



**‘I watch it for historic reasons.’
Representation and reception of the
Middle Ages in *A Song of Ice and
Fire* and *Game of Thrones*’**

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This article aims to analyse several ideas of the Middle Ages that inspired HBO’s TV show *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011-), based on George R. R. Martin’s ongoing series of novels *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-). The phenomenon will be read through the concept of “medievalism”, i.e. «the representation, the reception and the post-medieval use of the Middle Ages» (di Carpegna Falconieri 2011). After a short introduction concerning the Middle Ages and cinema, I will analyse the new way in which Martin represents and perceives medieval times. This different approach places in the medieval era the disillusionment and the alleged absence of values typical of postmodern times, often hidden behind the notion of historical “realism”. The result is a rejection of the neo-medieval romantic idealization of the Middle Ages that characterized most twentieth-century productions. Keywords: Medievalism, Middle Ages, Game of Thrones, A Song of Ice and Fire, Fantasy.

“I watch it for historic reasons”: Representação e recepção da Idade Média em *As Crônicas de Gelo e Fogo* e *Guerra dos Tronos*

Este artigo analisa as diversas percepções da Idade Média que inspiraram a série televisiva da HBO *Guerra dos Tronos* (HBO 2011-), baseada na série de livros de George R. R. Martin intitulada *As Crônicas de Gelo e Fogo* (1996-). O fenómeno será lido à luz do conceito de “medievalismo”, isto é, “a representação, recepção e uso pós-medieval da Idade Média” (di Carpegna Falconieri 2011). Depois de uma pequena introdução sobre a relação entre Idade Média e cinema, irei analisar o novo modo como Martin compreende e representa os tempos medievais. Esta perspectiva diferente coloca no período medieval a desilusão e a alegada ausência de valores típicas dos tempos pós-modernos, frequentemente escondidas por trás de uma noção de “realismo” histórico. O resultado é a rejeição da idealização romântica da Idade Média que caracterizou a maior parte das produções do século XX.

Palavras-chave: Medievalismo, Idade Média, *Guerra dos Tronos*, *As Crônicas de Gelo e Fogo*, Fantasia.

‘I watch it for historic reasons.’

Representation and reception of the Middle Ages
in ‘*A Song of Ice and Fire*’ and ‘*Game of Thrones*’

Riccardo Facchini*

Introduction

This article will examine the idea of the Middle Ages offered by the popular TV series *Game of Thrones* (from now on *GoT*), produced by the American network HBO (2011-), created by David Benioff and Daniel Brett Weiss, and based on George Raymond Richard Martin’s literary saga *A Song of Ice and Fire* (from now on *ASoIaF*). It will operate a transmedia analysis, since, even if there are differences between the two products, the TV show and the novels have deeply and reciprocally influenced each other. Martin has actively contributed, at least until season five, to the production of *GoT*, offering his opinions about casting choices, scenography, locations and costumes¹. He also reviewed the scripts of each episode and each of the first four seasons contains an episode written by Martin himself². Furthermore, Martin has so far published only five out of the seven books that will compose the *ASoIaF* saga, while *GoT* has reached season seven and it is now following its own plot, even if based on what Martin told Benioff and Weiss about how the saga should proceed. All these elements create a

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1 “From the Book to Screen,” in *Game of Thrones: the Complete First Season* (New York: HBO, 2012).

2 “The Pointy End,” S01E08; “Blackwater,” S02E09; “The Bear and the Maiden Fair,” S03E07; “The Lion and the Rose,” S04E02.

strong intertwinement of the two products, which foster what has been defined as «une transmédialité féconde et complexe»³.

Before getting to the heart of this paper, I will make some considerations about studies that have researched the relation between Middle Ages and cinema in the past few decades. They represent some illustrious precedents for this article and have laid the basis for a new way to study the representation of the medieval on-screen (in this case, on the small screen).

The historiographical tradition on Middle Ages, cinema and medievalism

The reproduction of medieval imagery is a field of research that mainly belongs to the Anglo-Saxon historiographical tradition⁴ and it is only one of the aspects of the complex phenomenon that has been defined as ‘medievalism’. Some of the studies on medievalism, especially the Italian ones⁵, were often tainted by a problematic methodological approach. Marc Ferro and Pierre Sorlin, in their 1970s’ works, advised historians not to use a positivist approach while analysing historical fiction, such as films⁶. Historians should not necessarily have to look for mistakes or inaccuracies in a film, because, according to Frédéric Vitoux, «being archeologically faithful to the past is often the best way to betray it»⁷. What deserves to be studied in these products, in fact, is not their alleged historical accuracy, but what Guido Fink defined

3 Florian Besson, Catherine Kikuchi, and Cécile Troadec, “Les Moyen Âge de Game of Thrones,” *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes* 28 (2015): 481.

4 See: Bettina Bildhauer, *Filming the Middle Ages* (London: Reaktion, 2011); Andrew Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages: the methods of cinema and history in portraying the medieval world* (London: McFarland & Company, 2011); Gail Ashton, ed., *Medieval Afterlives in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012); Meriem Pages and Karolyn Kinane, eds., *The Middle Ages on Television: Critical Essays* (London: McFarland & Company, 2015).

5 See: Giuseppe Sergi, *L’idea di Medioevo: tra senso comune e pratica storica* (Roma: Donzelli, 1998); “Medioevo al passato e al presente,” in *Arti e storia nel Medioevo*, IV, eds. Guido Castelnuovo and Giuseppe Sergi (Torino: Einaudi, 2004). *A different approach is represented by: Renato Bordone, Lo specchio di Shalott: l’invenzione del Medioevo nella cultura dell’Ottocento* (Napoli: Liguori, 1993); Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri, *Medioevo Militante* (Torino: Einaudi, 2011).

6 See Marc Ferro, *Cinema e storia: linee per una ricerca* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1979).

7 Cited in Mino Argentieri, *Cinema: storia e miti* (Napoli: Tullio Pironti Editore, 1984), 24.

as their «double trip into the past»⁸, that is, the opportunity for the audience to perceive both the remote past where the story is settled and the recent past, the historical context in which the film has been produced and how such context inspired it.

Nevertheless, if we look into European scholarship, we can rely on some important studies on the relation between Middle Ages and cinema, including the works of Vito Attolini⁹, Germana Gandino¹⁰ or the volume of *Les Cahiers de la Cinémathèque* dedicated to “Le Moyen Age au Cinéma”¹¹. I would also add the rich and detailed database contained in the Italian website «Cinema e Medioevo», created by professor Raffaele Licinio, where more than 3.000 films of medieval inspiration are listed¹².

In my view, a proper methodological approach consists of reading the different representations of the medieval through the lens of medievalism. This category – which we can define as «the representation, the reception and the post-medieval use of the Middle Ages»¹³ – can

8 Cited in Gianfranco Gori, “Introduction to Pierre Sorlin,” in *La storia nei film: interpretazioni del passato* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1984), XXIV.

9 Vito Attolini, *Immagini del Medioevo nel cinema* (Bari: Dedalo, 1993).

10 Germana Gandino, “Il Medioevo rappresentato: il cinema,” in *Arti e storia nel Medioevo*, 737-55.

11 *Les cahiers de la Cinémathèque* 42-43.(1985).

