Review #66 : *Game of Thrones* (2013)

A Horror Fantasy about Feuding Kingdoms, ugly violence and lurid sex

TRAILER

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpJYNVhGf1s

Game of Thrones is a **dense and complex epic** set in a quasi-medieval fantasy-land with sweeping *Braveheart* shots of warrior hordes. Shot largely on location in the fields and hills of Northern Ireland and Malta, *Game of Thrones* is all about **rival dynasties vie for control over the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros** — in this universe of dwarfs, armour, wenches, braids and loincloth, summers are measured in years, not months, and winters can extend for decades. The strange temperatures clearly are not the fault of a reliance on inefficient HVAC systems, so given the bizarre climate of the landmass at the center of the bloody disputes — and the series rejects no opportunity to showcase **gruesome violence** such as **graphic beheading, disembowelling and amputations**, rapes, pregnant women stabbed in the stomach, crucified slaves, sacrificial slaughter of horses, porn torture and off-screen castration, or to offer a slashed throat close-up — you have to wonder *what all the fuss is about*.

Like *The Tudors* and *The Borgias* on Showtime and the *Spartacus* series on Starz, *Game of Thrones* is a costume-drama sexual hopscotch, even if it is more 'sophisticated' than its predecessors. It says something about current American attitudes towards sex, that with the exception of the equally lurid and awful *Californication*, nearly all eroticism on TV is past tense. The imagined historical universe of *Game of Thrones* gives license for full-frontal nudity, unhindered bed-jumping and blow-jobs in brothels, orgasms and post-coital boredom — here sibling intimacy and same-sex attraction is hardly confined to emotional exchange. **There is far too much stuff in it to have any time for that nonsense.**

The true perversion, though, is the sense you get that all of this nonchalant illicitness has been tossed in for men only, though I do not doubt that there are women in the world who read books like Mr. Martin's. *Game of Thrones* is boy fiction patronizingly turned out to reach the population's other half through strong feministic characters such as Daenerys and Cersei Lannister.

Since the arrival of *The Sopranos* more than a decade ago, HBO has distinguished itself as a corporate auteur committed to examining the way that institutions are made and how they are upheld or fall apart : the Mafia, municipal government (*The Wire*), the Roman Empire (*Rome*), the American West (*Deadwood*), religious fundamentalism (*Big Love*). When the network ventures away from its instincts for real-world sociology, as it has with the vampire saga *True Blood*, things start to get even worse. *Game of Thrones* serves up a lot of confusion in the name of no larger or really relevant idea beyond sketchily fleshed-out notions that **war is ugly, families are insidious and power is hot**. If you are not averse to horror fantasy aesthetic, the series might be worth *partial* effort — while skipping generously some scenes. Anyway, you will hunger for TV series to get back to the business of languages for which we already have a dictionary...

SEASON 2

Review by Neil Genzlinger

The new season of this dense medieval fantasy serves up a whole **bunch of wartime posturing, a seemingly endless number of would-be rulers and the usual sex and violence**. But it sure doesn't give viewers much to latch onto.

In the second-to-last episode of season 1, *Game of Thrones* ate its own heart by killing off its main and **most noble character, Ned Stark**, who was played by **Sean Bean**, perhaps the best-known actor in this cast-of-thousands extravaganza. Yet *no one* replaced him as the focus of the series. Ned's assorted children are now floating around and might turn into something important but it's hard to tell, because **so many plotlines have been set in motion** that in any given week none of these offspring get enough screen time to evolve into the kind of layered character who can sustain a series.

In the opening credits, top billing now goes by default to **Peter Dinklage**, who plays Tyrion Lannister, younger brother of Cersei and Jaime, the incestuous twins who spawned Joffrey. Tyrion is just about the only character developing any complexity. Maybe even a **glimmer of a human conscience** in this beastly world. Everyone else is busy preparing for war, though against whom seems to be almost random, as if enemies and allies were assigned by throwing darts at a wall chart. Referring to one of those who are gathering armies and staking a claim to the throne, the excellent Cersei (**Lena Headey**) winks : '*How many is that now ? Five ? I've lost count*.'

So far, the rough weather and the invaders from the North have mostly been hinted at, vague threats that don't seem in any hurry to materialize. To this point we've seen only a **bunch of petty pretenders jockeying for a throne that, frankly, doesn't seem all that desirable to start with**.

Some people love this kind of stuff of course, and presumably those addicted to the George R. R. Martin books on which the series is based will immerse themselves in Season 2, just as they did in Season 1. *Will anyone else ?* You have to have a fair amount of free time on your hands to stick with such a show, **and a more than low reward threshold**. If decapitations and regular helpings of bare breasts and buttocks are all you require of your TV, step right up, we do not belong to the same world.

