensified in later seasons to “Winter Is Here.” Viewers quickly made connections between the show's long-term (if eventually abandoned) focus on an impending climate transformation and current off-screen concerns about ecological destruction and climate change.⁵ Although Martin began writing *A Song of Ice and Fire* in 1991, before climate change had become a broad issue in mainstream politics, he agrees that the climate situation in Westeros offers a parallel to current political myopias, noting that “climate change should be the number one priority for any politician who is capable of looking past the next election.”⁶ But Winter means quite a lot of different things in the show—and most are not related to the weather. The parallel between Winter in Westeros and climate change in the real world is problematic because *Game of Thrones* in fact lacks a sense of ecology, of a dispersed organization of causes and effects that would extend beyond the human realm.

From the beginning, Winter emerges as a major factor for life in Westeros. Winter is a season of unpredictable length on this continent, and the impending one is bound to be brutal since it follows a summer that lasted almost ten years, the longest in living memory.⁷ But the term does not just describe weather patterns. A second, metaphorical sense of Winter refers to the bloody succession battles raging throughout Westeros. The relative quiet of the summer decade, with the Seven Kingdoms temporarily unified after the overthrow of the Mad King, is shattered as aspiring kings and queens fight for control of the continent and control of the Iron Throne. The people of Westeros have to prepare not just for extreme cold but also for battles and sieges, trampled crops, and marauding armies that destroy farms and commandeer meager supplies. And in addition to these human squabbles, the spreading frost causes, or at least facilitates, an impending invasion by the Night King (Richard Brake, Vladimir Furdik) and his army of White Walkers, powerful nonhuman beings that lurk in the permafrost beyond the Wall, a fortification built ages ago to keep them out. Formed as a massive army of wights (dead humans, giants, and animals he

has turned into zombies), the White Walkers threaten to annihilate the human world.

Despite the immediacy of an incoming cold front and the brutality of human conflicts, it is the Night King and the White Walkers that emerge in the end as the main problem and the main reference to a climate-change parable in the show. Weather patterns and fighting kings and queens are one thing, but an army of the infinite unkillable undead is another. By season 7 the questions become urgent: Will the characters remain blinded by their human ambitions and rivalries, or will they unite against the common enemy that threatens everyone's survival? Can they believe in and respond to a threat they have not seen? Despite their political differences and family legacies, all humans are in fact on the same side in this bigger war, because, in the words of Jon Snow, they can breathe—whereas the White Walkers and wights are dead, inhuman.

As reviewers and fans quickly suggested, the humans' reluctance to join forces in Westeros parallels real-world debates about climate change, from willful blindness to evidence of climate change to reckless abuse of precious natural resources, and the general adherence to local rather than global political aims.⁸ Reviewers compared Jon Snow's warnings about the impending attack to Al Gore's calls to action, and speculated about the didactic possibilities of the show's depiction of political issues.⁹ Should environmentalists invent a White Walker zombie army, one article asks, in order for climate change to be taken seriously?¹⁰

The Meanings of Winter

The nature of parables is that they linger in the space between reference and elision. While the show clearly calls for people to band together in order to fight a large-scale and loosely climate-related upheaval, the presence of the Night King and the White Walkers as central characters makes it less likely that the situation of Westeros can be useful for resolving contemporary climate debates. They may embody threat and danger, but these supernatural beings do not exist in an ecological relationship to the rest of Westeros; they operate through spontaneous magical eruptions of power, and remain independent from the kinds of interrelationships that characterize an ecosystem.

In order to understand what an ecological frame of reference entails, consider the words that humans employ to conceptualize the natural world. Although used as common nouns in everyday language, words that describe the seasons as “spring,” “summer,” “fall,” and “winter” are actually abstractions that summarize the changes caused by the earth's



Winter Is Here: the Wall in *Game of Thrones*.

orbit around the sun and the angle of the earth's axis. The earth moves; therefore, light and temperature conditions change, and all the bacteria, microbes, plants, trees, insects, animals, and humans respond to these changes. A word such as "winter" encodes such changes and reactions into language. In this ecological scale, causes, effects, events, and experiences of winter extend from macroscopic to microscopic worlds, and the human experience of winter is only a small part of these radically different scales of events.

