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Go woke, go broke? On black elves, anthropological perspective, and critical approach to “culture wars”*

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Abstract: The text reflects on the issues of wokeness and culture wars in regard to mainstream cinema and its reception. Building on the author’s own ethnographical fieldwork within film industry, it addresses the question of desired anthropological approach to the discourse about representation in popular culture. The case of backlash against certain elements of popular fantasy live action series *The Lord of the Rings: Rings of Power* and *The Witcher* is used by the author to argue for intersectional analysis rooted in economic perspective that exceeds identity-oriented, binary discursive setup, in search of more nuanced social knowledge, which is something that should constitute anthropological presence in public debate.

Keywords: cinema, woke, discourse, culture wars, entertainment industry

Słowa kluczowe: kino, woke, dyskurs, wojny kulturowe, przemysł rozrywkowy

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Doing research among contemporary “culture wars”

I did not particularly enjoy *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (2022–), a series, so far the most expensive (Andreeva, 2017) in the history of television/streaming media productions, based on the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien. Nor did I was too fond of earlier *The Witcher* (2019), adaptation of *The Witcher Saga* by Andrzej Sapkowski. In both cases, I approached the productions as someone who liked the original novels a lot, was more than familiar with them and fairly excited to see once beloved stories and characters on screen. In both cases my expectations were not exactly met – while I enjoyed both shows to some extent, neither did, in my opinion, a good job of offering satisfying experience

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to the viewers, and both had severe problems with pacing and maintaining high quality throughout their (still ongoing at the moment) runs. In other words, I was not really satisfied with popular culture products that I had been, as a viewer-consumer, anticipating. That should be the end of story, but it is just a point from which I want to begin my reflection. Due to the aforementioned cases I have been feeling a bit guilty about criticizing respective shows and by this indirectly joining its heavy criticism. This was severe not only because of the quality reasons, but mostly because both *Rings of Power* and *The Witcher* have been associated with “wokeness in film industry” and deemed as symptoms of what has gone wrong with mainstream entertainment these days. The issue of approaching “woke” and involving oneself in “culture wars” – clashes about how the world represented in TV and cinema should look like – is what I want to address here as an anthropological challenge. Because with starting my impressions on aforementioned productions, it was a viewer-reviewer speaking. But it so happens that this particular viewer is also an anthropologist – albeit deeply entangled in on-field relations and perspectives shared with other people encountered there – doing his fieldwork about film and its social aspects. And this is partially where my guilt is coming from – the necessity of taking stance in heated debates and inability to separate aesthetic experience from social and political issues. This puts me betwixt and between, as a subject combining personal experiences and affects with evoked information and external perspectives (Tedlock, 1991: 73; Geertz, 1998: 69; Rapport, 2000: 76–77). The notions of taste and political optics blend together and create paradoxical situations, where we label films like, as one of my field partners put it, “important but not interesting” or “slightly offensive but fun.” So, how anthropologist should approach such situations, given our unique theories, methodology and toolbox of knowledge-practice operations? I reckon it may be a major challenge to navigate between our own aesthetical views (that may be more or less embedded in formal education) and more socially critical approach to discourses regarding popular culture.

I craft this essay based on my personal experience of prolonged involvement in the life of film communities (consisting of varied social actors – cinema professionals, film critics/journalists, filmmakers, scholars and film enthusiasts, especially those whom I call “engaged viewers,” see: Raczkowski, 2020) as part of my PhD research project developed since 2019. In my ethnographic practice, framed as a multi-sited venture (Marcus, 1995), research across different social spaces that emphasizes the importance of larger-scale processes and intercultural nodes of social practice. That translates into me working with and within several

film communities,¹ performing the mixture of participant observation (also as a professionally involved contributor – a critic, festival organizer and cinephile, engaged viewer, see: Tedlock 1991), in-depth ethnographic conversations, extemporary discourse analysis and constant auto-reflection on the situations and actions that I am taking part in (Falzon 2009). Such anthropological fieldwork results in being almost constantly engaged in film-related discourses at some level.

My fieldwork often includes taking part in a discussions in which, whereas I am performing not only in researcher-observer mode of ethnographic activity, but perhaps more regularly I am one of the subjects exchanging thoughts (Hazan, Herzog, 2012: 2–4). Given my anthropological paradigm, the fact that I am indeed studying film and film-related social issues from academic point of view, is always known to my interlocutors, so wanting it or not, I am acting with ever-present *responsibility* to represent anthropological *authority*. In such case – and by extension in almost all other situations, when me or any anthropologist is taking part in a discussion about popular culture – there is no option of withdrawing *as anthropologist*, not taking a stance, not giving an opinion or “staying neutral” (McLean, Leibing, 2007; Enguix, 2014). Even refusal to answer is an answer. Thus the issue I am trying to solve here – not if, but how should we be taking personally driven stances about popular culture. Not necessarily as experts, but sometimes as common individuals, that happen to be of anthropological, to phrase it blatantly, “ethnicity.” Addressing this question with a case of “wokeness” and “culture wars,” I will construct more general remark on anthropological authority, responsibility and operational tendencies, that may and should be part of our modern toolboxes.

