Literalizing hyperobjects: on (mis)representing global warming in *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones*   *Markus Laukkanen*

HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), one of the most popular and influential pieces of audiovisual fiction of the past few decades, ended in 2019: its finale was viewed live by 19.3 million people in the U.S. alone. The series, a juggernaut of the so-called golden age of television (see Poniewozik 2015; Waldfogel 2017), was adapted from a critically and commercially successful book series (see Sheehan 2011), George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–Present) that has been instrumental in reimagining what contemporary fantasy can be. However, as the television series came to close in 2019, after eight seasons of continuously growing audience, it left a large portion of its viewers disappointed. Almost two million signatures were collected for a change.org petition to "Remake Game of Thrones Season 8 with competent writers." Why were the fans of the series so unhappy? This chapter suggests one possible answer, which is that the books and the TV series have been perceived as offering different confrontations with the Anthropocene and global warming. For all the differences between the books and their filmic adaptation, *A Song of Ice and Fire* lends itself to a reading in which Martin moves from a simple analogy into a reconstruction of the logic of global warming as a means of rendering it representable. This chapter argues that while the television series largely fails to adapt the core of what makes the books resonate as climate fiction, enough of climate change and global warming concerns were carried over into earlier seasons to create audience expectations that the last season appears to have abandoned.

A Song of Ice and Fire as climate fiction

Climate Fiction, or Cli-Fi, is defined as a subgenre of speculative fiction whose "pivotal themes are all about Earth, examining the impact of pollution, rising sea levels and global

warming on human civilization" (Ullrich 2015; Di Paolo 2018, 2). That global warming is a central theme of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones* has been proposed often by both fans and critics (Miller 2018). This thematic interpretation of the series is not an obscure one. The climate of Westeros, the primary setting in Martin's tale, is one of the great worldbuilding mysteries of the series. In this fantasy world winters and summers are irregular and last for years. The nature of these strange seasons has been a recurring subject of discussion by the series' fans: speculations have ranged from magical explanations to planetological theories (Reddit; A Forum of Ice and Fire). What remains, regardless of which explanation is correct, is the unfathomable nature of the climate of this world, and the imminent danger it poses to all humanity.

This chapter takes as its starting point a contention that a story about the sinister, magical winter that is threatening to engulf all of Westeros resonates so strongly with contemporary audiences largely because of its eerie parallels with the creeping effects and consequences of global warming in our real world. Both are existential threats that seem too complex and too distant to grasp. Both are perceived as problems for the future, and not everyone even believes in them. Winters, while irregular, do happen in Martin's fictional world. It is difficult for the characters located far away from the icy Northern frontier to believe that this winter will be different, that it will be an apocalyptic event, a second mythic long night. Meanwhile, in our reality, some argue that since climate has always been changing and since weather is just weather, there is no need to worry, no need to act yet. Alternatively, even if changes brought about by global warming are real, another denialist argument holds that they are not caused by humans—and anyway there is nothing we can do to stop them.

The rulers of Westeros are too preoccupied, constantly bickering with and plotting against each other, to make plans for what is coming, just as in our real world the sphere of global politics seems to lack the capability for appropriate action. To effectively tackle global

warming, one would have to rise above the immediacy of tangible economic demands and conflicting interests of the various nation states that inhabit our planet. In both Westeros and our world, token action is the norm. More troops might be sent to the wall of ice that guards the realms of men as members of the night's watch—an organization tasked but woefully unequipped to deal with the threat of the long night from beyond the wall. Meanwhile, in another world, commitments to reduce carbon emissions are regularly made and triumphally announced even as those very same emissions keep rising higher year after year.

The parallels are hard to miss. In one analysis, Marc Di Paolo goes into detail about the allegorical interpretation of the wall and those who man it as a commentary on climate change (in)action in our world (Di Paolo 2018, 243). He puts forth the idea that the extensive descriptions of food in *A Song of Ice and Fire*—depictions that have often puzzled readers— serve a thematic rather than merely an aesthetic function. As the series goes on, Di Paolo notes, the list of foods shrinks, communicating to the reader the threat of food-insecurity that is one of the more immediate effects of both climate change and of the apocalypse approaching Westeros (255). The big-picture message drawn from this type of allegorical reading can be powerful. As Charli Carpenter states: "The argument seems clear: if existing governance structures cannot manage emerging global threats, expect them to evolve or fall by the wayside" (Carpenter 2012).