Game of Thrones takes this process even further. The term "Winter" is used to describe three distinct threats: from climate, politics, and the deadly White Walkers. Each layer moves the threat of Winter further away from real-life conditions and weather patterns—first into the symbolic realm (Winter as war) and then into an increasingly allegorical realm (the depiction of the Night King, a supernatural character whose very touch kills and creates ice but also raises the dead). The Night King may function as a symbolic embodiment of winter conditions, by being icy blue, ice making, death related, inexpressive, relentless, lethal, and so on, but

there is no evidence that the Night King is subject to the kinds of microscopic and macroscopic material effects I am describing for the natural world.

This escalating abstraction of winter, the regular season, into Winter, an unpredictable season in Westeros, into war, and finally into the Night King and his undead warriors also removes the final threats depicted in the show from material conditions. Anthropomorphizing a climatic situation into a zombie enemy focuses the energies of the show, but undermines the extent to which this threat can be seen and understood in the off-screen world. As hard as it is to form one common army out of the different human factions of Westeros, it does not require such a drastic change in how the characters see their universe and how they act. In fact, fighting the White Walkers maintains the same ideological direction that Westeros has been on for a while: focused on power struggles and warfare, and just trading enemies.

Imagine instead saying to the military/magical complex of Westeros: since this may be the last temperate season for a while, all armies should be disbanded, and everyone should



The Night King.

be recruited to farm, can vegetables, preserve meats, process wool, develop high-calorie energy drinks with a long shelf life, and build insulated caves for all the livestock. It is highly unlikely that the Seven Kingdoms would consider such a transformation of their political and social priorities, but that is what would be required if they could see winter itself, not its allegorization into zombies, as the enemy. This is the kind of ideological transformation required in order to make climate change a political priority in the real world today. Not only does it require a rearrangement of ideological priorities, but it also means negotiating with the infinite ambiguities, uncertainties, and conflicting interests of a global community. Fighting the Night King—a clearly demarcated, personified, nonhuman enemy—in Westeros is much clearer, much easier.

Game of Thrones thus does not constitute an effective climate-related parable because it both denaturalizes and personifies the landscape. The natural world of the show is subject to the demands of the narrative: the initial richness of locations and exterior shots, beautiful aerial images of diverse landscapes, and a variety of terrains and textures is replaced by a monomaniacal visual emphasis on snow and ice and a gradual stylized dimming of light. Neither nature nor weather remain central to the narrative as such. The show participates in the contemporary fetishization of cold and ice that Simone Hancox has described as a form of entertainment—a curiosity about nature as spectacle that does not address issues of climate change and human responsibility.¹¹

I am not advocating that one need read the show, and popular culture in general, in a didactic way, nor mine it for real-world solutions. The issue is what kind of worldview the show transmits about recognizing and solving problems. The implicit and pervasive treatment of nature as pure fiction deprives the *Game of Thrones* universe of any sense of ecology—a state that has both environmental and political implications.

While the books refer to weather and climatic events, and while they borrow elements from long-standing interests and traditions in science fiction and fantasy, they often bypass questions of context, of ecological totality. This tendency is exacerbated in the television series, which lacks the books' focus on limited perspectives and gaps in cultural and personal memory. The TV show presents a consistently linear, present-focused, and anthropocentric narrative, centered on human struggles: people's lust for power, political squabbles, the cities in which power is located or negotiated, the whims and intrigues of the powerful, the suffering of those enslaved by them, and the fallout from processes of succession.

The show's obsession with monarchic rulers, legitimacy, control, and hierarchy finds a counterpart in its stunning visual depictions of characters looking at landscapes and cityscapes from high ground—from mountaintops, towers, and castle walls—with vistas and army formations spread infinitely below. Yet within a more ecological frame of reference, the narrative of *Game of Thrones* is dominated by horizontal, not vertical, relationships, which are based on lines of succession in the feudal structures of its human world, with forays into the supernatural via the White Walkers and those individuals who deploy magic, revive the dead, go back in time, have visions, or project themselves into animals. The focus is on human desires and human actions as well as parallel supernatural actions.

Indeed, an ongoing issue in such fantasy narratives is how to annex the supernatural so that it can serve human wills and desires. Characters who have exceptional powers or are trained in magic participate in this incorporation of the supernatural into the human political realm. Bran Stark (Isaac Hempstead Wright) has visions of the past that confirm but do not alter the course of the present. Beric Dondarrion (Richard Dormer) is brought back from the dead multiple times in order to fulfill a very specific destiny: to preserve the life of Arya Stark (Maisie Williams) so that she can kill the Night King. Instead of remaining outside, these alternative worlds of supernatural power are incorporated into the rules and priorities of the human world.