I suppose it's possible to make a decent *no-character-is-safe* show nowadays ; a series needn't have a sympathetic major figure if its evil and ambiguous ones somehow shed light on **human condition**. But in almost every episode, *Game of Thrones* seems mostly to be **presenting vileness for voyeurism's sake**. You wince every time Joffrey, a sadist, comes on the screen, and not in an '*Oh, I wonder what nasty thing he'll do next*' sort of way. If you find yourself looking forward to Joffrey's scenes, there's definitely *something wrong with you.*

What a shame, and what a waste. There were definitely good ideas in the creation process of this saga.

***A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE* BY GEORGE R. R. MARTIN**

Anyone familiar with Martin's slowly metastasizing epic — it began as a trilogy in 1996 and now runs to five volumes of a projected seven, each around a thousand pages long — will find it hard not to see a clearly inspiration by the **Wars of the Roses**. The series traces the internecine **power struggles among a group of aristocratic clans**, each with its castle, lord, heraldic arms, and lineages, following the not entirely accidental death of King Robert I of the Seven Kingdoms in the first novel. Robert had seized the throne from young Princess Daenerys's father at the end of a previous civil war, thereby ending the Targaryens' three-century-long rule. The civil wars that follow Robert's death will stretch from Westeros across the Narrow Sea to the exotic East, where Dany Targaryen, as we know, plans to make her own power play.

These bloody struggles take place in a world whose culture is somewhat familiar-looking — Martin gives the civilization of the Seven Kingdoms a **strong medieval flavour** — but classified as *fantasy*. Westeros may have castles, drawbridges, knights, squires, jousts and ladies ; the City of King's Landing may look a lot like late-medieval London, but it also has giants, shape-shifters (*wargas*), blue-eyed walking dead (*wights*), seasons that last for decades — and, of course, dragons. At the end of the first novel, Daenerys emerges from a fire holding three newly hatched specimens that, you suspect, will greatly improve her chances of gaining the throne.

Against this **wildly inventive supernatural backdrop**, the books' characters otherwise engage in a good deal of unsentimental fornication. Since the hit HBO TV adaptation of Martin's books began airing in April 2011, the show's **graphic representations of violence** (you lose count pretty early on of the times blood pumps out of gaping throat wounds) **and of sexuality** (of female nudity in particular) hasn't yet prevented the show from being a tremendous hit. This is, in part, a testament to the way in which *fantasy* (TV, movies, games) has moved ever **closer to the center of mass culture** over the past decades, as witness the immense success of the *Lord of the Rings* , the *Harry Potter* or *Hunger Games* phenomenon. I suppose *Game of Thrones* has attracted many viewers who wouldn't ordinarily think of themselves as people who enjoy the fantasy genre, because they have a great deal to do with the **complexity and quality of Martin's novels, characterization, and overall tone** — something very similar to Greek and Roman Classic **legends of gender and power**, which have fascinated readers for centuries.

SYNOPSIS

The first novel introduces the present king, **Robert of House Baratheon**, as a Henry VIII. Robert's wife, **Queen Cersei** (like the sultry witch in the *Odyssey*) belongs to House Lannister, a wealthy, golden-haired, black-souled clan who are the Boleyns to Robert's Henry VIII : the patriarch, the cold-blooded Tywin Lannister, endlessly schemes on behalf of his unruly children and siblings by whatever means may be called for.

The royal marriage was, indeed, one of political convenience. The Lannisters supported Robert's rebellion with money and arms, and Tywin aims to see his descendants on the throne. As the first novel unfolds we understand that the marriage has failed — not least because Cersei prefers her twin brother, the handsome knight Jaime, who is in fact the father of her three children. The most interesting member of the Lannister family — and by far the most interesting male character in the series — is the other brother, **Tyrion**, a hard-drinking, wise dwarf whose outsider status gives him a soulfulness his relations lack.

Staunchly loyal to Robert and just as staunchly wary of the evil Lannisters is **Eddard Stark of Winterfell**, the King's Hand or chief minister, a gruffly ethical northern lord who, along with his family — his wife Catelyn, their five children, and a bastard whom he has lovingly raised as his own — provides the violent goings-on with a **strong emotional focus**. After Robert dies during a hunting accident engineered by his wife's relatives, Ned finds himself locked in a **struggle for the regency with the Lannisters**, who have placed Cersei's eldest son, Joffrey, a Caligula-like teenaged sadist, on the throne. But because the high-minded Ned is insufficiently ruthless, his plan backfires, with fatal results for himself and the Stark family. One of the pleasures of Martin's series is the **grimly unsentimental, rather Tacitean view it takes of the nature and uses of power at court**. Often, the good guys here do not win.

