

Ghost's Gaze: Direwolves, War, and Interspecies Relations in Game of Thrones

Written by Matthew Leep

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MATTHEW LEEP, JUN 20 2019

"The Last of the Starks" episode of *Game of Thrones* begins with scenes of mourning the dead and a mass funeral following the Battle of Winterfell. Many lives, including the lives of animals, were injured and lost. At the funeral we see Ghost—Jon Snow's mute direwolf—in the front row of the funeral pyre. We see the toll of war on Ghost. He has noticeable facial and body wounds. His white fur is stained with blood. Ghost's right ear is bloodied and partially missing. While the funeral was mostly a human event, Ghost's prominence in the front row was a reminder of the non-human experience of war and loss. His presence was fitting given his centrality in the storylines of Jon Snow, his role in the frontlines of battle, and the broader symbolic significance of direwolves as the sigil of House Stark.

The next scene with Ghost caused uproar among TV critics and the public. Roughly halfway through the episode, Jon Snow, preparing to fight another battle in the south, leaves Ghost behind without saying goodbye. In an interview with the show's creators, Jennifer Vineyard noted how "a lot of fans were upset that Ghost didn't get so much as a goodbye pet." *The Ringer's* Miles Surrey argued that *Game of Thrones* "botched Jon's relationship with his direwolf." *Vox's* Aja Romano wrote about how "on social media, Ghost quickly became the subject of an outpouring of anger." 11.8 million viewers watched this episode in its initial live broadcast, and it appeared that many were troubled by Jon's seeming lack of affection and the episode's lack of attention to Ghost. What might public reactions to Ghost—a silent, non-human character—mean for how we think about war?

I approach this question through the lens of Jacques Derrida's comments about *le regard insistant de l'animal* [the insistent gaze of the animal] to open up space for thinking about non-human perspectives in war. The French philosopher, born to a Jewish family in Algiers, is a frequent target for critics of "postmodernism." But even critics of Derrida might see some value in his thinking. For those interested in the world of Westeros, attention to his texts on non-human perspectives helps reveal central insights from *Game of Thrones*: our world is also a multispecies world; it is a world filled with war but also moments of interspecies responsibility and connection.

Derrida, Game of Thrones, and Non-Human Perspectives

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida is interested in the "gaze of the animal." In considering his cat gazing at his naked body, Derrida begins inquiring into the meaning of being looked at by animals. "The insistent gaze of the animal," he writes, calls into question his human place in the world and foregrounds how an animal has a "point of view regarding me" (p. 11). "Nothing," he claims, gives him "more food for thinking" than considering this animal's point of view (p. 11).

While the chapters of George R.R. Martin's novels are not dedicated to non-human points of view, non-human perspectives are nonetheless noticeable. Both Martin's novels and the HBO series focus significantly, for example, on "skinchangers" and "wargs"—humans with the ability to inhabit animals. While warging into an animal, one can "see through its eyes" and discover other ways of "being in the world," as T.A. Leederman insightfully writes (p. 190). Beyond literal perspective-taking, the characters of *Game of Thrones* also engage in imagining non-human perspectives. This is the case with the Stark children and their direwolves. For instance, Bran imagines the howls of his direwolf Summer as "long and sad, full of grief and longing" and wonders if the direwolves "missed their brothers

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and sisters” and if when they howled they were “calling to Grey Wind and Ghost, to Nymeria and Lady’s Shade? Do they want them to come home and be a pack together?” (p. 71). This example reveals not a move toward masterful knowledge but rather a gesture toward an imaginative-poetic feeling toward understanding non-human life. The interior lives of direwolves are beyond us, but imagining their sense of longing is a poetic form of knowing and offers a kind of connection.

Derrida, too, never claims full knowledge of an animal’s point of view; rather, he points toward its importance and seeks to imagine and imbue it with moral weight. Imagination, like warging, is a kind of crossing of species boundaries and a means of registering the value of other perspectives. While zoological knowledge helps us understand animal behavior and our close connection to animals, imagination might help us recognize how our existence in the world is inextricably bound up with animal others. As Derrida notes, “being-with-the-animal” might be considered an “irreducible structure of being-in-the-world,” and theorizing the world without attention to non-human perspectives might “not even function as a methodological fiction” (p. 79). The non-human gaze in the fictional world of *Games of Thrones* reminds us how longing and loss are not just human experiences; these emotions are to some extent shared and course through the lives of non-human others.

In the “Last of the Starks,” the episode that caused such an uproar, Jon Snow and Ghost’s reciprocal gaze provides a pathway for thinking about animal points of view and about the ethical weight of “being-with” non-human others in times of war. As Jon Snow prepares to head south, Tormund Giantsbane informs Jon that he will instead go north, where he belongs. We see Ghost watching this discussion. The camera is stationed behind Ghost, revealing the dialogue from Ghost’s perspective when Jon tells Tormund that the north is “where he [Ghost] belongs too.” The camera then faces Ghost when Jon states that “a direwolf has no place in the south” and asks Tormund to take Ghost with him because “he will be happier up there.” Though Ghost has been a faithful frontline fighter, his happiness rather than his military utility seems to shape Jon’s perspective. When the camera pans to Ghost, his intact ear moves in a way that signals he is intent on listening and making sense of the conversation. After Jon says goodbye to Gilly and Sam, he walks away and catches Ghost’s gaze. The camera pans back and forth between Ghost and Jon. Jon winces slightly, lowers his head, and turns away. Ghost slightly lowers his head as Jon leaves. These six silent seconds—an insistent gaze.