The series' horizontal focus on human power struggles and questions of succession is antithetical to ecological thinking. An ecological approach would entail a more expansive sense of the causal organization of actions and effects, on both a horizontal and a vertical axis, to link together animals, people, weather patterns, and possibly even the workings of celestial bodies and invisible microscopic entities.

This kind of vertical span figures in earlier texts, such as Brian Aldiss's *Helliconia* trilogy.¹² Writing in the early to mid-1980s, Aldiss projected the emerging concerns of



Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey) surveys King's Landing.

ecological thinking into a science-fiction story about a planet where seasons last for centuries: moving on a double orbit around two suns, the planet of Helliconia experiences extremely long seasons as its elliptical course brings it closer to the dominant star for a scorching summer of five hundred years, followed by a freezing winter of similar length when the planet moves to the other end of its orbit. The impact of these climatic conditions on the ecology of Helliconia is major, as species emerge or hibernate, thrive or die out, and almost lose all memory of the previous season, or even the sense that there are other seasons, during each long phase. The political intrigues of rulers and armies seem myopic and limited when seen against this cosmic backdrop.

Similarly, in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* trilogy, published a decade later, there is a direct link between the material properties on the surface of Mars and the political options of its human settlers.¹³ It is only when long-term terraforming projects that use oxygen-producing bacteria and lichen succeed in creating minimal survivable conditions and a thin atmosphere that the humans on Mars can escape the control of Earth and its corporations. Political action depends on being able to walk outside the protected artificial atmosphere of the domes they control.

In contrast, there is an implicit unmooring of narrative action from material conditions in *Game of Thrones*, despite

the show's incredibly rich emphasis on world building, family trees and infamous rivalries, the styles and banners of different houses, the narrative and personal significance of objects or clothing, the storied origins of specific swords and daggers, and so on. Fans of the show have complained about the show's depiction of time and radical transformation of distance to enable condensed storytelling: crows might fly and deliver messages almost instantaneously or armies appear in mere days across distances that previously took months to traverse.¹⁴ Or an order might be given for a thousand ships to be built in the Iron Isles, where there doesn't seem to be any lumber or trees, nor any source of wealth to buy them from others.¹⁵ What such plot moments have in common is a disconnect between material environments and their larger meanings and effects. There is no counterbalance to human narcissism (of the kind portrayed in the Helliconia or *Red Mars* trilogies), no awareness of the microscopic and cosmological perspectives that would limit the importance and impact of human will. These problems of continuity are part of the larger problem occasioned by the absence of nature as an agent within the narrative.¹⁶

There is no sense, for example, that something bigger than the wills, actions, and battles of the Targaryens caused the demise of the Dragons, nor that something in a larger context changed enough to allow them to regenerate when

Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke) managed to hatch three of the remaining dragon eggs (season 1, episode 10). The sudden discovery of a litter of newborn dire wolves, long thought extinct, is another singular fluke, useful only as a mysterious portent about the Stark children (season 1, episode 1). Nothing explains the relationship between the winter season and the White Walkers in terms of changing weather patterns expanding or contracting a plant or animal's habitat. Since they are not alive, the White Walkers need nothing. They have no reason to venture south of the Wall, except that their leader, the Night King, is portrayed as intent on invading Westeros and destroying humankind. The reasoning that a viewer can provide for their actions is solely individualistic, focused on a leader's actions and impulses rather than material conditions.

The Night King's actions lack an expansive sense of causality as well: he was created ages ago by the Children of the Forest in order to destroy Men and is still on that same programmed mission (season 6, episode 5). Everything is very limited, very local in this causal chain: he was created as a weapon of war, and is still waging war; the wights are reanimated through his power, and they simply follow him. The story seems not to need a larger context for explaining the advent or motivation of these beings. Later, when the Night King is killed by Arya Stark in the Godswood garden of Winterfell, all his followers and all the animated corpses lose their powers and either explode into shards of ice or collapse, useless (season 8, episode 3), making all the (horizontal) spectacles of endless undead armies and relentless attacks irrelevant, because only the singular leader, the Night King, actually matters.