12 “Cinema e Medioevo”, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.cineMedioevo.net/>

13 Di Carpegna Falconieri, *Medioevo Militante* 18, n.º 1. The definition of medievalism, especially in the American context, is more fluid. See Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, eds., *Medievalism: key critical terms* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014); Nils Holger Petersen, “Medievalism and Medieval Reception. A Terminological Question,” *Studies in Medievalism* 17 (2009): 36-44, 36: «Should this term be used for everything that derives from the Middle Ages, or should it be reserved for post-medieval interest in the revival of phenomena belonging to the period or notion of the Middle Ages?»; Tom Shippey, “Medievalisms and Why They Matter,” *Studies in Medievalism* 17 (2009): 45-54, 45: «Any post-medieval attempt to re-imagine the Middle Ages, or some aspect of the Middle Ages, for the modern world, in any of many different media: especially in academic usage, the study of the development and significance of such attempts.»; Corey Lowell Grewell, “Neomedievalism: an Eleventh Little Middle Ages?,” *Studies in Medievalism* 19 (2010): 34-43, 41: «While neomedievalism is constituted from a variety of its own forms and while those forms are markedly distinct from previous form of medievalism, insofar as these forms are essentially an employment of medieval tropes and images in a series of aesthetic and ideological responses to contemporary culture, they seem to conform to the artistic and intellectual process definitive of other forms of medievalism, in spite, perhaps, of the anti-historical way in which these forms approach the Middle Ages itself.»; Mary Jane Toswell, “The Simulacrum of Neomedievalism,” *Studies in Medievalism* 19 (2010): 44-55, 44: «Medievalism implies a genuine link – sometimes direct, sometimes somewhat indirect – to the Middle Ages, whereas neomedievalism invokes a simulacrum of the medieval.»

help us avoid a superficial reading of this phenomenon. The contemporary medieval revival, despite being «considered by professional historians as something not worthy of consideration, not pertinent to a serious scientific research»¹⁴, is much more than a fad – it is a complex phenomenon whose roots lay in 19th-century Romanticism¹⁵ and which continues to inspire and influence new generations.

Returning to the object of this study, we can, at first, face a methodological problem: *ASoIaF* and *GoT* are not products which evoke the ‘real’ Middle Ages, but they are clearly set in a fantasy context. Many historians in recent years have refused to study the fantasy genre, since it does not clearly represent concrete and ‘real’ places or events¹⁶. Fantasy, which Renato Bordone defined as the «fourth Middle Ages»¹⁷, did not arouse the interest of historians because they do not even consider it a manifestation of medieval imagery. However, if it is true that a fantasy tale is not set in the real world, it is also true that in some cases – and Martin’s work is the perfect example – authors claim to have been inspired by the reading of books concerning the ‘real’ Middle Ages¹⁸. As we will see, this alleged historical accuracy heavily influences the opinions of the audience, which often perceives fantasy products as somehow inspired by authentic medieval atmospheres. This perspective follows Gianfranco Gori’s statement about historical films: «a historical film can be defined as historical in relation to the public that perceive it as historical»¹⁹.

14 Attolini, *Immagini del Medioevo*, 5.

15 About the relation between the Middle Ages and Romanticism, see: Bordone, *Lo specchio di Shalott*; Arthur Dwight Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Núria Perpinya, *Ruins, Nostalgia and Ugliness: Five Romantic perceptions of the Middle Ages and a spoonful of Game of Thrones and Avant-garde oddity* (Berlin: Logos-Verl, 2014); David Matthews, *Medievalism: a critical history* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2015).

16 Gori, *Introduction*, XXIX.

17 Renato Bordone, “Medioevo americano. Modelli scenografici e modelli mentali,” *Quaderni Medievali* 13 (1982): 149. Bordone made a clear reference to what Maria Teresa Fumagalli said about the existence, in contemporary imagery, of «three types of Middle Ages»: the barbaric, the rebirth, and the vulgar one. See Marina Fumagalli Beonio-Brocchieri, “Perché il Medioevo? Il Medioevo nei romanzi contemporanei,” *Quaderni Medievali* 21 (1981): 175.

18 See for example the declarations of Micheal Hirst, creator of the TV show *Vikings*. “Vikings: an interview with the show’s creator and writer Michael Hirst,” *History Extra*, June 7, 2016, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.historyextra.com/period/viking/vikings-an-interview-with-the-shows-creator-and-writer-michael-hirst/>.

19 Gori, *Introduction*, XXXIII.

***Game of Thrones* and the Middle Ages: state of research**

The first volume of *ASoIaF* – titled *A Game of Thrones* – was published in 1996. In 2017, HBO aired *GoT* season seven. In the last few years, these two products have aroused the interest of both popular audiences and scholars, who have published a number of works on the topic. Leaving aside studies analysing the connections between Martin’s work and philosophy, religion or politics in general²⁰, as well as television studies, I will now offer a brief overview of studies addressing the relationship between *ASoIaF*, *GoT* and medieval history.

Most of these studies have not conducted a proper analysis. They often examine the intertwinement between fiction and history by insisting on a positivist approach, thus operating a sterile comparison between medieval events and the ones narrated in the saga. In recent decades, this approach was often inspired by the desire to debunk historical fiction but, in this case, the positivist approach is mostly used to legitimize the historic density of the products, which are presented by the respective authors as based on the ‘real’ Middle Ages.

We can clearly see this approach in Carol Larrington’s *Winter is Coming* (2016), where the author establishes a lengthy series of parallels between medieval topics or events and their equivalent in *GoT*²¹. Larrington does not read the products through the lens of medievalism (this term is never used in the book) and avoids analysing the non-medieval sources of Martin. Even the contributions contained in *Game of Thrones Versus History*, edited by Brian A. Pavlac (2017), share

20 See Henry Jacoby, ed., *Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper Than Swords* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012); Stephen Benedict Dyson, *Otherworldly politics: the international relations of Star trek, Game of thrones, and Battlestar Galactica* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015); Eric Silverman and Robert Arp, ed., *The ultimate Game of Thrones and philosophy : you think or die* (Chicago: Open Court, 2017); Christopher Roman, “The Ethical Movement of Daenerys Targaryen,” *Studies in Medievalism* 23 (2014): 61-68; Pascal Massie and Laurin Mayer, “Bringing Elsewhere Home: A Song of Ice and Fire’s Ethics of Disability,” *Studies in Medievalism* 23 (2014): 45-59.

21 Carol Larrington, *Winter is Coming. The Medieval World of Game of Thrones* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016). Among the parallels, we remember: Knights of the Night Watch/Knights Templar (76-81); three-eyed raven/third eye in the Hinduist ascetic tradition (91); wildfire/Greek fire (117-18); grey scale/black death (141-45); R’Hllor cult/Cathar belief (177-79).

the same methodological approach. Apart from Shiloh Carroll's text²², this work is characterized by several articles focusing on parallels between real medieval topics and *GoT*. Likewise, the Italian archaeologist Valentina Bonaccorsi, in her study published in the volume *Game of Thrones. Una mappa per immaginare mondi* (2017)²³, succumbed to the positivist temptation. As for *Beyond the Wall* (2012), except for the contribution of Linda Antonsson and Elio García – focused on the influence of Romanticism in Martin's thought – this is a book conceived just for the fandom²⁴.

