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Written In Only to Be Excluded?
The Ethics of Screenwriting and Diversity in *Game of Thrones*

HBO's *Game of Thrones* was one of the most popular fantasy shows in recent memory, with the finale to its last season boasting tens of millions of viewers. While dedicated fans had some things to complain about concerning the series, such as the careless accidental inclusion of a Starbucks coffee cup in a dinner scene, there was a more serious ethical issue that stood out for many. In the third episode of the season, the show depicts a long-awaited battle between an army of undead zombies and the collective forces of the living, officially led by Queen Daenerys, who are defending a major northern city in the show, Winterfell. At the beginning of this epochal night battle, all of the surviving warriors from the nomadic group known as the "Dothraki" bravely charged in the first wave against the approaching army of the undead. As might be

Queen Daenerys Leads the Dothraki
Game of Thrones / HBO / Modified

predicted, this first wave was wiped out. This frontal assault of the Dothraki occurred without any real support, even though the writers had given the human coalition some of the best air support available in the fictional world of Westeros: two giant fire breathing dragons. After the battle for the north turned south, the army of mostly white-presenting human warriors retreated while the "Unsullied," a mechanized and efficient group of slave-soldiers played by black actors, covered the retreat with almost-total decimation of their numbers.

Amidst all this drama, many viewers attentive to issues of race and media were not amused. As Native American Dr. Adrienne Keene tweeted after the episode aired, "I've always felt like the Dothraki were portrayed like the … indigenous people in [Game of Thrones] and damn did they prove me right tonight. Just got rid of them. All. In the first 10 minutes. Totally disposable." Another Twitter user, R. O. Kwon, exclaimed, "Did they...really...just...kill off almost all of the POCish [People of Color-ish] people in the front lines of this battle, then turn them into zombies, then kill them all over again?" Godzilla Thee Stallion tweeted "Can we just take a moment to talk about how Dany's Brown Coalition was placed at the front of the formation? The expectation for them to not only die first but then hold the line for the northern wypipo to retreat was f[----] up given the fact that they are the 'outsiders.'" Airea D. Matthews put the lesson succinctly in a post-episode tweet: "Please know I noticed that all the brown and black soldiers died first (Dothraki and Unsullied). Lesson? Don't march North to fight in wight wars under any circumstance" (Rodriguez, 2019).

Regardless of the narrative steps and missteps in *Game of Thrones*, a significant ethical issue was raised by this episode. While there are fewer all-white casts in films about all-white

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characters, Hollywood still faces an "epidemic of invisibility" when it comes to the inclusion of diverse groups and ethnicities in films (Deggans, 2016). Some films, however, strive to live up to ideals of diversity and inclusion by involving more people of color as characters and as actors in their fictional worlds. But they face a new challenge: how should the characters played by actors of color, or closely resembling living people of color through their narrative details, be treated by writers, directors, and film makers? Are these characters to be major or minor, virtuous or viceful, pure or evil? Each choice brings with it potential objection given the cultural complexity of race and film.

One potential problem that has happened time and time again is portraying people of color in film, when they are included at all, through disabling "simpleton narratives." Zahra Mohamed describes this sort of use of characters of color: "an example is that these characters and their stories that are often told through a Eurocentric lens, where they are 'assisting' or 'tagging along' with a white character." In the case of *Game of Thrones*, this worry seems relevant, considering that the Dothraki (and the Unsullied) followed one of the main characters, the white-skinned and blond-haired Queen Daenerys, acting as her bodyguards and her loyal subjects until the gruesome end. To some, it seems like careless or even pernicious writing when these longtime characters are killed off so quickly to advance the story and to give more screen time to the main—and mainly white—characters. However, some might hold that it does not make sense to devote much time in an episode to secondary characters, those of color or not, and instead to focus on the main characters that the viewers watch the show for; perhaps the larger fault was the casting of so many main characters as white or as played by white actors, instead of how characters of color were treated in this specific battle scene. Another common problem with film is that they too often portray minorities or people of color as evil or as the narrative's villains. The Dothraki and Unsullied were not portrayed as villainous in *Game of Thrones*, but instead they seemed characterized as brave and loyal warriors. Was it a fitting move to have them bravely—and perhaps foolishly—charge into an epic battle they could not win? Or should the writers have stayed away from a situation that seemed to render the non-white characters as disposable pawns in a one-sided battle between equally-pale living and undead nobility?

Diversity in characters, and in actors, meets a new level of ethical complexity when we begin to consider how these characters are used or abused. Artists should have the freedom to create their art however they see best, but viewers and critics are also free to attend to the racial dynamics their works create, maintain, or seemingly promote to rapt viewers. Should characters of color always be good or powerful? Under what circumstances is virtuous conduct that erases them from a narrative—like the Dothraki and Unsullied—an ethically good feature of a film or series? As more diverse actors and characters are written into our cherished films and stories, questions about how they are to be treated and written into complex storylines will only proliferate.

Discussion Questions:

1. What values were at conflict in the reaction to the *Game of Thrones* battle scene and the actions of its characters of color? Do you agree with one side in this controversy?
2. What ethical standards or limits should filmmakers and writers be attentive to when writing characters of color into their works?
3. Should writers and filmmakers be limited to positive portrayals when incorporating people or groups traditionally left out of major cultural narratives?
4. Are there any circumstances where it is allowable to use actors of color or characters of color in roles that might cause offense to some viewers?
5. Why should writers and filmmakers consider real world implications for works of fiction like *Game of Thrones*?

Further Information:

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