Geopolitics

The displacement of the threats of winter onto the threat of the White Walkers' army of human zombies offers just one example of the elision of material realities that structures *Game of Thrones* in general. The challenge of surviving a long and unpredictable winter is somehow insufficient and too diffuse to drive the series forward, whereas the battle with an army, even one as dehumanized as this zombie army, restages the power troubles of the human world of Westeros into the supernatural world, bypassing the question of nature altogether. For the rulers of Westeros, this is just another war, another kingdom, another king, another battle for supremacy, or succession, or control—another clash of wills, another measuring up of numbers and weapons. The climate problem appears only in order to disappear.



The dragon eggs of Daenerys Targaryen.

More important, the length of seasons in *Game of Thrones* is never explained, despite pressure from fans, and countless scientific and science-fictional speculations and fan theories.¹⁷ George R. R. Martin himself has said that if an explanation were ever to emerge from the novels, it would be related to magic and mystery rather than to a realistic, positivist, or scientific perspective.¹⁸ Yet fantasy worlds often revel in inventing their own ecologies and rules for how alien or fantastic worlds may be organized: Ursula K. Le Guin's novella *The Word for World Is Forest* presents a dense ecological connection among sentient and nonsentient species, plants, and trees on the planet of Athshe, while N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* posits a world constantly destroyed by earthquakes and inhabited by a diverse range of beings attuned to vibrations, sound, gravitational fields, and geological strata.¹⁹

The absence of ecological consciousness in *Game of Thrones* goes against the tendencies of the fantasy genre and in fact violates some of the pleasures of fantasy and speculative writing in inventing alternative taxonomies and forms of internal coherence. As a result, politics is separated radically from geopolitics, as war becomes first purely ideological and then capricious, unmoored from material realities. Winterfell, for example, makes for a valuable location, as mentioned in the novels but not in the television series, due to the material fact that it is situated on a natural hot spring, which makes the castle comfortable and the area livable even during the coldest winter. This fact alone changes its centrality to the story, explaining not only why armies would fight for it but also why it would be a refuge for the people of the area. Winterfell is the best place to be during winter not because of the aura and honor of the Starks, but because of its strategic location and relationship to the landscape. Similarly, The Twins is a double castle and bridge so strategically situated that it controls the only crossing point over the main river of Westeros for hundreds of

miles. Casterly Rock, the seat of the Lannisters, is founded on a major gold mine.

In a geopolitical sense, a location's desirability was long rooted in just such material conditions: the weather patterns, the length of the seasons, the temperature, the consistency of the soil, the minerals deep below the earth's surface, the proximity to rivers, trade routes, access points, the quality of the clay in the riverbeds, the underwater topography of a coastline, the relation of a port to the prevailing winds, the migration routes of the local fish or birds, the seasonal sprouting of a certain valuable herb, and so on.

This description may seem like an old-fashioned listing of strategic priorities, as found in classic board games like Risk or Civilization and their more recent counterparts, but narratives set in the past or in feudal fantasy contexts often crave precisely such forms of simplification, reflecting not merely escapism or the romance of simpler times but a wider cultural desire for rooted forms of understanding. Modern war and modern capitalism seem to have removed the significance of hills and fish routes in favor of trade pacts, industrial zones, flight paths, and the movements of capital, abstracting the importance of local resources and conditions into the colonial logic of extraction and the postmodern logic of neoliberal capitalism. But as Paolo Bacigalupi proposes in his novel *The Water Knife*, geopolitical basics such as access to water

may yet be what wars are fought for in the future.²⁰ War is also an aftereffect of climate transformations that destabilize governments as populations are displaced because of drought, rising sea levels, or desertification, while migrations lead to new conflicts.²¹

The elision of geopolitics in *Game of Thrones* makes wars and conflicts just a matter of human will or whims, caused by political intrigues, ambition, and competition, not scarcity or hardship. This magnification of human will and desire is another effect of the absence of ecological awareness in the show. By focusing on the wills and actions of specific characters, especially leaders, and by centralizing threat into magical figures, *Game of Thrones* distances both weather and politics. The threat of Winter becomes supernatural, disconnected from material conditions—as is war. The old geopolitical sense of war as a battle for territory, land, or resources is replaced in these fictions (and in many contemporary cultural productions) by that of war as a battle for power or for ideological supremacy. Viewers are thus even less likely to understand war when it is uprooted from particular places and histories, its origins dematerialized and abstracted into a purely ideological realm.