These works could perhaps represent a way for the audience to get closer to medieval history²⁵, but they do not answer the more interesting questions that a scholar – and above of all a medievalist – should ask regarding Martin's works. These questions might concern, for example, the non-medieval sources of Martin, the relation between history and its fictional representations, and the intertwinement of contemporary society and its medieval past. To quote Richard Utz: «An impactful cultural phenomenon like *GoT* deserves to be read as a self-standing cultural artefact, not as a derivative of its potential medieval models or a pretext for sustaining an academic discipline»²⁶.

There are, however, some studies that have tried to examine *ASoI-aF* and *GoT* through the concept of medievalism. Besides my own ventures into this field²⁷, the work of Florian Besson, Catherine Kikuchi

22 Shiloh Carroll, "Barbarian Colonizers and Postcolonialism," in *Westeros and Britain, Game of Thrones Versus History. Written in Blood*, ed. Brian Pavlac (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell 2017), 73-84.

23 Valentina Bonaccorsi, "Le Cronache del Ghiaccio e del Fuoco: elementi storici e suggestioni letterarie," in *Game of Thrones. Una Mappa per Immaginare Mondi*, eds. Sara Martin and Valentina Re (Bologna: Mimesis, 2017), 11-32.

24 Linda Antonsson and Elio García Jr., "The Palace of Love, the Palace of Sorrow. Romanticism in A Song of Ice and Fire," in *Beyond the Wall. Exploring George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, ed. James Lowder (Dallas: BenBella, 2012), 1-14.

25 Elisabetta Gola, Alice Guerrieri, Emiliani Ilardi and Donatella Capaldi, "Insegnare la Storia con le serie TV. Il medioevo visto con gli occhi de Il trono di spade," *Rivista dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea* 1/I n. s., (December 2017): 127-37.

26 Richard Utz, "'Game of Thrones' Among the Medievalists," *Inside Higher Ed*, July 14, 2017, accessed January 25, 2018. <https://GoT.insidehighered.com/views/2017/07/14/why-game-thrones-shouldnt-be-used-effort-recruit-future-medievalists-essay>.

27 Riccardo Facchini, "La rappresentazione del Medioevo nella serialità televisiva: il caso di *Game of Thrones*," in *Medioevo in Formazione*, ed. Marco Paperini (Debate: Livorno, 2018), 9-19.

and Cécile Troadec, although ignoring much of the historiographical tradition of studies on medievalism, raises interesting questions²⁸. Furthermore, Laurin Mayer²⁹, Carol Jamison³⁰ and Shiloh Carroll³¹ have made poignant contributions. The latter, for example, successfully analysed the relation between *ASoIaF*, *GoT*, their sources (medieval and, most of all, non-medieval), the post-medieval representation of the Middle Ages and its perception among the public. This whole complex intertwining has been inspired by what Carroll defined a «quest for realism»³².

Game of Thrones and the (gritty) Middle Ages

In the last few years, George R.R. Martin has given several interviews that can help us understand his thought and, in particular, his perception and representation of the Middle Ages. In an interview published by *Rolling Stone*, for example, he declared to have been inspired by the War of the Roses and by the novels related to it, but he also said that «the problem with historical fiction is that you know what is going to happen»³³. Furthermore, he compared the Wall (a gigantic ice barrier built in the northern part of the continent of Westeros to defend the population from the assault of the uncivilized “Wildlings”) to Hadrian’s

28 Besson, Kikuchi, Troadec, “*Les Moyen Âge de Game of Thrones*”, 479-507.

29 Laurin Mayer, “Unsettled Accounts: Corporate Culture and George R.R. Martin’s Fetish Medievalism,” *Studies in Medievalism* 21 (2012): 57-64.

30 Carol Jamison, “Reading Westeros: George R.R. Martin’s Multi-Layered Medievalisms,” *Studies in Medievalism* 26 (2017): 131-142.

31 Shiloh Carroll, *Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones* (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2018).

32 Shiloh Carroll, “George R.R. Martin’s Quest for Realism in A Song of Ice and Fire,” paper presented at the 48th edition of the International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo (US), accessed January 25, 2018. http://GoT.academia.edu/6653466/George_R.R._Martins_Quest_for_Realism_in_A_Song_of_Ice_and_Fire.

33 Mikal Gilmore, “George R.R. Martin: *The Rolling Stone Interview*,” *Rolling Stone*, April 23, 2014, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.rollingstone.com/TV/news/george-r-r-martin-the-rolling-stone-interview-20140423>.

Wall³⁴. He also stated: «I like to use history to flavour my fantasy»³⁵; «[*ASoIaF* is] just a historical novel in a world with a different sort of history»³⁶; «I write an epic fantasy that has the imagination and the sense of wonder that you get in the best fantasy, but the gritty realism of the best historical fiction»³⁷. His thoughts about the relationship between history and fiction are well summarized in an interview given in 2013 to the *Austin Chronicle*:

«People have pointed out that probably the main influence on *Ice and Fire* is the War of the Roses, and that’s certainly true. I’ve also read about a lot of other medieval conflicts. The Hundred Years War was another huge influence, the Crusades and the Albigensian Crusade, and a lot of details from Scottish history, which was particularly bloody. So, you take events from real history, but I don’t believe in just transcribing them. Like, taking something that happened to Henry the Eighth and having it happen to my characters in the same way, just change the names? To my mind that’s cheating, that’s too easy. You take a bit of this, you take a bit of that. You combine them, you re-think them. You add new twists that maybe even a student of history doesn’t see coming, and you add fantasy elements to make everything bigger and more colourful»³⁸.

34 Sarah Scott, “Game of Thrones writer reveals Hadrian’s Wall inspired hit TV series,” *The Journal*, June 5, 2014, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.thejournal.co.uk/news/north-east-news/game-thrones-writer-inspired-hadrians-7214397>.

35 Jessica Walker, “‘Just songs in the end’. Historical Discourses in Shakespear and Martin,” in *Mastering the Game of Thrones. Essays on George R.R. Martin’s ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’*, eds. Jes Battis and Susan Johnston (Jefferson; McFarland, 2015), 71.

36 Leimar Garcia Siino, “Resembling Fantasy: Studying the Game of Awareness with George R. R. Martin’s A Game of Thrones,” *Hélice. Reflexiones críticas sobre ficción especulativa* 2 (2012): 22.

37 John Hodgeman, “George R.R. Martin, Author of A Song of Ice and Fire,” *Bullseye*, September 19, 2011, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.maximumfun.org/sound-young-america/george-r-r-martin-author-song-ice-and-re-series-interview-sound-young-america>.

38 Amy Gentry, “LoneStarCon 3: The George R.R. Martin Interview,” *Austin Chronicle*, August 29, 2013, accessed January 25, 2018, <https://GoT.austinchronicle.com/daily/books/2013-08-29/lonestarcon-3-the-george-r-r-martin-interview/>.