I use here the figure of “black elves” as a referring point for anthropological perception of polarized cultural discourse, that not only exemplifies the tensions encountered in popular culture, but also intersections of discursive attitudes and sometimes paradoxical nature of both participating in cultural discourses and research set in such space.

1 In my project, I build on the primary perspective of participation in three selected film festivals, representing the local level of film culture (Opolskie Lamy Film Festival in Opole, Poland), translocal cross-road of local venue opened for an international scope of film culture (arthouse film festival New Horizons in Wrocław, Poland) and international, global event (Berlinale International Film Festival in Berlin, Germany). From those sites I then follow the relationships between various actors of film culture (Harbord, 2002; De Valck, 2005) and film industry (Caldwell, 2008; Adamczak, 2018) resulting in the creation of shifting and cross-spatial ethnographic field (see: McLean, Leibing, 2007), practically tied network of practices and engagements that include both physical and virtual (online) social spaces.

Woke, wokeness, and wokism

Strictly speaking, the adjective “woke” comes from black vernacular² (Edwards, 2004) and refers to maintaining the consciousness and staying alert in the wake of racism and acts of discrimination. Originally coming from a spoken afterword to the 1938 “Scottsboro Boys” by Lead Belly, a protest song commenting on the false accusation and conviction of nine black youths in Alabama. The singer says: “I advise everybody, be a little careful when they go along through there – best stay woke, keep their eyes open” (Kóczé, 2022: 1). In the following decades, it was established as a cultural “watchword” for Black Americans, eventually becoming a slogan for Black Lives Matter movement in 2014 and since then began to be associated with the anti-racist mobilization and campaigns, including social and traditional media coverages and advocacies for the cause (Romano, 2020). Soon enough, as it became widely recognized as an emblematic phrase for social justice and anti-racist discourses, the word and its noun derivations: “wokeness” (the condition) and “wokism” (the ideology) were directed by the conservatively-oriented discourse, sceptic towards the agenda of BLM and its allies.

In such context, “staying woke” was drawn into the heated discourse of “culture wars” (James, Plaice, Toren, 2012) and appropriated by conservative and reactionary groups as a term describing activist efforts to silence the “inappropriate” voices and opponents as part of pushing progressive, offensive agenda against traditional status quo (Kóczé, 2022: 2–3). This context formed the common use of the term “woke,” which I encountered during my research since 2020. As it appears in the wake of my fieldwork experience, the variants of “wokeness” are used mostly pejoratively as an umbrella term related to a set of discourses that are associated with “progressive” agendas advocating social change and breaking of oppressive hierarchies – here seen as a “good old,” default state of things that is presumably comfortable and good enough for everything and everybody. In the specific case of film industry, “wokeness” sparks therefore a controversial matter of (mis)representation in the industry – regarding race and/or ethnicity, but also by extension a gender and queer identities that are usually joining with black movement (or at least perceived as joining) in the rally against traditional white-straight-male centrism (double meaning intended). It came to the point where even using such term risks being seen as a political stance, with “woke”

² Alternatively: African-American Vernacular English, a cluster of African-American dialects or spoken variations of English among black communities in United States of America (see Edwards, 2004; Bailey, Baugh, Mufwene, Salikoko, Rickford, 2013; McDorman, 2012).

coming about as commonplace insult against products that are perceived as “gone too far with political correctness,” that is not living up to elusive neutral standards.

Experiencing *wokeness* and *culture wars*

Very glaring manifestations of this “woke issue” are the debates about equality-oriented casting in modern production, especially in adaptations of well-known franchises. Here is where *Rings of Power* and *The Witcher* are coming as the most glaring examples. Much of the criticism that they received – often even before the actual premiere – pertained to the issues of “changing” the skin color or gender of certain character, which from one point of view is seen as egalitarian and providing more diverse representations in the medium (see Plotz, 2020). The change may be direct – for example casting black actors to play the parts that originally were or were supposed to be white (or unspecified – and therefore in the fantasy lore they were by default presumed to be white “in accordance with how this world works” as one of my interlocutors phrased it). It may be however something else – for example giving more agency to female characters or introducing subplots that flesh out more diverse and equal structure of the world. These changes are declared to be made to help (re)shape mass imagination and envisioning the world – in order to create symbolic space relatable to contemporary viewers seeking more equal spaces of entertainment, to give people of color, women and other groups that were misrepresented before the characters and narratives to identify with more (Plotz, 2020), and therefore make the entertainment products more inclusive and “modern.” For the opposing view, it is “pushing the agenda” and form of reverse discrimination of privileged white male culture. It is manifested by half-jokingly coined term “black elves” (which is a dialectically ironic phrase, at the same time ridiculing the anger about reshaping the world that is imaginary to begin with and mocking the will to “change the existing canons in order to fit woke ideology instead of creating new ones”). It fuels the deep social divisions in the discourse organized around binaries of woke and “racist.” In some way, the answer to the question: “What do you think about black elves?” may define to which worldview you subscribe in general discourse.