But are we really looking at a clean and simple allegory where the parallels are difficult to miss? While the apocalyptic winter that seems to always be just around the corner does lend itself to a reading in which it stands in for global warming and the chaos it brings, the claim that *A Song of Ice and Fire* series concerns global warming must be qualified. After all, the first installment of the book series was published in the mid-1990's. The 1990's was a time when the greenhouse effect and global warming were already known, a time when they entered the larger discourse and when the first tentative steps were taken to reduce the

potential damage they might cause. That said, these concerns were not yet a centerpiece of the

wider cultural conversation (see Uekötter 2014, 129–130), and global zeitgeist was

preoccupied with the cultural anxieties surrounding the fall of the Berlin wall (Di Paolo 2018,

251). While I am not entirely convinced that Martin was unaware of global warming when he

began plotting his series, the environmentalist of the 1990s generally rallied around other

things, such as pollution, the health of the ozone-layer, the protection of rainforests and of the

oceans. Given this context, Di Paolo speculates that *A Song of Ice and Fire* is an example of

unintentional cli-fi. According to this argument, Martin pivoted the focus of the story toward

issues of global warming when he realized that, increasingly, readers were interpreting it that

way (Di Paolo 2018, 10).

Hyperobjects

I approach global warming via Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobjects—extremely large

and complex objects that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans

(Morton 2013(a), 1). One of the defining characteristics of hyperobjects is their viscosity.

Hyperobjects like global warming are sticky. Once they are recognized, it appears that they

have been everywhere all along. For Morton, humans exist within hyperobjects. They are all

around us and cast their terrifying shadows on all aspects of human life: a stranger at a car

park makes a comment to Morton about the weather, and Morton feels the oppressive

presence of global warming take over the conversation, whether it is acknowledged or not

(Morton 2013(a), 99). By Morton's logic, everything in our world is, of near deterministic

necessity, about global warming. This includes art, which in the time of hyperobjects must

automatically and directly include them (109). This argument finds purchase when discussing

a work of fiction like *A Song of Ice and Fire* which, I argue, is deeply concerned with the

logic of hyperobjects. The series' HBO adaptation is significantly newer than the books and is

a product of the age of climate consciousness: an age, as Morton puts it, after the end of the world (24).

If the magical winter of Martin's world is read as a direct analogy for global warming, the winter should be a viable candidate to be analyzed as a hyperobject within the fictional world of the series. I will, however, approach the question from a different angle: I propose that the whole series is about hyperobjects. While Morton's coinage is significantly newer than the beginning of Martin's series, I see compelling reasons to interpret the books as an attempt to grapple with two enormous elemental forces—or objects—that frame Martin's invented world, namely Ice and Fire. The name of the series has been an object of fan theories for a long time. The mystery is pointed out explicitly in the second volume of the series: "What is the song of ice and fire?" "It's no song I've ever heard" (Martin 1999, 876). A queen in exile, Daenerys Targaryen, asks the question of a disgraced knight, Ser Jorah Mormont, and it is unsurprising that the knight has no answer either: after all, how could he know about the hyperobjects that threaten to end his world, not only in Morton's sense of making the concept of the world obsolete (Morton 2013(a), 6), but also in a more literal sense.

Morton has enumerated five characteristics of hyperobjects, many of which overlap with each other. These characteristics are viscosity, nonlocality, temporal undulation, phasing and interobjectivity (1–2). Viscosity, which I explained earlier, stands apart from the other characteristics since it has to do with how hyperobjects are noticed, unlike the four others which all have to do with how they are perceived. Nonlocality means that no single local manifestation of a hyperobject is that hyperobject itself (48). Phasing refers to hyperobjects occupying a high dimensional phase space and being invisible to three-dimensional humans most of the time. Interobjectivity means that hyperobjects exist not as singular entities but as meshes, constituted by many different objects (83). From the point of view of my analysis these three characteristics collapse into nonlocality. It is not the hyperobject itself that we

perceive, but an interobjective mesh of different objects; the hyperobject is phased and as such not ever wholly present nor is it ever completely localized into one focal point: one character or object cannot represent the whole of the hyperobject. Lastly, temporal undulation refers to the unimaginably large timescales of hyperobjects. Hyperobjects distort temporal-spatial relationships, creating the feeling that we are already lost within them (55).