This moment also highlights the notion of being gazed at. Derrida is perhaps more interested in the animal’s point of view and the meaning of being seen by animals than what our seeing animals means. What does the gaze of the animal “offer to my sight?” he asks (p. 12). What does it mean to “be seen through the eyes of the other, in the seeing and not just seen eyes of the other?” (p. 12). We can ask what the gaze of Ghost means to Jon Snow but also what Jon’s gaze means to Ghost. We can also inquire into the meaning of Ghost’s gaze in terms of how we might see war and our human place in global politics. Perhaps this gaze might flex a wolfish sensibility into the entrenched anthropocentrism of International Relations.

To Jon, the gaze of Ghost contains layers of a painful and joyful past and also an unknown future. There is a history to this gaze, an unquantifiable sense of togetherness. While direwolves serve as a symbol and offer security for House Stark, the meanings of direwolves also disclose interspecies ways of being-together in the world. This is particularly the case with Jon Snow. For instance, Jon feels that “Ghost was closer than a friend. Ghost was part of him” (p. 160). While Jon could occasionally warg into Ghost, he “felt as if he and the direwolf were one, even awake” (p. 511). In another moment, Jon—apart from Ghost but with a woman he loves—wonders “where Ghost was now. Had he gone to Castle Black, or was he was running with some wolfpack in the woods? He had no sense of the direwolf . . . It made him feel as if part of himself had been cut off. Even with Ygritte sleeping beside him, he felt alone” (p. 466). Ghost’s gaze exposes Jon’s world, revealing the loneliness of a universe without his silent friend. Perhaps this is all sensed somehow in the gaze. Perhaps its meaning is intensified by the mutual experience of fighting and surviving the Battle of Winterfell together.

Jon’s gaze might mean something similar for Ghost. There is a scene in Martin’s novel *Storm of Swords* when, after Ghost sees Jon after a long period of separation, Ghost sprints, leaps, and playfully wrestles with Jon and licks his “face with a tongue like a wet rasp” (p. 895). Ghost remembers Jon, their moments together, the feeling of being-together in the world. Their gazing is a bridge into these interconnected worlds. Without knowing what Ghost actually

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knows, remembers, or feels, *Game of Thrones* points toward a certain multi-species sense of connection and being-in-the-world. These moments of interspecies care, connection, and loss help us, as Derrida puts it, disrupt what some might think is only “proper to man” (p. 32). Moreover, perhaps Ghost’s gaze in “The Last of the Starks” is not just a *reaction* but also a meaningful *response*. In the aftermath of war, his gaze seems to problematize “the purity” of the line between a behavioral *reaction* and a more meaningful *response* and “the possibility of tracing” this line, to use the language of Derrida (p. 126). And perhaps this is one reason why the public was upset about this scene; Ghost’s look was not simply an “animal reaction” but a *response*—a response demanding concern and care. Ghost has agency and preferences, and he is more than an “animal machine” (p. 76).

Conclusions

IR scholars have begun approaching *Game of Thrones* as a form of knowledge and a means for fostering new ways of thinking about violence, sovereign power, and gender. In this essay, I have suggested how reflecting on *Game of Thrones* alongside Derrida is instructive for thinking about war in its many multi-species manifestations. By tracing Ghost’s gaze through Derrida, we might become drawn into other interspecies connections and into the look of other animals involved in war. For example, we might attend to the story of Aslan, the teenage Syrian refugee who carried his dog, Rose, for most of a 300-mile journey away from violence. We might think of Mohammad Alaa Aljaleel and his “sanctuary for Syrian cats.” We might be ushered into these cats’ experiences of war and Mohammad’s sense of responsibility to Syrian street cats whose owners fled or were killed amid violence. We might see Mohammad’s refusal to accept the loss of street cats as a *fait accompli* in the face of massive violence as a reminder that animals might be part of our concept of community, our sense of who we might be, and our sense of belonging in the world. To see how “animals and humans . . . suffer pain, and [how] all of them deserve compassion,” even the ones we never see or know—the animals without names—is to move toward a prospect of capacious forms of interspecies perspective-taking. To imagine, for instance, the gaze of anonymous stray dogs amidst war in Iraq and how these animal experiences were bound up with civilian experiences of war is to accustom our senses to war’s interspecies experiences, to possibilities of a post-human IR. Perhaps we might think of international politics in “interspecies terms;” consequently, we might seek to sense the gaze of the known and unknown humans and animals inhabiting our shared world.

Non-human life and animal perspectives are central to the work of both Jacques Derrida and George R.R. Martin. Derrida wrote about cats and was deeply troubled by factory farming. Martin wrote about direwolves, and the initial idea for *Game of Thrones* began with a chapter involving direwolf pups. Martin has also been a supporter of the Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary in New Mexico. Perhaps thinking about the world of Westeros through Derrida might push us to problematize human/animal boundaries and to bring the ethical weight of others’ perspectives to bear on our sense of responsibility.

As I think about Ghost’s gaze, I recall a moment after I gave a public talk about animals and war on Memorial Day weekend. After the talk, a Vietnam veteran asked to speak to me about his experiences with a military dog in Vietnam, a dog left behind. His eyes welled up with tears. Behind those tears and within their possibility was a gaze—an animal seen and who sees, a dog remembered, imagined, felt—a ghost’s gaze moving through time, followed . . . following.

About the author:

Matthew Leep is a political science instructor at Western Governors University. His research has been published in *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, *Politics and Animals*, *Cooperation and Conflict*, *Democracy and Security*, *Global Change, Peace, & Security*, and *International Politics*. He is on twitter @matthewcoenleep.

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