In the end, *Game of Thrones* does not propose the changing weather, itself hardship enough, as the reason for the battle for resources and territories that leads to war, instead



Arya Stark (Maisie Williams, left) and Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner, right) on the ramparts of Winterfell.

it presents the battle for succession in Westeros as related only to the political realm, to human desires and intrigues, devoid of such motivating material forces as the breakdown of agriculture, inaccessible terrains, food and resource scarcity, migrating populations, the need to capture territories less affected by weather problems, and so on.

Plot details then follow suit. The main refugee population shown in Westeros are the Wildlings, whose arrival south of the Wall is caused not by literal winter hardships but by the supernatural White Walker attacks. In Winterfell, when Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner) begins amassing grain and accounting for the move of local populations into the castle, she is not just preparing for the coming of Winter but for a possible attack by either the Lannisters or the White Walkers (season 7, episode 3). Her plans for preparedness are the only visible strategy for treating a castle as a refuge for local populations needing to withstand a prolonged siege. In fact, of the two commodities being transported in the Loot Train (season 7, episode 4), the gold is safely deposited into King's Landing, while the grain is destroyed by the dragons that attack the supply. Viewers are not required to recognize Winter itself as the issue in the series, beguiled instead by all the other threats that take the place of the climate threat. The show's characters don't seem to care about Winter much, either. Armies move toward Westeros and the North, instead of away from the weather front. No one is moving away from Westeros—to the continent of Essos, which seems less susceptible to the Winter season. The more one considers the weather in Westeros, the further this weird seasonality is removed from any connection with real-world problems.

Political Ecologies

Stated axiomatically, ecological thinking requires recognizing both horizontal and vertical relationships, making causal links among disparate facts. *Game of Thrones* does not engage with macro or micro forces in order to develop larger causalities for actions and effects. The forms of unmooring that I describe at the level of weather and environment are in fact consistent throughout the show's world building and affect its political realm as well.

This paradox is most visible in the final episode of the series, when, after all the destruction, the remaining leaders of Westeros gather for a decision about who should rule the continent. Suddenly, Sam Tarly (John Bradley) questions the legitimacy of this assembly. "Why just us?" he asks the group, composed of the surviving heirs and rulers of some of the great houses of Westeros. "Maybe the decision about what's best for everyone should be left to, well, everyone."

Of course, this suggestion of an election process that would include the actual inhabitants of Westeros meets with shock and derision: "Maybe we should give the dogs a vote as well," one character comments.

It makes sense that a democratic election process can't emerge out of nowhere in a feudal society. Political systems are not just an eruption of an idea, because they evolve out of material conditions and long processes of economic, social, and political transformation. Just the suggestion that the deadly succession conflicts of Westeros may be resolved in a peaceful gathering of these particular people, none of whom now have a blood claim to the throne, may be progress enough. And since Bran Stark, the finally chosen ruler, cannot father children due to disability, perhaps this is a sign that the hereditary rule that had dominated Westeros might in the future be replaced by a form of oligarchic rotation among peers.

A political ecology to sustain democratic possibilities would at the very least require a participating public, whether that follows the restricted, selective, enfranchised citizen groups of ancient direct democracies or is modeled on modern representative democracies. The latter would assume population densities, a trade class, literacy, financial and social structures that offer the possibility or at least the fantasy of social mobility, mercantile economies, a bureaucracy and range of social strata, a system of laws, robust communication and information modes, and so on.

Such elements do exist in the *Game of Thrones* universe, but they are compartmentalized: a centralized financial institution, the Iron Bank, exists in Braavos; a mercantile, slave-owning society in Meereen; a major exchange marketplace in Pentos, Volantis, and the other Free Cities; a historical archive in The Citadel; an agricultural export power in Highgarden, and so on. The show also includes numerous councils and assemblies, ranging from a feudal lord/vassal model to oligarchic and aristocratic models. The Wildlings may even be exercising a form of majority-oriented self-governance after the demise of the King-Beyond-the-Wall, Mance Rayder (Ciarán Hinds). When a public sphere emerges in King's Landing, though, it is on the rush of religious fervor. Power stratification on *Game of Thrones* tends toward a hierarchical structure with a centralized hegemony: a leader at the top, a small group of nobles and allies, and a mass of soldiers, slaves, and farmers who follow them or fight on their behalf.

At a political level, *Game of Thrones* oscillates between conflicts in an epic mode and conflicts fueled by ideologies. In the epic mode that dominates the series, battles on-screen involve entities within the same value system, as aspiring

leaders fight for preeminence within and according to the rules of that system: wars that follow hegemonic principles of succession along blood lines, legitimate and illegitimate claims to the throne, and a feudal or early modern political structure. This mode traffics in names and legacies, heritage, and the aura of storied exploits.