Robert Frost's poem "Fire and Ice" explicitly concerns the apocalypse and ponders how the world will end. The poem's answer is that the likelier culprit is fire, but if the world were to end twice, then ice would be just as effective. In a literal sense, the world ending by fire might refer to either warfare or to the sun expanding and consuming the Earth; ice, in this scenario, could then refer to a new Ice Age or the inevitable heat-death of the universe. Frost associates these elemental forces with human emotions: fire with desire, ice with hatred. Whether or not this poem is referenced in the name of the series—as I think it is—Martin, like Frost, clearly casts Ice and Fire as two massive forces, either of which might lead to the ending of the world. They are the dangerous hyperobjects casting their shadows on all things in the story.

The determining roles of Ice and Fire are highlighted in the series' belief systems. Both *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones* depict a religion in the world of Westeros based around these two forces, that of the red god R'hllor and of the Unnamed Lord of Ice. As Melisandre, a fire-worshipping priestess, explains the two forces to the skeptical smuggler Davos Seaworth: "On one side is R'hllor, the Lord of Light, the Heart of Fire, the God of Flame and Shadow. Against him stands the Great Other whose name may not be spoken, the Lord of Darkness, the Soul of Ice, the God of Night and Terror" (Martin 2000, 348). Melisandre sees the Heart of Fire and the Soul of Ice as opposites engaged in a mythic battle. If we follow this interpretation, as Di Paolo does by conceptualizing the magical winter as a direct analogy of global warming, Melisandre may be seen as a fiery environmentalist. For Di

Paolo, the character of Melisandre offers the lesson that radical environmentalist convictions alienate potential allies, something that can be ill afforded in the current fight against global warming (Di Paolo 2018, 248). This is a valid interpretation, although if we look at Ice and Fire as separate but connected hyperobjects, one of which—Ice—is aligned with environmental catastrophe whereas the other—Fire—signifies warfare, this simplistic dualism falls apart. Both Ice and Fire are destructive forces. They do not battle each other. Instead, they compound each other's effects, accelerating the story towards Frost's vision of an end of the world that happens twice over.

Westeros is brimming with conspiracy and mystery. "Dragons and darker things. … Old powers waken. Shadows stir" (Martin 2005, 14). There are always deeper currents at play. The world the story takes place in becomes strange, difficult to explain. What is told in the books can rarely be taken at face value, and often falls apart on closer inspection. *A Song of Ice and Fire* is long and expansive, nearing 1.8 million words and counting. There is an endless list of details that support a staggering variety of readings. This, in addition to the hyperobjective nature of Ice and Fire, creates a sense of being trapped within the story as if it too were a hyperobject. It seems there must be vast and unfamiliar things lurking underneath the surface, that teasing out those hidden forces might explain everything. The series' fandom is notorious for creating labyrinthine theories aimed at making sense of the true nature of Martin's imagined world[i]. The books call for a paranoid style of reading, and it is no coincidence that the cli-fi interpretation of the epic is often also referred to as a fan-theory (Segall 2018).

Compared to the books, the *Game of Thrones* TV series largely lacks the ever-present sense of the coming winter. Its threat is localized and limited to the northern storyline of Jon Snow, rather than existing at the periphery of the whole story. In the books, much is made of the summer's last harvest being ravaged by war, leaving Westeros woefully ill-prepared for

the coming winter. There are mentions of a lack of resources in the television adaptation as well, but awareness always stays at the level of off-hand remarks, as if relic-dialogues carried over from the books. The sense of being trapped within a hyperobject is utterly absent.