These statements indicate one of the key points of Martin's thought, which is the strong conviction of having created a saga very close to a historical novel, with the addition of a few fantasy elements and set in a fictional world inspired by 'real' medieval places and events. This procedure, according to him, led to the creation of «a fantasy for people who hate fantasy»³⁹. However, as we will see, Martin's creative process shows the impact of several centuries-old interpretations and re-elaborations of the medieval imagery, which he clearly seems to have assimilated but radically and voluntarily refused.

To understand the idea of the Middle Ages present in Martin's works, we should first engage with the "ten ways" to define the Middle Ages that Umberto Eco outlined in 1983, especially the "romantic" and the "barbaric" one⁴⁰. The romantic idealization of the Middle Ages, which Alice Chandler has efficiently defined as *A Dream of Order*⁴¹, and most of the products that have drawn it into the 20th century had a fundamental importance during Martin's youth. He was born in 1948 and the first edition of *The Lord of the Rings* was published in 1955. Roughly in the same period, Disney managed to conjure up its own medieval imagery through films such as *The Sword in the Stone* (1963)⁴².

Understanding the impact of the romantic and post-romantic view of the Middle Ages in Martin's education – and also the absence of scholarly works on this period⁴³ – is fundamental in order to understand his radical refusal of this imagery, which he sees as too static and not inspired by a 'true' vision of the Middle Ages. In particular, Martin

39 Dave Itzko, "His Beautiful, Dark, Twisted Fantasy: George R.R. Martin Talks Game of Thrones," *New York Times*, April 1, 2011, accessed January 25, 2018, http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/01/his-beautiful-dark-twisted-fantasy-george-r-r-martin-talks-game-of-thrones/?_r=0.

40 Umberto Eco, "Dieci modi di sognare il Medioevo," *Quaderni medievali* 21 (1986): 187-200.

41 Alice Chandler, *A dream of order: the medieval ideal in nineteenth-century English literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970).

42 Martin also declared that the Maurice Druon's saga *Le Roi Maudit* heavily inspired his imagery. See Ben Milne, "Game of Thrones: The cult French novel that inspired George R.R. Martin," *BBC News*, April 4, 2014, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.bbc.com/news/magazine-26824993>. See also G.R.R. Martin, "Knights," *GRR Martin* website, accessed January 25, 2018. <http://GoT.georgerrmartin.com/for-fans/knights/>.

43 William Blanc, "Au-delà du réel," in *Game of Thrones. Série Noire*, ed. Mathieu Potte-Bonneville (Paris: Les Prairies ordinaire, 2015), 60.

declared that he does not have great consideration for these products, which are mostly epigones of the Tolkienian imagery that contributed to show a medievaesque world too different from the real one:

«I'm a big fan of historical fiction. I did read fantasy as well. As I read that, I sort of had a problem with a lot of the fantasy I was reading, because it seemed to me that the middle ages, or some version of the quasi middle ages, was the preferred setting of a vast majority of the fantasy novels that I was reading by Tolkien imitators and other fantasists, yet they were getting it all wrong. It was a sort of Disneyland middle ages, where they had castles and princesses and all that»⁴⁴.

Martin talks about the creation of a «Disneyland Middle Ages», a false medieval imagery created for a community of readers who needed strong and definite moral reference points⁴⁵. According to him, 20th-century fantasy novelists have radicalized Tolkien's view, locking themselves into schemes focused on an excessive division between good and evil. Martin also respectfully criticized the Oxford professor for having idealized the person of the medieval king⁴⁶. In these statements, we can clearly observe what William Blanc defined as a «conflit de générations» between two different kinds of medieval imagery⁴⁷.

44 John Hodgman, *Interview on 'The Sound of Young America'*, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.maximumfun.org/sound-young-america/george-r-r-martin-author-song-ice-and-fire-series-interview-sound-young-america>.

45 Shiloh Carroll, “‘You ought to be in skirts and me in mail’: Gender and History in George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*,” in *George R.R. Martin’s “A Song of Ice and Fire” and the Medieval Literary Tradition*, ed. Bartłomiej Błaszkiwicz (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2014), 249. See also Tyson Pugh and Susan Aronstein, *The Disney Middle Ages. A Fairy-Tale and Fantasy Past* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); Matteo Sanfilippo, *Il Medioevo secondo Walt Disney* (Bari; Dedalo, 1987).

46 Gilmore, *George R.R. Martin: The Rolling Stone Interview*.

47 Blanc, *Au-delà du réel*, 62. In fantasy literature we can see a strong idealisation of the past. According to Narelle Campbell: «the medievalism at the core of fantasy demonstrates an attachment, not necessarily to an historical past, but to idealized or pre-modern places and times». See Narelle Campbell, “Now and Then: Traces of the Present in Medievalist Fantasy Fiction.” (PhD diss., University of Wollongong, 2013), accessed January 25, 2018, <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/3910/>.

This ‘conflict’ also emerged in the thought of Italian film director Mario Monicelli who, speaking about one of his most acclaimed works, *Brancaleone* (1966), claimed that it was

«a film set in the Middle Ages, a period that has always fascinated me because I think that it was extremely different from that set of elements such as knights and damsels that we study at school. It was an era full of hunger, plagues and superstitions»⁴⁸.

We are aware that the Italian film tradition embodied by Monicelli is very different from fantasy literature and from the American TV series industry. However, in the case of Monicelli, we can see the same effort to dispel the myth of the golden Middle Ages, idealized by the romantic literary tradition. While Monicelli’s approach led to the creation of *Brancaleone*, where he painted a ridiculous and caricatured medieval world, Martin’s ‘realism’ led to the invention of what Helen Young defined as the ‘gritty’ or ‘grimdark’ Middle Ages⁴⁹.

The presence of elevated levels of violence, sexism and alleged misogyny both in *AsoIaF* and in *GoT* have often aroused indignation among parts of the audience, who have occasionally perceived some scenes as superfluous. Furthermore, in some cases, Martin has been accused of being a male chauvinist because of the abundance of sexual violence in his works. Martin defended himself by claiming to be a feminist⁵⁰ and saying that he has merely reproduced the kind of sexuality typical of the Middle

48 Mario Monicelli, *L’arte della commedia* (Bari: Dedalo, 1986), 80 (my translation).

49 Helen Young defines “grimdark” as «a sub-genre created in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, [...] marked by low-levels of magic, high-levels of violence, in-depth character development and medievalist worlds that are ‘if not realistic, at least have pretensions to realism’ in their depictions of rain, mud and blood». See Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 63.

50 Jessica Salter, “Game of Thrones’s George RR Martin: ‘I’m a feminist at heart’,” *The Telegraph*, April 1, 2013, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/9959063/Game-of-Throness-George-RR-Martin-Im-a-feminist.html>. He also stated: «I’ve always considered women to be people»: see “George R.R. Martin on Strombo: Full Extended Interview.” YouTube. March 14, 2012, accessed January 25, 2018, <https://GoT.youtube.com/watch?v=fH p4DefG4>.