Indeed, the shocking climax of the first book — Joffrey's surprise execution of Ned, who up to this point you'd figured was the protagonist — is a strong sign that Martin's narrative arc is going to be far more surprising than you could have guessed. **A sense that brutal, irreversible real-**

life consequences will follow from the characters' actions — rare in serial novels and almost unheard of in TV series, which of course often depend on the on-going presence of popular characters (and actors) for their continued appeal — is part of the **distinctive tone of Martin's epic**. I suspect that one reason *Game of Thrones* has seduced so many of my writer friends, people who have either no taste for fantasy or no interest in TV, is precisely that its willingness to mete out harsh consequences, rather than dreaming up ways to keep its main characters alive for another season, feels more authentic than anything even the best series in this new age of TV can provide.

After Ned's death, the **multiplying plotlines adhere**, for the most part, to the various Starks. The widow Catelyn (splendidly played by **Michelle Fairley**), a complex character who oscillates between admirable strength and dangerous weakness, and her eldest son, **Robb**, lead a new civil war against the triumphant Lannisters. Her son **Bran**, crippled after being unceremoniously defenestrated by the corrupt **Jaime Lannister**, finds that he is gifted with second sight ; the beautiful young **Sansa**, once betrothed to Cersei's son Joffrey, now finds herself a terrified political hostage in King's Landing ; and the plain but spirited **Arya**, a girl of nine when the story begins, is separated from the rest and starts on an unusual spiritual and emotional journey of her own.

And then there is **Jon Snow**, ostensibly Ned Stark's bastard. The most sympathetic of the younger generation of male Starks, Jon is a spirited but troubled youth who, in the first novel, goes off to join something called the Night's Watch. Informally known as *Crows*, this black-clad cohort, part monk and part warrior, vowed to celibacy and trained to arms, culled from the realm's rich stores of bastards, criminals, and political exiles, man the Wall, a fabulous seven-hundred-foot-high edifice that runs across the entire northern border of Westeros. Clearly modelled on Hadrian's Wall, one of Martin's most striking creations, it is meant to protect the realm against the giants, monsters, undead, and the unruly clan of Wildlings who inhabit the frozen region to the north — and who, when the action of *A Song of Ice and Fire* begins, have begun, terrifyingly, to move southward for the first time in thousands of years. **The novels are strewn with ominous portents** — not least, a red comet that illuminates the sky for much of the second novel — **of an imminent, cataclysmic confrontation between the supernatural and natural worlds**.

The Wall is one of the three centres of the sprawling action, the other two being King's Landing in the Italianate South, where the Lannisters endlessly machinate, and **the exotic Eastern lands beyond the Narrow Sea**, where Daenerys plots her comeback. In the HBO series, shot mostly in Ireland and on Malta, each locale has its own colour palette : cool blues and hard whites for the Wall, tawny soft-focus gold for King's Landing, and saturated tropical hues for the East.

Martin renders the Eastern cultures in particular with **Herodotean gusto** : the nomadic, Scythian-like Dothraki, to one of whose great warlords Daenerys is bartered when the saga begins ; the quasi-Assyrian city-states of Qarth, Astapur, and Meereen, with their chattering merchants and slavers ; the decadent port of Braavos, a cross between Switzerland and Venice, whose moneylenders finance the Westerosi wars.

But what keeps you riveted, in the end, are the **characters and their human dilemmas**. Jon Snow on the frozen Wall, **torn between family loyalty and duty to his vows** ; Daenerys, far away in the burning Eastern deserts, learning the art of statecraft even as she dreams of love ; the vindictive Lannisters and fugitive Starks, **conniving and being betrayed** by their various bannermen : all the characters suggest why Martin likes to paraphrase William Faulkner's remark, in his Nobel speech, that the only great subject is '***the human heart in conflict with itself***'.

Inevitably, the TV series can't reproduce, or must violently compress, much of the novels' most interesting techniques and most entertaining material. **A striking feature of the novels is that each chapter is narrated by a different character**. This device — which the directors of the HBO adaptation do not attempt to reproduce cinematically — gives the sprawling goings-on a lively texture, and can have a ***Rashomon*-like effect**, since it often turns out that the perspective we have on a character or event is partial, or biased, or simply wrong. One pleasure of reading the series is that you constantly have to revise your opinions and theories about the characters as the multiplex tale evolves. People often talk about Tolkien as Martin's model, but the deep, Christian sentimentality of the world-view expressed in *Lord of the Rings* is completely foreign to the Martin, who has, if anything, a tart Thucydidean appreciation for the way in which political corruption can breed narrative corruption, too.

