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Topics in TV: HBO

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Alliances of *Game of Thrones*: On Screen and Off Screen

Game of Thrones, the crown jewel of HBO in recent years, is known for being the most pirated TV program in the history of TV because of its popularity. With a strong, global fan base, it truly exemplifies HBO's slogan "It's what connects us." It seems a little counter-intuitive how a fantasy show about wars dated back in ancient history can captivate the modern society where sci-fi shows dominate the TV industry. In the show, characters use only swords and arrows, fighting for the one and only iron throne of the seven kingdoms. Based on real battles that took place in history, wars in this show are portrayed as bloody and realistic. But as this paper will argue, the wars are not the true attractions of the show. Rather it is the alliances that emerge from wars.

Game of Thrones has its share of graphic violence and terror, from the Temple of Many Faces, the Red Wedding, to White Walkers. In the world of the story, no one is safe, not even (and especially) the kings and queens. Armies of royals and different houses fight and characters finesse against each other in order to survive. Occasionally, characters form alliances for purpose of their success. In the series, characters go on their individual journeys, and the audience never knows whom they will encounter. Thus, the audience engages in the world through debating on online forums about the anticipation and guessings of the character alliances.

Season 1 where the Stark family drift apart in their stories have established character reunions as the show's anchor. In Season 6 Arya Stark (Maisie Williams) heads back to

Winterfell and meets her long-lost sister Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner) as the “Lady of Winterfell”. The two sisters face the question of whether they are allies or enemies. At the start of the first season, the sisters share their lives together but often goes into skirmishes. Sansa is displeased at Arya’s unlady-like behaviors, and Arya does not want to be a lady-like Sansa. At the time of their reunion, Sansa finally learns her lesson of what being a lady means and takes charge of Winterfell. Arya also learns her lesson of what it takes to be a warrior through her journey across the narrow sea. However, the characters also start to question new things from their experiences. Many betrayals later, Sansa no longer trusts people so easily, and Arya too has issues with trust which she learns from being a warrior. But in the end, the two sisters overcome their trust issues and ally with each other. The reunion is especially exciting for the fans rooting for the two characters, as the actresses are good friends in their real life social media presence. In their reunion, the writer of the original GOT book George R.R. Martin makes an unexpected twist in the story with the presence of “Little Finger” Petyr Baelish to play with the convoluted feelings of the sisterhood, by having Petyr persuading Sansa to kill her sister. The sisters’ alliance is revealed in the house meeting where Arya kneels in the middle of the room, waiting to be executed. The color of the scene is dark and bleak, just like the dinner scenes in the Stark family in the first season. When Sansa says the words of execution, she orders the execution of Petre who is caught in surprise on one side of the room. With the addition of this twist, the coming together of the two sisters seem the more genuine. But of course, alliance is not only a survival strategy. The efforts that the two characters make in order to overcome the differences and come together require some additional source of incentives than their titles and physical encountering. When Sansa saves Arya and puts Petyr on trial, she says “when winter comes, the lone wolf dies and the pack survives”. The wolf is the sigil of the Stark family, Sansa’s phrase is

an analogy to how the Starks should survive in the difficulties and the long winter to come. Alliance is what makes the Stark family stand in the turmoils of the seven kingdoms.

Another house central to the story with interesting and perhaps an opposite perspective on alliance is the Lannisters. A commonly repeated phrase in the first few seasons when the patriarch of the family Tywin Lannister (Charles Dance) is alive is “A Lannister always pays its price”. In the show, the Lannisters are portrayed as rich and self-reliant. In later seasons we Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey) takes the throne in King’s Landing, she plays out a version of the family mantra of trusting nobody but oneself. In the later episodes, decision-making scenes which used to take place in the court with many people of power are moved to the map room where Cersei makes decisions alone, or with one other person who brings messages. The map room had been established as a place where she ponders about how to conquer the territory all for herself instead of negotiating with the people of power. The Lannisters add on to the philosophical debate within the show that they do not believe in alliance, and even when they do need to get into alliance, they do not have faith in them. This believe is manifested in the family history. The three children come from the family incest of Cersei and her twin brother Jamie Lannister who are lovers from the start of the show up to the story’s current development. When Margery and High Sparrows gain power in the royal court, Cersei makes alliances with them but later kill them by setting the whole court on fire, knowing that their power would perhaps soon go beyond control in a way unbeneficial to her. Kinship is not an excuse for alliances for the Lannisters. When Tyrion Lannister (Peter Dinklage) kills his father and when Cersei does not trust Tyrion when he returns to the King’s Landing with Daenerys.