Ages⁵¹. Even if we believe – in line with the opinion of Florian Besson, Catherine Kikuchi and Cécile Troadec⁵² – that this kind of scenes, especially in the literary saga, are not gratuitous and that they play a role in plot development, we also have to consider that Martin’s obsession with realism seems to have led him to the creation of a medieval world not far from the stereotype of the ‘dark’ Middle Ages. In fact, this «formulaic obsession with sex, violence, power and dirtiness» is not only functional to describe a different kind of fantasy, but it also corresponds to the idea of the Middle Ages that the author wants to communicate to his audience⁵³.

This obsession has been absorbed by Benioff and Weiss, the creators of the show. For example, in the special features of the season five DVD, we can find a section called “The Real History Behind Game of Thrones”, focused on several comparisons between *GoT* events and their alleged ‘medieval’ references⁵⁴. Moreover, during an interview in 2011, Daniel Weiss claimed, when talking about the presence of sexual violence in the show, that Westeros is «not our world but it’s a real world, and it’s a violent world, a more brutal world»; then he added: «We felt that shying away from these things would be doing a disservice to the reality and groundedness of George’s vision»⁵⁵.

Such engagement with realism is not new in the context of historical TV series or films. Shannon McSheffrey has analysed the tendency

51 Rachael Brown, “George R.R. Martin on Sex, Fantasy, and ‘A Dance With Dragons,’” *The Atlantic*, July 11, 2011, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/07/george-rr-martin-on-sex-fantasy-and-a-dance-with-dragons/241738/>.

52 Besson, Kikuchi, Troadec, *Les Moyen Âge de Game of Thrones*, 483.

53 Andrew Elliott, “‘Our Minds Are in the Gutter, But Some of Us Are Watching Starz...’. Sex, Violence and Dirty Medievalism,” in *Fantasy and Science Fiction Medievalisms: From Isaac Asimov to A Game of Thrones*, ed. Helen Young (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2015), 97.

54 “The Real History Behind Game of Thrones,” in *Game of Thrones: the Complete Fifth Season*. HBO, 2016.

55 Jace Lacob, “Game of Thrones’ Sexual Politics,” *The Daily Beast*, June 5, 2011, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.thedailybeast.com/game-of-thrones-sexual-politics>. According to Shiloh Carrol there is a difference between the representation of violence in *ASoIaF* and *GoT*: «Rape, violence, abuse of women and children, and slavery are considered necessary plot points because they are somehow required for Benioff, Weiss, and Martin’s version of the Middle Ages to “feel” real. While Martin attempts, with mixed success, to unpack, critique, and problematize these aspects of his Middle Ages – even while claiming that including them in the first place is necessary to keep his Middle Ages “authentic” – Benioff and Weiss instead glorify toxic masculinity, use rape and casual female nudity as backdrops to the action, and oversimplify the condition and structures of slavery». See Carroll, *Medievalism*, 180.

of showrunners to «invoke the copious amounts of ‘historical research’ that underpins what appears on the screen»⁵⁶ while, at the same time, often justifying historical mistakes present in their products by hiding behind creative freedom. According to Elyzabeth Wawrzyniak, it seems that this kind of medievalism is just an «ideological blanket» to justify their creative choices⁵⁷.

However, this ‘realism’ is nothing more than the result of a complex and old process of stratification of medieval imagery made by western culture over, at least, the last two centuries. We can observe in *GoT* the presence of most medieval tropes imagined and created by western artists, intellectuals and historians. By using the categories that Franco Cardini outlined in 1986, we can find in Martin’s universe eleven different types of Middle Ages: the barbaric, the intellectual, the feudal, the urban, the Nordic, the Mediterranean, the mystic, the sceptical, the secular, the commercial and the bellicose⁵⁸. All these elements are very different from each other, both conceptually, geographically and chronologically, but they have been united into one homogeneous universe pervaded by what Dubost defined as a «médiévalité diffuse»⁵⁹.

Another important aspect of Martin’s medievalism consists of his constant dialogue with the present. In fact, his works perfectly match one of the definitions of medievalism offered by Pugh and Weisl: «a comment on the artist’s contemporary sociocultural milieu»⁶⁰. By narrating his stories and by using his own kind of medieval imagery, the

56 Shannon McSheffrey, “William Webbe’s Wench,” in *The Middle Ages on Television: Critical Essays*, eds. Meriem Pagès and Karolyn Kinane (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015), 57.

57 Elyzabeth Wawrzyniak, “George R.R. Martin and the Myths of History: Postmodernism and Medievalism in ‘A Song of Ice and Fire,’” paper presented at the conference *Popular Culture and the Deep Past*, Ohio State University, February 8, 2014, accessed January 25, 2018, https://GoT.academia.edu/6007571/_George_R.R._Martin_and_the_Myths_of_History_Postmodernism_and_Medievalism_in_A_Song_of_Ice_and_Fire._According_to_Carol_Larrington_rapes_were_a_social_plague_during_the_Middle_Ages. See Larrington, *Winter is Coming* 28, n.º 5: «The rape inflicted on Sansa on her wedding night must have been the lot of many a medieval bride.»

58 Franco Cardini, “Medievisti di professione,” *Quaderni Medievali* 21 (1986): 39-40.

59 Francis Dubost, *Aspects fantastiques de la littérature narrative médiévale XII -XIII siècles: l’Autre, l’Ailleurs, l’Autrefois* (Paris, Champion, 1991), 2.

60 Tyson Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl, eds., *Medievalisms: making the past in the present* (London: Routledge, 2013), 1.

author means to establish a permanent and stable contact with our times. As stated by Elizabeth Wawrzyniak:

«*A Song of Ice and Fire*, then, offers its audience the opportunity for reflection on the present through the past—an opportunity not necessarily intended by the author, perhaps, but irrefutable in the face of the numerous postings on personal websites, social media, and places like Reddit where fans eagerly discuss the connections between the wars in Westeros and Essos with those in Iraq and Afghanistan»⁶¹.

Judging by the impact of *ASoIaF* and *GoT* on the audience, this contact has been successfully established and Martin's medievalism has played a key role in the process.

The audience reception of the Middle Ages

The declarations of Martin, Benioff and Weiss about realism, along with the “medievalité diffuse” that pervades their products, heavily contributed to foster the idea, among the audience and above all the fandom, that both books and TV series are somehow inspired by real and medieval events and themes.