In contrast, battles based on ideology pit radically different systems of value against each other. The main ideological thrust of the show is Daenerys's call for the abolition of slavery and the freeing of populations from their tyrants—a battle that makes sense on Essos with its institutions of slave labor, but not in King's Landing, a place full of poverty and injustice without a visible social structure of permanently enslaved people.

The absence of a political ecology is pertinent to understanding the paradoxes of *Game of Thrones*, especially in its final resolutions. On her way from the Dothraki lands to Meereen in season 3, Daenerys frees the slaves in the cities she passes, fights the counterrevolutionary actions and retaliations of the Great Masters, and installs forms of government and work contracts to realign these societies after the abolition of slavery. Her war with the Great Masters of Meereen is therefore portrayed as an ideological project, not just a fight for succession.

In King's Landing, however, Daenerys does not target any clearly demarcated class of rulers or enslaved persons. In order for the equivalent liberatory philosophy to be deployed there, the script would have to dictate that Daenerys could make invisible disenfranchisements visible, free the poor, the servants, those sold into prostitution, and so on; in today's terminology, such a narrative would function as a recognition of social injustice and class-based oppression. Instead, Daenerys burns down King's Landing in season 8, describing her actions and agenda in ideological terms, with the fervent claim that she will free people from tyrants. Without a more robust political philosophy, however, it is hard to see how any rulers in King's Landing could be presented as non-tyrants.

In contrast to Winterfell's feudal mode, long line of hereditary rulers, and strong tie to the landscape and culture of the North, there is no connection between ruler and population in King's Landing. The city's poverty, the condition of the drinking water, the filth in the streets remain unchanged regardless of who occupies the Iron Throne. This makes the city more modern but in an uneven way, with notions of legitimacy and hereditary rule persisting despite the arbitrary forms of succession from one ruler to the next.

The final episodes of the show switch conceptually from a feudal war of succession to a modern ideological conflict, but without any material basis for this modernization of the

political rubric. If Daenerys could interpret "tyranny" as social and financial oppression, for example, and "tyrants" as the ruling class, and if the people of King's Landing had a sense of class struggle, they could join together to wage a revolution. If Daenerys's act of razing King's Landing could be described as enacting a "total war" doctrine, it would match modern warfare, in which there is no distinction between armies and civilians; in industrialized capitalism, everyone in a society is interpreted as being complicit in its ideological mission.²² But the representation of the material and political conditions of King's Landing renders both a reading of class struggle and a reading of ideological complicity impossible, making Daenerys's attack on civilians solely a form of psychopathic violence, individual, explicable only via family legacies of madness and unpredictability. In this, the show replicates the reliance of many popular-culture texts on individual pathology as the driver of plot. This widespread tendency to explain events as the result of human and personalized actions, instead of reaching for ideological, systemic, or larger-scale explanations, restages the conflict between self and context that I am tracing here.

The Expressionist Landscape

The circulation of political models uncoupled from material contexts reinforces the series's treatment of both landscape and politics as expressionist, at least in part: what is depicted as the natural world or the political context is in fact a construct that prioritizes the needs of the narrative, the emotional demands of a scene, and the visual impact of a particular effect. As a visual tendency long native to mainstream American cinema and television, the expressionist treatment of nature has been exacerbated by the advent of computer-generated imagery; today, the natural world is thoroughly designed and constructed as a spectacle built to serve the needs of the narrative.

In the tense and beautiful scene of the Battle of Winterfell (season 8, episode 4), for example, the human forces have gathered around Winterfell to await the attack of the White Walkers. It is a dark and worried night, and the tension is created through multiple scenes of preparation and anticipation, with characters expecting the worst in absolute darkness and eerie silence. The close-ups of the darkness really work to transmit a feeling of fear and anticipation, but in reality a landscape covered in snow and ice is not actually that dark: even the smallest ambient light is amplified by the crystals in snow and ice. Creating this scene in a computer-generated environment means that nature is reframed to fit narrative demands, and the natural landscape is prevented



Daenerys (Emilia Clarke) reviews a razed King's Landing.

from asserting its material properties and behavior. Thousands of warriors on horseback with flaming swords would have looked different in a snowy environment that followed natural material properties and allowed the rules of the physical universe to assert themselves. The scene would still have been otherworldly, but without the excessive darkness that CGI facilitates in its denaturalization of nature.