The Lannisters definitely have reasons not to trust alliances. Cersei learns her lesson on trust when her daughter Myrcella is poisoned by the Dornish royals after she married her to the

prince of Dorne for political alliance purpose. The Lannisters have a special position in terms of the theme of allegiance inside the Seven Kingdoms. As royals, their connections to people in the Seven Kingdom is not so much of mutual alliance as it is about possession and betrayals.

Throughout the seasons, characters who are highborn citizens who are supposed to support the throne by default attempt to take it, and therefore classified as treason. Essentially, houses are assumed to be allies of the Lannisters because they have pledged their allegiance to the crown, but not many of them do so at will. A study of *Game of Throne's* characters through network theory show that the Lannisters actually have the most networks despite their doubts about alliances, more so than the Starks, even though the Lannister connections are mostly hostile.

(Liu, Albergante) The House of Lannisters brings up the topics of war and conquering.

Sometimes they do benefit from the kind of alliance that they force upon others, other times they bring trouble.

The same study found correlation between the appearance of houses in each episode and the number of viewers, which provides evidence that the rooting of characters and houses is an important incentive for views. The study found for example, that House Bolton is negatively associated with the number of viewers in the episodes they appear in, while House Targaryen brings positive association. (Liu, Albergante) The relation suggest two possibilities, or perhaps a combination of the two: Firstly, the fans might rewatch their favourite characters appearing on the episodes. And secondly, people may choose to watch or not watch episodes based on online reviews and buzzes of them, which means that the fan presence is significant enough to influence the business of the show. Either way, the audience's attachment to the characters is important to the show's success. When the audience is involved in the show, they would have goals in the show that sometimes meets the goal of the characters, and thus the audience can form "alliance"

with characters across the screen. Interestingly, the audience's viewing habits vary in different regions in the world. In a study on the French and Spanish fan response on *Game of Thrones*, Spanish GOT fervents say that they like to watch the show because they root for particular characters, while the French respond that they like the intellectual challenges that the show give them. However, the commonality that they have is that both fan groups like to watch the show alone, allowing them to form their opinions independently, before they bring their opinions to the diverse fan community. What the show does really well is that because of the wide varieties of characters and houses, the viewers can have their own minds in the show just like a character. A part of the challenge for *Game of Thrones* to satisfy the wide range of global audience, since the show is popular all around the world with both distribution and pirating, is to find a way to work with all the differences.

Season 4 Episode 3 *Breaker of Chains* features briefly a heart-melting moment of The Hound and Arya pretending to be father and daughter when they ran into a farmer and his daughter when they travel through a vast, empty land together. The two characters cannot be more different in their identities in the GOT world. They have an unfriendly start at the beginning of the show when The Hound kills Arya's innocent friend under the order of the ruthless Prince Joffrey. Even though it is not necessarily The Hound to blame for the boy's death, Arya still holds a grudge against The Hound's cruelty and have decided to avenge a list of people of that sort, including him. At this point in the show, Arya is not skillful enough to kill The Hound, while he sees her as a currency for his own journey, given Arya's highborn identity. In this episode, the farmer takes them in for shelter from a storm that is coming, feeding them and asking if they can stay till the end of the month to help him on the farm. However, the next morning when Arya wakes up, The Hound already beat up the farmer and took his silver. Arya

fled with The Hound, despite being angry at his cruelty towards the farmer. The scene leaves the audience with sympathy about Arya's frustration at The Hound's cynical attitude towards violence. "You're the worst shit in the Seven Kingdoms!" Arya yells to The Hound as she chases him down the field after he injures the peasant and takes his silver. "There's plenty worse than me. I just understand the way things are," The Hound replies.