However, especially at the beginning, these ‘gritty’ Middle Ages might have disappointed part of the audience, especially the one that was looking for a more ‘traditional’ fantasy inspired by romantic and neo-medieval tropes. This kind of delusion is also embodied in some of the characters, particularly in those who suffered what Carroll defines

61 Elizabeth Wawrzyniak, *All Our Old Heroes Are Dead: The Nostalgia of Chivalry and the Myth of the “Good War” in Game of Thrones*, in “Academia.edu”, accessed January 25, 2018, https://GoT.academia.edu/23333235/All_Our_Old_Heroes_Are_Dead_The_Nostalgia_of_Chivalry_and_the_Myth_of_the_Good_War_in_Game_of_Thrones. See also Yann Roché's opinion: «L'une des raisons du succès de Game of Thrones est son réalisme, de même que sa capacité à nous faire découvrir, dans un univers imaginaire, des échos de notre histoire et de notre présent»: cited in Blanc, *Au-delà du réel*, 57.

as «a violent reeducation», with the aim of demonstrating «through their experiences that his [Martin’s] version of the Middle Ages is by nature violent and oppressive»⁶². Above all, this process is clear in Sansa Stark, who can be considered a symbol of the average reader. Like the average fantasy consumer, she was raised in the myth of knighthood, reading novels that we can compare to our chivalric romance. At the beginning of the story, her only dream is to marry a king and live happily ever after, yet she goes on to face the ‘real’ and dark nature of knighthood: she marries a mad and evil king and she suffers on her skin the violence of the ‘real’ world, that is, the ‘real’ Middle Ages. Sansa then realizes that in real life «There are no heroes ... In life, the monsters win»⁶³, and, along with her, the reader/viewer makes the crossing from the idealized “Disney Middle Ages” to the gritty ones.

Having dashed the hopes of more traditionalist audiences, this alleged realism was at the same time one of the main reasons for the saga’s success. Even rapper Snoop Dogg has declared:

«I watch it [*GoT*] for historic reasons, to try to understand what this world was based on before I got here. I like to know how we got from there, to here, and the similarities between then and now»⁶⁴.

This kind of declarations seem to validate Helen Young’s ideas when she claims that «the fantasy genre is one of the most significant channels through which the Middle Ages are drawn into twenty-first century popular culture»⁶⁵. Still, Young, when analysing the reception of *GoT*, has noted a «cognitive dissonance» among the fans:

62 Shiloh Carroll, “Rewriting the Fantasy Archetype: George R.R. Martin, Neomedievalist Fantasy, and the Quest for Realism,” in Young, *Fantasy and science fiction medievalisms*, 72.

63 *A Game of Thrones*, Chapter 67.

64 Hardeep Phull, “Snoop Dogg thinks ‘Game of Thrones’ is based on real history,” *New York Post*, May 9, 2015, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://nypost.com/2015/05/09/snoop-dogg-thinks-game-of-thrones-is-based-on-real-history/>.

65 Young, *Place and Time*, 4.

«there is a very strong desire [...] for imagined worlds to reflect historical realities of the Middle Ages» [...] «the point that a fantasy world is, by definition, not historically accurate, however, does not derail the demand for historical authenticity.»⁶⁶

It seems that as medievalist imageries mute into the most shared and common version of the Middle Ages assimilated by mass culture, it becomes even more difficult for the audience to operate a distinction between the post-medieval representation of the Middle Ages and their academic and scholarly interpretation. This process can and must be read in the light of Baudrillard's idea of 'hyperreality'⁶⁷, whose relation to medievalism has been pointed out by Brent and Kevin Moberly:

«Neomedieval works, in this sense, do not simply seek to describe, reproduce, or otherwise recover the medieval, but instead employ contemporary techniques and technologies to simulate the medieval – that is, to produce a version of the medieval that is more medieval than the medieval, a version of the medieval that can be seen and touched, bought and sold, and therefore owned [...] In doing so, they produce a version of the medieval that, as Baudrillard wrote about simulation in general, “is no longer really the real”, in the sense that its point of origin is not a historical epoch or event, but a conglomeration of models and data in which the medieval and all of the traits traditionally associated with it (nobility, chivalry, feudalism, etc.) become indis-

66 Helen Young, “‘It’s the Middle Ages, Yo!’: Race, Neo/medievalisms, and the World of Dragon Age,” *Year’s Work in Medievalism* 27 (2012), 6.

67 See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994). See also Mary Jane Toswell, “The Simulacrum of Neomedievalism”, 45: «A simulacrum (Baudrillard) is a copy of a copy of a nonexistent original, an original that never had tangible existence, a posited will-o-the-wisp. Neo-medievalism depends upon a simulacrum of the medieval; medievalism refers to an existing medieval text, even if seen through the transcendent light of nineteenth-century constructions of the medieval».

tinguishable from and equivalent to any number of other historical, fictional, and mythical elements. The result is a hyperreal medievalism». ⁶⁸

This intertwining of medievalist products and the Middle Ages also aroused the interest of the scholarly community when talking about the role that these products might play in the construction of the idea of the Middle Ages in younger generations and in the uses of films and TV series in teaching medieval studies. For example, according to Olivia Waxman, *GoT* is “Changing How Scholars Study the Real Middle Ages”⁶⁹. In 2016, Philippa Byrne, postdoc fellow in Medieval History at Oxford University, claimed that medievalists «should stop talking about Game of Thrones». Byrne admitted that this approach «may sound like an academic historian sneering at popular culture from her ivory tower», but she added that «Game of Thrones is worth analysing – but as a piece of literature or drama, not as history» because «it isn’t set in the Middle Ages, or any specific part of it» and also because it is «a chaotic amalgam of periods and places with dragons thrown into the mix»⁷⁰. In turn, Byrne’s opinion led another young medievalist, James Palmer, to reply that medievalists should look at popular culture in order «to be part of the conversation – not just to set the record straight, but to engage in an informed debate using their knowledge and interpretative skill» because «they bring a different and often valuable point of view to the table»⁷¹.

Even if one personally considers the analysis of medievalist productions such as *GoT* important, it is true that in the last few years this

68 Brent Moberly and Kevin Moberly, “Neomedievalism, Hyperrealism and Simulation,” *Studies in Medievalism* 19 (2010): 12-24, 15.

69 Olivia Waxman, “Game of Thrones Is Even Changing How Scholars Study the Real Middle Ages,” *Time*, July 14 2017, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://time.com/4837351/game-of-thrones-real-medieval-history/?iid=sr-link1>.

70 Philippa Byrne, “Why medievalists should stop talking about Game of Thrones,” *The Conversation*, June 15, 2016, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://theconversation.com/why-medievalists-should-stop-talking-about-game-of-thrones-61044>.

71 James Palmer, “Medievalists Should Talk About Game Of Thrones,” *Merovingian World*, June 17, 2016, accessed January 25, 2018, <https://merovingianworld.wordpress.com/2016/06/17/medievalists-should-talk-about-game-of-thrones/>.

has been the subject of studies that, as mentioned above, lost themselves in sterile comparisons between ‘the medieval past’ and *GoT*’s universe. In part, this approach may be a consequence of the plethora of declarations by Martin, Benioff and Weiss concerning historical accuracy, which have fostered, especially in the fandom, what has been defined as a positivist approach to a medievalist production. It is quite ironic that, in recent decades, both historians and amateurs have mostly evoked historical accuracy to criticize historical films or TV shows, yet in this case, due to the clever strategy of the authors, the fandom uses the same positivist approach to give *GoT* the allure of a product based on serious and meticulous historical research, even if we are speaking of a fantasy saga. In fact, it is common to find on the internet analyses that, for example, compare the tragic death of Robb Stark during his wedding feast⁷² to some vague similar events that took place in Denmark in 1157 or in Scotland in 1440, despite the fact that none of these were wedding feasts and despite the total lack of declarations by Martin on the topic⁷³. This approach also led to the creation of *History Behind Game of Thrones*, a website entirely focused on comparisons between *GoT* and the Middle Ages⁷⁴.