Given the necessary distance between reality and representation, and the freedom of the show to treat its spaces and concepts according to its own narrative rules, such concerns might seem irrelevant. But the show's expressionist treatment of landscape is meaningful, especially when politics and ideologies are also treated expressionistically for emotional effect. A close analysis of this treatment of nature and politics uncovers a paradoxical parallelism between contemporary political inaction in relation to climate change and the show's own blind spots. The situation in Westeros reflects contemporary states of nonknowledge: a political refusal to listen and act, a reluctance to connect evidence into causal narratives. Today's political bodies also behave as if there is

no ecology, just lists of unrelated facts, narratives that inspire belief and disbelief, and a tendency to amplify human power and downplay human responsibility.

By describing the Winter in Westeros as a season, the creators of *Game of Thrones* try to bypass the need for explanation; because seasons are a natural phenomenon, the strange duration of the seasons in Westeros is supposed to be taken as a given, as a mysterious trait of that world. Climate change, on the other hand, is not a season: it is a dysfunction of seasonal realities that human behaviors, technologies, energy consumptions, and political choices have caused. Thus, both in Westeros and on Earth today, there is a form of denaturalization embodied in the weather. Seasonality, weather patterns, seasons: these once were measures of time, measures of a certain order in the world. "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" wrote Percy Bysshe Shelley in his "Ode to the West Wind" in 1819. Any such pattern of cosmological order that unites the scale of the universe with the scale of humans is gone in Westeros, troubled by the unpredictability of the seasons, and troubled for Earth today, too.

My ambivalences feel doubled to me, now, in the wake of the series's end: every issue I identify in how *Game of Thrones* navigates its political and ecological choices partly mirrors current political realities, and runs counter to what should be today's visions and priorities. The spectacles of scarcity in *Game of Thrones*—destroyed cities and villages, an icy world that cannot grow anything, looted cities and war-ravaged fields, and frozen villagers found dead on their beds—are counteracted by spectacles of spontaneous abundance, with grain imported from somewhere else, a thousand new ships commissioned and built in a matter of months, a new army paid and recruited to fight a war. This is an old-fashioned colonial point of view: a settler world in which “other” spaces are perennially available for the extraction of resources—gold, materials, food, and people—to support the colonial centers of power.

While the colonial extraction fantasy continues to treat the world as a space of magical abundance that can be instrumentalized, capitalized, and appropriated, recent apocalyptic films and texts offer escape fantasies, safe havens that provide reprieve from a destroyed or exhausted world that has been ravaged by destruction, extraction, and instrumentalization. In *World War Z* (Marc Forster, 2013) it is the North; in *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009), a pristine and presumably uninhabited Africa; in *Elysium* (Neill Blomkamp, 2013), an idyllic suburban space station where all labor is done by robots; in *Interstellar* (Christopher Nolan, 2014), a new Earth.

Let me make the parallel blatant and memorable: the rulers of *Game of Thrones* behave as if they can order food, armies, and ships through Amazon. Many people on Earth today sometimes behave as if they can conjure up more oxygen with an app or refreeze the melting ice through CGI, as if one could just order up another Earth for home delivery. Rethinking the position of human actions within an ecological framework involves more than just considering the weather. It requires the recognition of the rootedness and embeddedness of human culture within a dense and expansive network of beings and meanings.

Notes

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6. Jamie Sims, “George R. R. Martin Answers Times Staffers’ Burning Questions,” *New York Times*, October 16, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/10/16/t-magazine/george-rr-martin-qanda-game-of-thrones.html.
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 14. Emily Todd VanDerWerff, “*Game of Thrones*: Why Time Suddenly Seems to Pass So Damn Fast in Season 7,” *Vox*, August 1, 2017, www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/1/16072066/game-of-thrones-time-passes-fast-quick. Also see Kathryn VanArendonk, “Is the Passage of Time a Problem for *Game of Thrones*?” *Slate*, August 22, 2017, <https://slate.com/culture/2017/08/game-of-thrones-season-7-timeline-has-chronology-problems.html>.
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 22. As if to reference modern historical contexts, after the fight against the White Walkers in Winterfell, Daenerys declares, “We have won the Great War. Now we will win the Last War,” referring to the battle against Cersei in Kings Landing (season 8, episode 4).