This last shot in the field finally reveals the power dynamic between the characters through staging. Previous to this scene, Arya and The Hound are framed with some distance. They are either shown in separate shots and reverse shots, or The Hound would be positioned closer towards the camera, so it would be natural for him to appear bigger. The physical height difference is further hidden by conditions of the scene backgrounds. In the first scene in the field, the landscape is exaggeratedly slanted with hills, bridge, and river, so the two characters are never captured on the same level of field. The power dynamic between the characters are even - they each have a shot where they block one another because of their proximity to the camera. On the dinner table at the farmer's, the characters are all sitting down with The Hound and Arya on different planes of field, so the dynamic between Arya and The Hound is not apparent. What really stands out about the structuring of the frame is the contrast between the table side of Arya and The Hound and that of the farmer. The Hound and Sally sit in the front to the frame, so The Hound's mass is a significant contrast to the mass of the little Sally, which foreshadows the power takeover. In the last shot, the characters stand against one another, with Arya closer to the camera. The height contrast between the two characters become apparent, which goes along with Arya's frustrating failed expectation of The Hound to be kinder and less violent. The reason that Arya has The Hound on her list is that she wants to stop his violence against others. But her

previous attempts have failed, because The Hound, a strong and skillful fighter as he is, is no match for Arya the lady of Winterfell, at least up to this point of the show.

Throughout the scene, The Hound uses his physical strength to protect Arya, and Arya uses her verbal skills to cover up The Hound's violent nature. The brief journey that Arya and The Hound take over a few episodes in season four is the two characters' crossroad as Arya heads towards violence and The Hound towards redemption from violence. The Hound is born in a house of violence and violence had left mental and literal scars on him (part of The Hound's face is burnt when he was young by his brother who is now even more violent). At the start of the show, violence is a big part of The Hound's symbolic identity. He serves as the bodyguard for the most villainous prince Joffrey. Since then, The Hound attempts to protect the good people such as Sansa and later fled the capital to escape the institutional violence of the crown. Arya is born into the family of house Stark. She is raised to be a noble lady but instead she has been fascinated with being a warrior. She encounters some people who introduces her the way of violence and sees violence and conflicts taking them away from her life, such as the "dancing teacher" who is unjustly killed by royal command, John Snow the bestower of her "needle" who leaves for the war in the north, Jaqen H'ghar the faceless man whose whole life is devoted to the cause of killing, and The Hound. This scene serves as an inspiration for both characters, as The Hound establishes a relationship of protection and care rather than suspicion and killing, and Arya gets her power through her verbal skills, which foreshadows her becoming the killer of many faces. At the same time, in an attempt to overcome their differences, the two characters engage in a debate about violence, which they both have strong opinions of.

What is surprising and rewarding about this film sequence to those who root for the two characters is the surprising resemblance between Arya and The Hound due to the performance of

the actors. The relationship between The Hound and Arya therefore resembles that of a kinship, as the two characters in this scene put on an act to embody a father and a daughter constantly carrying their different opinions against one another. When the characters are praying at the table, the ravenous The Hound and Arya stare at the pot of soup featured in closeup shots. The Hound interrupts the farmer: “we ask the stranger not to kill us in our beds tonight for no damn reason at all”, followed by grabbing the pot of soup and dumping it in the bowl. Subsequently, Arya pours the soup in the same way, both of them making a lot of noise. “I’m so sorry”, she apologizes. Then The Hound and Arya both sip the soup loudly and ravenously while the farmer and his daughter watch on the other side of the table. The high quality sound design of the HBO production exaggerate the violent quality of their behaviors, which makes a juxtaposition with the kind and polite actual father and daughter pair.

