

The end of *Game of Thrones*: Spectacle versus art

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Game of Thrones ended its eighth and final season one week ago.

Since its pilot episode first aired in 2011, the HBO medieval-fantasy drama has become a global phenomenon. The final season drew an average international audience of at least 44 million people per episode. Tens of millions more are expected to watch the show in the coming days through pirating and other means.

While, in the US, the season finale was the most-watched scripted finale since 2004, the last season has also generated a public backlash. Only 37 percent of the audience liked the final season, according to Rotten Tomatoes, whereas the rest of the series has had an average audience approval rating of 93 percent.

Based on the popular novels of George R. R. Martin, the series revolves around two dynastic families, the Starks and the Lannisters, fighting a brutal civil war set in a fictitious, late-medieval fantasy world. To the east, Daenerys (Emilia Clarke), the exiled daughter of a third, and recently overthrown, dynasty, liberates slaves with her three dragons, intending to reclaim the throne and establish a better world. However, far in the north, an army of resurrected dead prepares an invasion to destroy them all. (Previous reviews can be found [here](#) and [here](#).)

The eighth season begins as Daenerys and her army join with the Starks at the northern city of Winterfell to fight the army of the dead. In the past season, this coalition tried to establish a ceasefire with their enemy Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey), who resides over “the iron throne” in the capital, King’s Landing. Cersei has unsurprisingly betrayed them, sending no army. Her twin brother and incestuous lover, Jaime Lannister (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau), angered by her actions, leaves to join the “army of the living.”

Nearly all the series’ characters, whose lives and goings-on have been divided between different story arcs for seven seasons, assemble for the final battle at Winterfell. In the second, and most compelling, episode, written by Bryan Cogman, intimate moments unfold between the characters as they consider their relationships in the face of death. The viewer gets a taste of the healthiest aspect of the show: complicated characters, played by gifted performers, presented

compassionately and humorously in the dark world they inhabit.

In the third episode, the battle at Winterfell, the exhaustive preparations taken against the dead prove completely useless. Despite many tools at their disposal, supernatural and otherwise, the defenders are overwhelmed by the dead, who apparently kill just about everyone. A mood of despair predominates. The struggles and accomplishments of the various characters, built up over years, suddenly seem ineffective and pointless.

The episode concludes with one of the main characters, Arya Stark (Maisie Williams), appearing out of nowhere, and killing the leader of the dead, which results in the destruction of the rest of them. While the day is saved, one is left with a sense of meaningless completion to the show’s central arc.

The last three episodes are devoted to a final twist: the dragon queen, Daenerys, who has fallen in love with Jon Snow (Kit Harington), becomes increasingly vengeful, insecure and isolated—one of her dragons is killed by Cersei, as is her closest female aide. Jon has revealed that he is actually her nephew, making him the rightful heir to the throne. Though pledging undying loyalty, he distances himself from her.

In the fifth, and most controversial, episode, Daenerys, despite obliterating her Lannister enemies, turns on the civilians of King’s Landing themselves. She burns a city of one million people to the ground in an act of utter destruction with no strategic value, inciting her own soldiers to a rampage against the defenseless population, including soldiers of Cersei who have surrendered. It is a difficult-to-watch half hour of wanton murder and rape. Cersei and Jaime, who has returned to his sister, both die.

In the final episode, though reluctantly continuing to follow the “mad queen,” Jon becomes convinced that he must kill Daenerys—and he does. The throne is symbolically melted by her surviving, bereft, dragon. The whole series ends with the crippled, but supernaturally all-knowing Bran Stark (Isaac Hempstead Wright), now in his early 20s, elected king. Jon is exiled to the far north. Certain well-liked side characters, now in important positions of government, spend one of the final scenes arguing about whether to spend money on brothels or ships.

While viewer hostility to the final season is not unanimous, and contains within it heterogeneous opinions, the most widely shared sentiment is that the final season was rushed, making its plot unbelievable and cartoonish. A petition to remake the eighth season with “more competent” writing has gathered one and a half million signatures, a significant phenomenon in its own right.

Certain cast members have also hinted their dissatisfaction. Kit Harrington, for example, when asked in an interview to use one word to summarize the final season, replied, “disappointing,” before awkwardly catching himself and changing his answer to “epic.” Emilia Clarke, in a widely circulated video, balks and smirks when asked for her assessment of the last season, sarcastically replying, “best season ever.”

The critical response seems generally healthy. It suggests that audiences would prefer a sophisticated, realistic story, focused on character development and meaningful explanation—not vapid battle scenes, hollow character development and other mainstays of Hollywood spectacle. It further suggests dissatisfaction with the trivial disposal of the series’ central arc, as well as the cynical and banal note on which the show ends.

While Season 8 is the series’ worst, it would be naïve to think that these themes and problems emerged from nowhere. *Game of Thrones* has always had two sides.

On the one hand, the show presents a relatively complex, morally ambiguous world, in which nonsensical portrayals of good versus evil are exposed as self-serving lies of the elite. In place of Christian-patriotic themes characteristic of the genre, the show tries to understand the material motivations behind characters and their intrigues. With no shortage of talented actors, the viewer feels empathy towards their struggles and development. Flawed and, at first, repugnant figures—such as the Lannisters—are not portrayed as evil incarnate but rather as products of their changing conditions.

On the other hand, *Game of Thrones* frequently jettisons artistic inquiry, preferring to shock the viewer with sadism, pornography and gratuitous violence. For example, the writers spend far more time hammering the viewer with Daenerys’s desecration of Kings Landing than producing a compelling explanation as to *why* it takes place.

It is not that violence or sexuality in various forms should be taboo. Rather, it is that *Game of Thrones* frequently presents them in order to overwhelm the viewer, not advance the plot or deepen the audience’s understanding of the events and personalities. As in the rape of Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner) and the castration and torture of Theon Greyjoy (Alfie Allen) in past seasons, the show gratuitously lingers on depravity as a substitute for and in fact an evasion of artistic and psychological seriousness.

While the show can be praised for its attempt to understand the characters’ concrete social and material motivations, it also

presents acts of nonsensical violence, “mad” psychological twists, and viciousness as “realism.” The insufficiently demonstrated transformation of Daenerys into a mass murderer of hundreds of thousands of innocent peasants, workers and shopkeepers is one example of the show’s ideological and *a priori* commitment to misanthropy.

Such views cannot be narrowly blamed on showrunners David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. The conflation of realism with cynicism is characteristic of a whole social layer of upper- and upper-middle-class intellectuals, professionals and artists who, isolated, self-centered and pessimistic, scoff at the idea that society or history might have any progressive logic or potential.

Benioff and Weiss have now been tapped to direct the next *Star Wars* trilogy by Disney. Likely earning them over \$30 million, the financial pull may have informed their decision to end the series earlier than HBO or George R. R. Martin desired, encouraging spectacle over story in the final season.

Game of Thrones is not without merit. Millions of fans rightfully feel something for characters like Jon, Daenerys, Tyrion and Jaime, all of whom convincingly struggle with themselves and those around them to do right in near-impossible situations. The central storyline, which wove together flawed, but developing, characters against a collective threat to humanity undoubtedly struck a chord with its audience—many of them young people. Furthermore, the talent and dedication that went into its production (the cast, the crew, the composers, the designers) are beyond question.

In the final season, the worst elements of the show, irrationalism, gloom and spectacle decisively win out over its best: complexity, explanation and empathy. In this context, the mass public reaction in support of the better aspects of the show but against its narrow, simplistic and seemingly rushed ending, suggests a growing critical response to the unsatisfying character of the modern film and television industry as a whole.



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