When it comes to representing the nonlocal and interobjective nature of hyperobjects, *Game of Thrones* fumbles. In the books, the Others act as harbingers of the hyperobject of Ice that threatens to consume Westeros. In the TV series, these beings, renamed as white walkers, are no longer personified manifestations of the nonlocal danger of winter but rather represent the primary danger themselves. Morton's definition of nonlocality is that "any 'local manifestation' of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject" (Morton 2013(a), 1). *Game of Thrones*, unlike its source material, fails to portray winter as a nonlocal issue; instead, it reduces it to a handful of magical beings led by the Night King—a character added by the show's scriptwriters but assigned such a central villain role that even the most devoted fans of Martin's work tend to forget that no such character exists in the series. Making the Night King the locus and endpoint of the magical climate catastrophe is a move that fundamentally weakens the show's thematic confrontation of the Anthropocene.

In the books both Ice and Fire manifest in multiple hyperobjective forms that are viscous and interobjective, at once local and nonlocal. Ice not only drives the undead army of the Others, but also powers the telepathic magic of the greenseer Bloodraven. It is the way in which the lavish descriptions of food are replaced by references to cannibalism; it is represented in the cold lips of Euron Greyjoy, a deranged prophet of an icy apocalypse; it lives in the endless labyrinthine systems of limestone caverns filled with darkness; it is remembered in the legend of the rat cook who feeds an unknowing king his own son baked into a pie, and much more. Likewise, Fire in the books is not only dragons and wildfire—a napalm-like alchemical concoction that burns hot enough to melt sand. It is also Lady Stoneheart, the vengeful reincarnation of Catelyn Stark; it is represented in the image of a

magician who climbs a ladder of fire; it is announced in the arrival of a comet that foretells doom; it lives in the obsidian candles burning in the cellars of the order of maesters' secretive stronghold, the Citadel, and much more.

This representational complexity from the books is also abandoned in the television show's conclusion. In the third episode of the show's last season Arya Stark destroys the Night King. That act alone ends the threat of winter altogether. If the winter in *Game of Thrones* represents global warming in any meaningful way—as has been argued in the discourse of the series' online fandom, in ad-monetized online entertainment-media and in the academy (see Di Paolo 2018; Segall 2018)—what are we to make of this ending? Does the series, inadvertently, suggest that the way to prevent a catastrophic climate future is to kill the villain responsible for global warming? Or that global warming is an insidious assault on humanity that originates from the outside and is orchestrated by a singular evil character? Does it communicate that others are literally responsible for the climate catastrophe, and we are merely its victims?

Metaphor and myth: On representing global warming

In a posthumously published collection of theological essays, C. S. Lewis, one of the founding fathers of modern fantasy, wrote, "In the enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction" (Lewis 2014, 57). Literalization of metaphors as a tool is not exclusive to speculative fiction, but it is often considered its defining feature (see Stockwell 2000; Chu 2019; McHale 2018). Many studies on the subject concern science fiction (SF) rather than fantasy, or the wider category of speculative fiction, yet most of this scholarship acknowledges that literalization of metaphors is a device common to all genres of speculative fiction, fantasy included. In Peter Stockwell's view, "[a] literal reading of a possibly

metaphorical deviant sentence cues up a science fictional (or surrealist, or magical, or other alternate) world,"and therefore "science fiction can be seen to treat metaphorical expressions and metaphorical worlds differently from other genres" (Stockwell 2000, 179)—this claim applies to fantasy equally well.

The genre-defining literalization of metaphors, Stockwell continues, "invites readers to exercise their isomorphic cognitive capacities" in a way that can create new, systematically arranged understanding and allows for new perspectives on familiar things (Stockwell 2000, 201–202). The notion of seeing global warming anew through fiction, of creating its novel, systematically arranged understanding, certainly resonates with what *A Song of Ice and Fire* seeks to achieve. If hyperobjects were to be interpreted as metaphors, then the erratic cadence of seasons could be seen as their literalization. Morton describes phasing, one of the characteristics of hyperobjects, with a metaphor: to three-dimensional humans phased hyperobjects seem to "come and go, like seasons" (Morton 2013(b), 40). In Martin's world the seasons are broken, they are concrete manifestations of the hyperobjects that envelope Westeros. Echoing Morton's metaphor, they do come and go like seasons, because they are literal seasons.