The reason why alliances play such a strong role in the *Game of Thrones* stories is the dynamic combination of the characters. GOT characters are designed with very diverse background and values. With a lot of differences as the base, the stories can be filled up with conflicts and attempts of resolution. In a way, wars of ideas, as well as literal war, bring the characters to alliances. Sean T. Collin’s article about the anti-war message in *Game of Thrones* references to the writer of the show’s original book George R.R. Martin’s interview back in 2012 that he does not intend to shy away from giving the audience the emotional disturbance in the war scenes, feelings which people who are opposed to wars tend to forget. Martin said that “If you’re going to write about war and violence, show the cost. Show how ugly it is. Show both sides of it.” (Collins) The most memorable war in the series for many audiences is perhaps John Snow’s war against the army of White Walkers. In that scene, we get a spectacle in the depiction of the large army of white walkers as frozen walking-dead and the powerful Night King with

fiery blue eyes. And then the bloodshed takes place, in which the night army shreds Jon Snow's army into pieces. The terror of this war is what gives Jon Snow agency to ally with other armies such as the Bear Island and Daenerys.

In Season 7 Daenerys steps her foot into the Seven Kingdoms and meets Jon Snow. The two strike an alliance in the attempt to defend themselves against their common enemy the white walkers. Daenerys and John did not have a friendly start, as the former does not believe in the white walkers and the latter is unwilling to bend his knees to her. Their relationship gets an unexpected turn, when at the end of the season we see them kissing. This alliance has many character-specific as well as symbolic meanings. For the story of individual characters' perspective, Daenerys might for the first time find a love interest that respects her as the powerful queen and not an object of attraction, and Jon Snow finally finds someone whom he is willing to bend his knees to. From a symbolic perspective, Jon Snow is the "King in the North" while Daenerys is the "Mother of Dragons" and the queen in the south of the Seven Kingdoms. For the two characters so different and so opposite as such, the audience cannot help but wonder the impact of the allegiance on the story and the lives of all the characters involved. In the world of *Game of Thrones* where everyone fights for the throne, power is everything, raising the stake for allegiances. When two people of power strike an allegiance, so do the people that side with them, and this alliance of two people of very different background create a poignant sense of hope of survival of the characters and potentially a resolution for the Seven Kingdoms.

The fan community has mixed response about the relationship between Jon and Daenerys. On the one hand, both are likable characters, and many fans want both of them to succeed and get on the iron throne. But on the other hand, according to the story Jon and Daenerys are long lost nephew and aunt, despite neither character knowing about this. To be fair,

the show does not draw attention to this piece of information in the near episodes. However, the online community is buzzing with comments. Kim Renfro, a writer for *Insider* collected some fan responses and remarks in his article: “Though Targaryens have long practiced incest as part of their culture as a way to keep bloodline pure, some fans are still not used to the idea.”

(Renfro) Situations such as this are not commonly acceptable to the audience’s society, but they are real issues that they have to deal with in the real world. The challenge of the audience and the fan community is how do they come to face this fictional reality, when it is as much a real moral and political issue than a narrative one. It is a war that the fans get to participate in when they watch the show that come from the differences in personal judgement and social norms.

Situations like this make the opinion of the fan for the story not just of enjoyment, but a little more intricate. Being a fan is not just about appreciating the show, it is about being involved in the show’s universe, including debates with the plot.