Furthermore, when the comparison is made towards topics such as the features of Northern or Middle Eastern medieval populations or the role of women in medieval societies, it is clear that what the

⁷² “The Red Wedding”, S03E09.

⁷³ Lars Kjaer, “Murder at the Feast: Game of Thrones and Medieval history,” *The Independent*, June 4, 2013, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.independent.ie/entertainment/TV-radio/spoiler-alert-murder-at-the-feast-game-of-thrones-and-medieval-history-29318973.html>; Ross Crawford, “The Historical Inspiration for the Red Wedding of ‘Game of Thrones’,” *Fickle Fascinations*, June 3, 2013, accessed January 25, 2018, <https://ficklefascinations.wordpress.com/2013/06/03/the-real-red-wedding-of-game-of-thrones/>.

⁷⁴ “History Behind Game of Thrones,” accessed January 25, 2018, <http://history-behind-game-of-thrones.com/>. See also Tom Holland, “‘Game of Thrones is more brutally realistic than most historical novels’,” *The Guardian*, March 24, 2013, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.theguardian.com/TV-and-radio/2013/mar/24/game-of-thrones-realistic-history>; Dan Jones, “How ‘Game of Thrones’ Is (Re)Making History,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 31, 2013, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2013/03/31/how-game-of-thrones-is-remaking-history/>; Stephanie Pappas, “How Real Is the ‘Game of Thrones’ Medieval World?,” *Live Science*, April 3, 2014, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.livescience.com/44599-medieval-reality-game-of-thrones.html>; Elide Messineo, “Se la realtà storica supera la fantasia de ‘Il Trono di Spade,’” *Storia in Rete*, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.storiainrete.com/11259/stampa-italiana-2/se-la-realta-supera-la-fantasia-de-il-trono-di-spade/>.

positivist critics have in mind here are, most of the time, just stereotypes (Northern people of Westeros are honest and proud fighters like medieval German populations; people of Essos are luxurious and slavers ‘exactly’ like Middle-Eastern medieval societies...) ⁷⁵ that have become stratified during a centuries-old construction of medieval imagery. The audience, observing the representation of these stereotypes, perceive them as plausible, recognizing them because they are familiar concepts, and this contributes to the creation of the historical allure of the production. As Amy Kaufman points out: «The neomedieval idea of the Middle Ages is gained not through contact with the Middle Ages, but a medievalist intermediary [...] Neomedievalism is thus not a dream of the Middle Ages, but a dream of someone else’s medievalism» ⁷⁶. Medievalism – in this case *GoT*’s medievalism – is a complex and articulate series of representations of previous representations.

“I like dogs better than knights”⁷⁷: *Game of Thrones* and knighthood

One of the most important medieval tropes deconstructed by Martin is undoubtedly knighthood, although he is not the first who tried to dispel this myth. One of the first to do it was Mark Twain, with his *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889). In *Knight Errant* (1915), the painter Kokoscha pictured the end of the myth of chivalry at the beginning of the Great War. We have already discussed a similar process in Monicelli’s *Brancaleone* (1966). In *A Knight’s Tale* (2001), Heath Ledger jousted to the sound of *We Will Rock You*. However, Martin does not want to parody chivalry or denounce the end of an

⁷⁵ About the Orientalist tropes in *GoT* see: Matt Hardy, “Game Of Tropes: The Orientalist Tradition in the Works of G.R.R. Martin,” *International Journal of Arts & Sciences*, 8 (2015): 409-20; Shiloh Carroll, “Barbarian Colonizers and Postcolonialism in Westeros and Britain”; Eugene Wolters, “Game Of Thrones: A White Liberal’s Orientalist Wetdream”, *Critical Theory*, June 14, 2013, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.critical-theory.com/game-thrones-white-liberals-orientalist-wetdream/>.

⁷⁶ Amy Kaufman, “Medieval Unmoored”, *Studies in Medievalism* 19 (2010): 11.

⁷⁷ *A Clash of Kings*, Chapter 18.

archetypal ideal⁷⁸. What he seems to want to say to his readers is that the knights as they knew them actually never existed.

The knights in *ASoIaF* and *GoT* are the opposite of the idealized medieval knight: violent and without any moral (the Royal Guard, Gregor Clegane); outcast and disillusioned (Jorah Mormont, Jaime Lannister); deprived of a stereotypical chivalric masculinity (Loras Tyrell). The “Hound” Sandor Clegane – who likes «dogs better than knights»⁷⁹ – is perfectly aware of the hypocrisy hidden behind the notion of chivalry, which he summarises in the sentence: «there are no true knights»⁸⁰. In his view, there is no space for an elevated and idealized vision of chivalry, as we can infer from this dialogue with Sansa: «What do you think a knight is for, girl? You think it’s all taking favours from ladies and looking fine in gold plate? Knights are for killing»⁸¹. Even disability, a very important topic in the saga⁸², plays a role in the deconstruction of chivalry: the young Bran dreamt to become a knight during his childhood, but he cannot because of his impossibility to walk; Jaime Lannister’s last chivalric attribute, his right hand, the “hand of the sword”, is brutally mutilated⁸³; furthermore, Tyrion, a dwarf, is the protagonist of a scene that is meant to parody the *trope* of the knight’s farewell to his lady (a prostitute, in this case) before a battle⁸⁴.

It also seems that Martin wants to mock those characters who live in the myth of a golden age of knighthood, like the aforementioned Sansa, the old and wise knight Barristan Selmy and Jon Snow at the

78 I am not totally agree with Elizabeth Wawrzyniak: in her opinion, in Martin’s work is present a strong nostalgia for the past, which can be find in his approach to the idea of knighthood. See Wawrzyniak, *All Our Old Heroes Are Dead*, 5-6.

79 *A Clash of Kings*, Chapter 18.

80 *A Clash of Kings*, Chapter 52. Carol Larrington consider this approach merely as a “more pragmatism and critical view of chivalry”: see Larrington, *Winter is Coming*, 122.

81 *A Clash of Kings*, Chapter 52.

82 According to Martin, his main characters are “Cripple, bastards and broken things”: see Larrington, *Winter is Coming*, 107, n.^o 3. See also the episode “Cripple, bastards and broken things”, S01E04.

83 Massie, Mayer, *Bringing Elsewhere Home*, 53. Jaime’s redemption arc starts from this point. See “Walk of Punishment”, S03E03.

84 “Blackwater”, S02E09. The trope is perfectly embodied by Edward Burne-Jones’ painting *The Knight’s Farewell* (1858).

beginning of his path⁸⁵. Even Jaime Lannister sometimes seems to be aware of the previous existence of a golden age of knighthood, but during his life he «has experienced the impossibility of holding to a chivalric code»⁸⁶, and, at least until the end of his path of redemption (which is quite clear at the end of season seven⁸⁷), he is aware of the impossibility of fulfilling the duties of a ‘true’ knight.