There is, however, an inherent problem in attempting to analyze the depiction of global warming in Martin's work as an instance of metaphor literalization. Hyperobjects are literal, concrete objects that humans collide with (Morton 2013(a), 2). The literalization of what is already literal would constitute a tautology. That said, something very similar to fantasy's literalization of metaphors does seem to be taking place when Martin's series meshes with, or cues, the readers' conceptual frames for thinking about global warming. This something is not metaphorical but is complex enough to be difficult to perceive as a concrete object unless translated into a structure through which we may perceive that very complexity. If this be so, Martin's saga about, metaphorically, confronting global warming would be an

example of Brian McHale's idea of reading SF as literalized narratology (McHale 2018, 319) rather than of literalization of metaphors. Global warming is obviously not a narratological phenomenon or a narrative. However, in literalizing the concepts and categories of narrative theory, speculative fiction, according to McHale, "estranges [narratological concepts], giving us glimpses into their internal workings" (319). Literalizing narratology conveys to the reader a systematically arranged understanding of the workings of an enormously complex system. The ways in which global warming is represented in *A Song of Ice and Fire* bear a clear similarity to this process.

Katheryn Hume argues that fantasy, rather than representing its subject-matter in a specific way—such as literalizing metaphors—would be better understood through the things it chooses to represent: "some of the experiences that move us most derive from more alien realms of experience, which we have represented in literature through the use of fantasy" (Hume 1984, 43). Fantasy, Seo-Young Chu suggests, is at its best when it is "cognitively estranging" (Chu 2010, 7). Chu's theory is an elegant reversal of Darko Suvin's classic conception of SF as a genre that cognitively estranges familiar things (Suvin 1979, 4). In Chu's articulation SF—and fantasy, by extension—represents things that are cognitively difficult to grasp. Indeed, it is successful representation of cognitively estranging referents that makes fiction qualify as SF for her.

The significance of Chu's proposal to my reading of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is this: Chu sees science fiction's and fantasy's tendency to literalize metaphors as a tool for representing cognitively estranging referents: objects of representation that are neither known nor unknowable but exist somewhere between those endpoints of a spectrum. This space evokes what is called wonder. And it is the measure of wonder that characterizes any successful narrative representation of cognitively estranging referents, for example, I suggest, hyperobjects like global warming. According to Chu, "SF is distinguished by its capacity to

perform the massively complex representational and epistemological work necessary to render cognitively estranging referents available both for representation and understanding" (Chu 2010, 7). In other words, if global warming is included as one of those cognitively estranging referents—difficult or even impossible to represent as itself, as all hyperobjects are—the affordance of fantasy and SF is that it can literalize metaphors that help us grasp it in ways that would otherwise be impossible.

Martin's approach to confronting global warming takes the discourse beyond the literalization of metaphors and towards the representation of Chu's cognitively estranging referents. *A Song of Ice and Fire* does not offer a vision of a planet literally on fire or any such direct literalization of language-based metaphors, even if that might be "[a] literal reading of a possibly metaphorical deviant sentence" in the vein of Stockwell's analysis (Stockwell 2000, 179). Instead, it recounts a mythical conflict between universal forces that, through having the characteristics of hyperobjects, maps onto real-world issues like global warming.

According to Attebery, fantasy, in creating myth, draws on the sense of mystery and meaning common to myths. It plays with symbols, providing them with new context and new meanings (Attebery 2014, 2–3). Suspended between wonder and anxiety, Martin plays with the signifiers of hyperobjects of Ice and Fire, and with symbols associated with them, thus encouraging the reader to see things like global warming anew. This operation takes the logic of hyperobjects and translates it into the language of myth. In this way the books can represent something that is very difficult to represent, and enable the reader to even learn something. That learning is certainly not scientific: reading *A Song of Ice and Fire* will not grant one the ability to understand climatological and mathematical models of global warming. Rather, the learning comes in the form of a new perspective, one that can make hyperobjects like global warming visible, make them thinkable as dangerous objects, and

make them emotionally meaningful in human terms, like Frost's desire and hatred embedded in his end of the world scenarios. Attebery suggests that deep, private understanding cannot be shared as such, but the mythic pattern that creates a space for such understanding can be communicated (54). I argue that the creation of those mythic patterns is at the heart of fantasy's way of playing with metaphors and abstract concepts.