Another explanation of the relation between wars and alliances in the story space can be explained through the analogy of the relationship between Brienne of Tarth and Jaime Lannister the kingslayer and kingsguard. Critic Inbar Shaham describes the story between the two characters as a “romantic comedy” in which the characters’ mutual despise towards each other turn surprisingly but pleasantly into love. In Brienne and Jamie are forced into a journey together unwillingly at first, when Brienne is instructed to escort Jamie as a hostage. But at one point in the journey, they are both kidnapped by mobsters on the road, thus putting them in the same situation, forcing them to ally with each other. In Season 3 episode 5, Jaime and Brienne are at Lord Bolton’s as highborn captives, and they are given a bath to clean themselves up. In that scene, Brienne is in the bathtub, when Jaime walks in with a sense of entitlement, ordering Brienne to get out, despite there being another tub. When Brienne refuses, Jamie takes off his

towel and gets in Brienne's tub completely naked, while she becomes irritated and curls herself up in the opposite corner. Later when Brienne gets angry at Jaime's attitude, she overpowers him by standing up to expose her naked body, giving him a showdown of her courage. Shaham points out that "as is customary in the first third of romantic comedy plotlines, their shared moments of intimacy are framed in a non-romantic, nonsexual context." (Shaham) What are supposed to be romantic gestures translate to the clashes of the two characters' differences. In the scenes where the two characters are both present since this road trip, shots and reverse shots are used to communicate the two characters' glances and reactions at each other. As their stories go on, the glances become more meaningful, gradually putting the two characters into the context of romance despite all their differences.

It is not so un-obvious that the viewers' relationship towards the tv series resembles somewhat like the one between Brienne and Jaime. Because of the multiple, intricate plot line, it is hard for the audience to remember the characters and their backstories when they first start watching. In the first episode, the show creators already leaves a lot of hints for later on. An example of this would be the Hound who killed the butcher's son under the instruction of Arya Stark. That scene inspires Arya later on to go on the journey of becoming a warrior to avenge for the dead boy. As the series progresses, the connection between the Hound and violence, and Arya with vengeance become more apparent. Presumably, the audience become more involved in the characters and attached to the show the more they watch them, because what they watch in the later episodes explain things later on. Besides the details that do not become significant later on which make the fans watch the show over and over again, there are also many suspenses that the show creators does really well in creating to make the audience want to expect the newest episode. Each episode is strategically terminated with suspenses such as the demise or

transformation of some important characters. The new information that the audience are given put the audience on a very different plane than their original assumptions about the situations in the characters.

If the relationship between the audience and the show is a romantic comedy, then it must be a process of learning from each other and in the meantime, learning about oneself. Shaham believes that an important part of romantic comedy is learning about learning about each others' differences on very different planes of fields. In addition, she writes that the learning process is also consisted of "self-acquaintance; of a revelation of hidden qualities and of acquiring good qualities; changing through learning a lesson, or education by imitation." (Shaham) Indeed, *Game of Thrones* is designed in a way relatable to many people by addressing issues in the real society, and its production team is marketed with some sort of transparency, in a way that is interactive to the audience. After filming season 5, Kit Harington reveals to the fans, after their shocking responses to the season finale, that his character Jon Snow is dead. Ultimately, the relation between the audience and the show is more one-sided than equal because of HBO's insistence on creative vision instead of big data from the audience like Netflix. (McAlone) However, GOT's alliance mindset extends to its fan community where they produce products such as games and DVDs to meet the needs of the audience. The series transcends its media as a television program with the establishment of its fan culture. An example in the alliance of the fans is the Arabic GOT Facebook fan page, the GoT-OAP. The members in the group have vastly different beliefs and identities. The only thing that they have in common is that they speak Arabic. However, the page is still able to maintain a safe space for people to discuss their opinions and insights of the show and how it relate to their own lives. The administrators of GoT-OAP writes in their co-authored letter, that they "try, generally, to avoid posting materials

on the page that directly link GOT to current politics, to ensure that followers from diverse political, tribal, religious, and ethnic backgrounds are not offended”. (Alhayek) The real world of the audience is still full of conflicts, especially in the middle east during the show’s showing. But at least in the fandom, HBO is able to create a world of acceptance through their show contents.

HBO’s series *Game of Thrones* explores the theme of alliance and transcend its definition beyond the world on screen, in an attempt to provide a resolution of how a world can contain the diversity of thoughts and opinions. Despite all its social commentaries on alliances, what makes the show so popular is the excitement that alliance brings.

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