The deconstruction of chivalry operated by Martin has been analysed by Stacey Goguen, who has defined medieval chivalry as the expression of a «homophobic, sexist, classist society»⁸⁸. However, perhaps Goguen ignores that the ethical framework she is analysing is the one idealized by romantic and neo-medieval 19th-century intellectuals, which was characterized by a strong and artificial internal coherence, and not the one codified during the 12th century, which consisted of «a multifaceted ideal»⁸⁹. Goguen’s approach is useful in this case to show the tendency, sometimes even in a scholarly context, to overestimate the representation of medieval imagery, charging it with meanings which often fall outside the purposes of research that should be focused on how and why the authors represent the Middle ages in a certain way. Deconstructing medieval tropes such as knighthood can be useful in historical research to offer a more complex and multifaceted view on a medieval social phenomenon, but its main purpose should not be to debunk medieval society *per se*. Again, we should remember that these representations are not reproductions of

85 Wawrzyniak, *All Our Old Heroes Are Dead*, 4: «Martin’s discourse of chivalry explodes out of its idealized origins from the very start with Tyrion Lannister’s interrogation of Jon Snow’s desire to join the Night’s Watch, which borders on outright mocking. “The Night’s Watch is a noble calling,” Jon tells the dwarf in *A Game of Thrones*, but Tyrion disagrees. “The Night’s Watch is a midden heap for all the misfits of the realm,” he points out, “sullen peasants, debtors, poachers, rapers, thieves, and bastards like you all wind up on the Wall” (*GoT*) [...]. It turns out that Jon Snow is just as enamored with the nostalgic ideal of chivalry as Sansa is.»

86 Carrol, *Medievalism*, 46.

87 See the powerful image of his charge against Daenerys and her dragon, which recalls the iconography of st. George: “The Spoils of War”, S07E04.

88 Stacey Goguen, “There Are No True Knights,” in *Game of Thrones and Philosophy*, 208. See also Dan Wohl, “Is ‘Historical Accuracy’ a Good Defense of Patriarchal Societies in Fantasy Fiction?,” *The Mary Sue*, December 5, 2012, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://GoT.themarysue.com/sexism-in-historical-fantasy/>.

89 Jean Flori, *Cavaliere e cavalleria nel Medioevo* (Torino: Einaudi 1999), X-XI.

the ‘real’ Middle Ages, but representations, or rejections, of a pre-existing medievalist imagery.

The postmodern Middle ages

In conclusion, we can now try to outline the result of George R.R. Martin’s medievalism, considering that, also in this case, «what is created is one’s *idea* of what the Middle Ages were, based on one’s exposure to the past as altered through historians, whether contemporary or from the era, and medievalist intermediaries»⁹⁰.

At first sight, it seems that the final result mainly consists in the reproduction of a stereotyped ‘dark’ medieval era, a consequence of Martin’s «fetishism of the authentic»⁹¹. However, a film or a TV show is always «a social product conditioned by its historical context»⁹² and, in this case, we can find in *ASoIaF* and *GoT* several elements typical of postmodern culture and narrative⁹³. The absence of moral absolute values, the lack of heroes and antagonists, the lack of a single point of view in the narration, the desire of breaking the rules of fantasy literature⁹⁴ – all these elements are sufficient to define *ASoIaF* and *GoT* as postmodern, both because of their contents and their style⁹⁵. In line with Pittaluga and Salotti, even if this product is not historical accurate, it is important for us that it contains several similarities with the «postmodern imagery»⁹⁶.

This postmodern approach is not new in the American tradition of historical fiction⁹⁷ but in Martin’s works it seems to be well embod-

90 Carroll, *Medievalism*, 15.

91 Attolini, *Immagini del Medioevo*, 8

92 Gori, *Introduction*, XXVI.

93 *Game of Thrones: Postmodernism*, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://got-postmodern.weebly.com/>.

94 Wawrzyniak, *G.R.R. Martin and the myths of history*.

95 Caleb Masters, “Redefining the genre of High Fantasy: A Song of Ice and Fire,” *Masters Film Review*, December 6, 2012, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://calebmasters.net/2012/12/06/redefining-the-genre-of-high-fantasy-a-song-of-ice-and-fire/>.

96 Pittaluga, Salotti, *Cinema e Medioevo*, 6.

97 Theophilus Savvas, *American postmodernist fiction and the past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.)

ied. Even one of the most emblematic sentences of the saga – *Valar Morghulis*, “All Men Must Die” – seems to symbolize the contemporary uncertainty and the anxieties of western society. Above all, we wish to highlight the role that this postmodern apparatus had in the construction of Martin’s idea of the Middle Ages⁹⁸. Martin does not escape to the past by idealizing it, as Tolkien did to some degree, as a reaction to the chaos generated by two world wars⁹⁹. On the contrary, his answer to postmodern ‘chaos’ consisted of projecting it into the past, into a vague ‘medieval’ era, and, by doing that, he created what we can define as the “postmodern Middle Ages”. In fact, both Tolkien and Martin had a strong relation, not only with the medieval past, but also with their present. As Mayer pointed out:

Martin draws extensively from both medieval and post-medieval texts and tropes, as does Tolkien, and invites the same comparison to contemporary culture as does Tolkien.¹⁰⁰

Martin has painted the medieval world with postmodern nuances, using it to describe «contemporary America»¹⁰¹. He created «a fictionalized past that served to illustrate [...] contemporary concerns»¹⁰² and, by doing this, he has projected our fears into the past. This is quite the opposite of what Roberto Vacca did in 1971, when he projected similar fears into the future. In fact, speaking of the concerns that humanity had towards the future, he coined the expression “*Medioevo Prossimo*

98 About post-modernism and medievalism, see: Lesley Coote, “A Short Essay about Neomedievalism,” *Studies in Medievalism* 19 (2010): 25-33, 26: «History, being a construct made up of other constructed accounts, never existed at all, except as representations of representations [...] The re-presentation of symbols until they are emptied of meaning is a feature of postmodern cultural theory.»

99 See John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: the threshold of Middle-earth* (London: HarperCollins, 2003).

100 Mayer, *Unsettled Accounts*, 61.

101 John Blake, “How Game of Thrones is like America”, CNN, May 24, 2014, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/05/24/showbiz/game-of-thrones-america/index.html>.

102 Shippey, “Modernity,” 149.

Venturo” (“The Middle Ages in the near future”), meaning with this the proximity of a new Dark Age¹⁰³.

Along with a typical postmodern deconstruction of the idea of the Middle Ages, Martin has, at the same time, created and crystallized his own view of the medieval era that, mostly due to the TV show, has now become one of the most influent imageries of the Middle Ages in Western culture. This is one of the main reasons why his works, as well as a great part of medievalist productions, deserve to be analysed through the notion of medievalism. Otherwise, medievalists may end up being considered a mere expression of an «antiquate erudition»¹⁰⁴, forgetting that, as Marc Ferro said, «imagery is history as much as history»¹⁰⁵.

103 Roberto Vacca, *Medioevo prossimo venturo: la degradazione dei grandi sistemi* (Milano: Mondadori, 1971).

104 Gori, *Introduction*, 5.

105 «L’imaginaire de l’homme, c’est autant l’Histoire que l’Histoire»: Marc Ferro, “Le film, une contre-analyse de la société,” *Annales ESC* 28 (1973), 113-14.

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