A Song of Ice and Fire might not have originally been intended as cli-fi, as Di Paolo claims (see Di Paolo 2018, 10). And it might not be about hyperobjects as such, considering its creation predates Morton's coinage and definition of the term. Nonetheless, Martin's work concerns living in a world threatened by unimaginably vast mythic forces that are almost beyond human control and to a large extent unknowable. It attempts to represent these cognitively estranging referents by forging a mythic pattern that creates space for understanding these forces. In this sense, the books incorporate the logic of hyperobjects and thus render global warming available for representation and understanding.

<div align="center">Lost (and found) in adaptation</div>

As mentioned earlier, the finale of *Game of Thrones* left a large and vocal part of its viewership with a strong but vague unease about the ending of the series. Google's video-sharing platform YouTube is filled with lengthy video-essays about the ways in which the last season betrayed the legacy of the series. Some of the most popular of these essays have been viewed more than 7 million times at the time of this writing (see Think Story 2019). The fandom still has high hopes for the books to fix the story, for there is still hope that Martin will complete the saga. But there does not seem to be an equally strong consensus about how and why the television adaptation failed. Many of the video-essays and lengthy forum posts focus on detailed explorations of just that question: what did the series fail to live up to? My

suggestion is that one significant failure of the HBO adaptation is its gradual abandonment the books' commitment to depicting human entanglement with hyperobjects.

I briefly explored the meaning of the book series' title earlier. *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a cryptic name for a fantasy epic: instead of focusing on the characters or the plot, it evokes the vast, alien and threatening objects that the series is haunted by. These objects lie at the core of its many themes. They are what imbues everything else in the novels with meaning and with a sense of applicability to issues beyond the fictional world of Westeros. The title refers to the hyperobjects that loom underneath the surface of the series' worldbuilding, their presence tinging the whole series with an anxiety and an uncanny sense of doom. Repeatedly, Ice and Fire are suggested to hold the keys to the mysteries of the story: if only we knew the answer when Daenerys asks: "What is the song of ice and fire?" Yet those same objects also threaten to destroy the fabric of the series' story by consuming everything else in it. After all, what is the significance of politics and backstabbing in a world that is being consumed by hyperobjects? As Di Paolo puts it: "Who cares [about who will rule]? What about the zombies?" (Di Paolo 2018, 253). This larger question reverberating throughout the series parallels the ways in which hyperobjects intrude on our world and change what is seen as meaningful in it. Considering the hyperobject of global warming, Morton declares that the world has already ended; part of Martin's series appeal may be that it is set in a world that has already ended too.

It is telling that HBO used a different name for the adaptation. *A Game of Thrones* is the title of the first book of the series but was chosen for the entire television series. The game that the first book refers to, as well as the name of the adaptation, gestures at all of the political plots and conspiracies that take place in Westeros. The aim of that game is to claim the Iron Throne, to become the ruler of the Seven Kingdoms. Since this politics is part of the world of Ice and Fire, some hyperobjective manifestations are still preserved in the

adaptation. Even though they are never really explored, the remnants of the abandoned thematic through-line are detectable in lines of dialogue like: "People's minds aren't made for problems that large. White walkers, the Night King, an army of the dead—it's almost a relief to confront a comfortable and familiar monster like my sister" (Mylod 2017, 0:32:50 to 00:33:03).

The renaming of *A Song of Ice and Fire* into *Game of Thrones* is an apt metonymy for the differences between Martin's novels and their television adaptation. As the show develops and moves further away from its source material, the underlying sense of unease is lost. Where much of the lasting appeal of *A Song of Ice and Fire* comes from that sense of depth— a depth with krakens lurking in it—*Game of Thrones* gradually becomes a shallow pool masquerading as an ocean. This thematic shallowness seems to be intentional. In a 2013 interview, David Benioff, one of the HBO show's two creators and main writers was asked a question about the themes of the series. His reply has been widely circulated among the series' disgruntled fandom "Themes," he disparagingly said, "are for eight-grade book reports" (Greenwald 2013).