Martin's medieval narrative, the distinctly Anglo-Saxon milieu alternating with exotic 'oriental' locales, everywhere bears traces of the author's **deep affection for the rather old-fashioned boys' adventure stories** that, he has said, formed him as a writer — not least Walter Scott's crusader romance *Ivanhoe*, but also Arthur Conan Doyle's *The White Company* and Thomas B. Costain's *The Black Rose*, stories in which European men have grand adventures when they wander into exotic, often Eastern cultures and climates. Yet Martin is **drawing a line between his work and what he considers as an earlier, more 'naive' phase of fantasy literature**.

The purest expression of this disdain for naive 'romance' is put in the mouth of the dwarf, Tyrion, who understands better than any other male character what it means to be on the outside — **on the other side of the myth**. After a battle, he declares that '*he is done with fields of battle, thank you…. All that about the thunder of the drums, sunlight flashing on armour, magnificent destriers snorting and prancing? Well, the drums gave me headaches, the sunlight flashing on my armour cooked me up like a harvest day goose, and those magnificent destriers shit everywhere*.' *Game of Thrones* is actually a **mock-medieval epic** that constantly asks us not to be fooled by romance and chivalry, to see beyond the glitter to the gore, to the harsh reality that power leaves in its wake, whatever the bards may sing. Martin's willingness to **question the traditional allure of his own genre** gives his epic an **unusually complex and strongly subversive texture**.

Almost from the start, Martin weaves a **controversial feminist thread** into his grand tapestry. It begins early on in the first book, when he introduces the two Stark daughters. The eldest, Sansa, is an auburn-haired beauty who loves reading courtly romances, does perfect needlework, and always dresses beautifully ; in striking contrast to this conventional young woman is the horse-faced younger daughter, Arya, who hates petit point and would rather learn how to wield a sword. Later on, she gets a sword that she sardonically names 'Needle'. The two girls represent two paths — **one traditional, one revolutionary** — that are available to Martin's female characters, all of whom, at one point or another, are starkly confronted by proof of their **inferior status in this culture**. In a moment from the second novel that the HBO adaptation is careful to replicate, Ned Stark's widow Catelyn realizes that Robb doesn't think his hostage sisters are worth negotiating for, although his murdered father would have been : they're simply not worth what a man is. Whatever the prurient thrills they provide the audience, the TV series' graphic and exploitive

use of women's bodies also function as a constant reminder of what the main female characters are escaping *from*. It's significant that the older female generation tend to be less successful and more destructive in their attempts at self-realization, while the younger women, like Arya and Daenerys, are able to **embrace more fully the independence and power** they grasp at. **Cersei Lannister** is a figure whose propensity to evil, we are meant to understand, results from her perpetually thwarted desire for independence, as is made clear in a remarkable speech she is given at the end of *A Clash of Kings* : '*When we were little, Jaime and I were so much alike that even our lord father could not tell us apart. Yet even so, when Jaime was given his first sword, there was none for me. We were so much alike, I could never understand why they treated us so differently. Jaime learned to fight with sword and lance and mace, while I was taught to smile and sing and please. He was heir to Casterly Rock, while I was to be sold to some stranger like a horse, to be ridden whenever my new owner liked, beaten whenever he liked, and cast aside in time for a younger filly. Jaime's lot was to be glory and power, while mine was birth and moonblood*.'

Cersei is a portrait of a tragic pre-feminist queen — **someone out of Greek drama, a Clytemnestra-like figure who perpetrates evil because her idea of empowerment rises no higher than mimicking the worst in the men around her**. By contrast, **Daenerys Targaryen** can be seen as a model of a new feminist heroine. Apart from the Starks, it is she who commands our attention from book to book, learning, growing and evolving into a real leader. We first see her as a timid bride, sold by her whiny brother Viserys, the Targaryen pretender, to a savage nomadic warlord whose men and horses the brother wants to secure for his own claim. But eventually Dany edges her brother aside, wins the respect of both the warlord and his macho captains, and grows into an impressive political canniness herself. This evolution is pointed : whereas Viserys feels entitled to the throne, what wins Dany her power is her **empathy, her fellow feeling for the oppressed** : she, too, has been a refugee, an exile. As she makes her way across the Eastern lands at the head of an increasingly powerful army, she goes out of her way to **free slaves and succour the sick**, who acclaim her as their 'mother'. ***She doesn't seize power, she earns it***. What's interesting is that we're told she can't bear children : like Elizabeth I, **she has substituted political for biological motherhood**. Unlike the frustrated Cersei, Daenerys **sees her femininity as a means, rather than an impediment, to power**. And so Martin's saga goes to considerable lengths to create alternatives to the narratives of male fantasy literature. George R.R. Martin's *magnum opus* is a remarkable feminist epic.