It becomes unfortunately clear, after the fact, that *Game of Thrones* was never going to tackle large issues that drove the popularity of the books. *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a multifaceted exploration of the hyperobjects of ice and fire—a mythic parallel to our current predicament as a species caught up in global warming—whereas *Game of Thrones* is a marketable product. The contrast between these two works of fiction says something about the difficult challenge of representing cognitively-estranging referents like global warming. It also illustrates some of the consequences of failing to do so. The realities of television production—and perhaps of neoliberal capitalism as such—seem like plausible culprits for this failure to depict the monsters created by our modern economic systems. It is no

coincidence that the Capitalocene is one of the strongest alternative terms for the Anthropocene.

Making hyperobjects representable is a process that necessarily makes them less like hyperobjects. For cognitively-estranging referents to be rendered understandable and representable, they must be transformed into something that can be grasped. This is a necessary trade-off, since representing global warming—like other hard-to-grasp phenomena—is an important affordance of speculative fiction. However, a measure of structural similarity must be maintained. Otherwise, if the qualities of hyperobjects are lost, the whole effort of attempting to represent them in the first place is jeopardized. This is exactly what happens in *Game of Thrones*. A lack of thematic clarity in the show results in the disquieting message of the series being abandoned in favor of something else, something predictable and familiar, like the story of human greed and thirst for power.

Regardless of the dangers of failing to represent something that is fundamentally difficult to represent, it remains clear that what Martin does in the books, and even what *Game of Thrones* managed after a fashion, is important. After all, even the dis-hyperobjectified *Game of Thrones* sparked the imaginations of viewers to speculate about the connections between the show and the themes of global warming. The endless essays by fans, dissecting the problems of the later seasons of the adaptation, display an emerging understanding about the logic of global warming through the analysis of the specific ways in which the series failed to consistently portray it. For example, a video-essay by vlogbrothers (Hank and John Green) argues that a key difference between the invasion of the undead in *Game of Thrones* and our real-world struggle against global warming is that in our world "there is no boss-man we get to stab and be done with it" and that "our Night King is, maybe unsurprisingly, ourselves" (vlogbrothers 2019).

Conclusion

What else but speculative fiction can begin to issue the moral call to wake us up to the myriad dangers of global warming? What other art form offers better narrative tools to help us imagine hopeful visions of a new way of life in which we learn to navigate the many difficulties of the Anthropocene? What other form of storytelling can better assist us in representing global warming itself in all its uncanny vastness? Indeed, as Chu insists, speculative fiction is the best tool we have, since any fiction becomes speculative precisely when it begins focusing on representing those cognitively estranging referents (Chu 2010, 7). This sentiment has a long tradition in fantasy criticism too: As Kathryn Hume once put it, "To answer questions about the nature of the universe without using fantasy is practically impossible" (Hume 1984, 121). A more nuanced version of this argument holds that fantasy is especially capable of portraying cognitively estranging referents such as global warming because its genre-specific structures of meaning-making lend themselves exceptionally well to confronting complex issues that are difficult, if not impossible to grasp through realistic representation. In representing these cognitively-estranging referents through a variety of literalizing practices, fantasy creates mythic patterns that give us a better grasp on the reality of hyperobjects those metaphors gesture at.

A Song of Ice and Fire is not complete yet nor is it likely to be finished any time soon. It is possible that Martin's series will fall into the same trap its HBO adaptation did: that of collapsing the complex mesh of hyperobject representations into a single anthropomorphized villain, a poor man's Sauron who just happens to be ice-blue. So long as the series is unfinished, however, it continues to signify the cognitively-estranging referent of global warming in one additional way. Global warming is not finished in our real world either: we do not know how it will turn out in the future. What we are waking up to is an uneasy

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premonition of impending disaster, a knowledge that the worst may still lie ahead, raising questions about mitigating action in the present.

In this chapter I have argued for a cli-fi interpretation of *A Song of Ice and Fire* according to which the books confront the Anthropocene through the representation of hyperobjects. Most of the mysterious undercurrents of Martin's work that have captured an ever-growing audience arise from that representation. The applicability of hyperobjects to thinking through issues like global warming makes the series relevant. While the television adaptation of the books largely abandons the thematic core of the story, its remnants seem to hold enough substance that it can help parts of its audience along a path towards greater climate consciousness.

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i For example: some argue that there is an elaborate conspiracy to end dragons and drain the world of magic, others maintain that the moon is not a moon but a secret satellite that enhances telepathy through technological means (Reddit).