“Black elves” is a symptomatic highlight for the cinema front of *culture wars*. As seen by its critics, the current agenda of political correctness and push for more equal representations transformed modern popular culture with its texts into a battleground (Kóczé, 2022). From this perspective, the war is declared by *woke* activists who infiltrate institutions

and aim at politicizing cultural consumption with exaggerated changes, such as racially diverse casting, that please liberal (in ideological meaning) groups and minorities. This in turn is said to be spoiling the products such as films and TV series, as the changes break the immersion into the world created and, as it is argued, ridicule the idea of anti-racism with what is perceived to be “anti-white” racism (Kachanoff, Kteily, Gray, 2022). So, following this logic, when *woke* creators go into fantasy genre and take *inherently* white-skinned elves and portray them as black, they create something “fundamentally wrong” that serves nothing else than unnecessary meddling with (naturally Western-based) culture. The similar perception is observed when it comes to female agency and sexual orientation – giving more agency and narrative importance to non-male characters, introducing, re-contextualizing or outing a character as queer are also seen as an act of *culture wars* by the *woke* against thriving of natural traditions that the world is built on.

From the opposite point of view, this way of argumentation is perceived straightforwardly as reactionary and racist, and by extension any kind of criticism may be seen as hostility against equality and diversity, seen here as inherently positive values. Such reception is further supported by marketing teams of film companies that launch ostentatiously anti-racist manifests and use the acts of hate-driven criticism to reinforce the inclusiveness of its products. But inclusiveness could not be seen here as a value per se itself, but rather a token guaranteeing undisputed value of the product – according to an unspoken rule that “if something is woke, it must be good.” In several conversations held in summer 2022, when the *Rings of Power* promotional campaign and the debate about race and gender representation changes in Tolkien lore were at full swing, this was pointed out as “premeditated action to create more drama, and therefore more attention – clicks and comments [that translate into internet positioning and advertisement incomes].” This indirectly creates a loom of “necessity of support,” that leads to the feeling of having been trapped between extreme stances, with seemingly no way out towards more nuanced debate.

Interestingly, in the scope of *culture wars*, cinema is perceived simultaneously as a problematic cause for both *woke* and anti-*woke* sides. A common notion that I encountered throughout field sites is that the cinema in general is patriarchal and Eurocentric, where women and people of color must fight for their representations and opportunities to have a voice. People point out systemic discrimination that goes all the way from the early production phases (pitch meetings, treatments, etc.), through various stages of production right onto the screen representation. For those, it is theoretically more likely to defend elves being black, maybe seeing it as a valuable gesture of change and film becoming

a little bit more open throughout racial diversity in mass entertainment. Another view is that as I was told recently at film festival “[white] men are in retreat” and in fact feel “at least scrutinized,” if not the victims of reverse structural oppression or projecting the blame on them. On this basis, some people recognize that the industry “went woke” and it is very much entangled in supporting discourses that are more or less aimed at changing status quo. Here, people are likely to express the resentment towards racially diverse cast and black elves as destructive to the aesthetic and undermining their white heritage. In this context, “going woke” is not necessarily to be seen as a straightforward act of committing to progressive discourse, but more blurred notion of particular strategy – using this discourse to obtain particular commercial goals and therefore hijacking wokeness for company profit.

The heat of such debates is significant. While big budget productions such as *Rings of Power* are earning fair amounts of money and receive generally positive attention, the backlash against *wokeness* is also something highly visible. When *The Witcher* first came out, the “black elves issue” was relatively restrained to most orthodox parts of fandom (mostly in original Poland, where challenging the idea of white-only medieval reality of fantasy genre was taken as a heresy that destroys very core of the cult *Witcher* universum). After show’s second season premiered the backlash intensified, notably due to lowering of overall production value and *wokeness* resurfaced as a cardinal sin against the franchise – which criticism was now reinforced by more voices that were keen to go along with “woke disaster” narrative due to questionable creative choices (whether they were actually related to representation and *staying woke* or not). The memes were going around about “blackwashing” done by Netflix and alleged hatred towards cult franchise build around white, heterosexual, male hero.³

This was then boosted in case of *Rings of Power*, where show’s diversity (heralded as necessary changes to Tolkien’s vision made by contemporary-minded showrunners) was the focal point of the discussion from day one. The *wokeness* of the production became the major virtue manifested by the producers and marketing campaign, and in turn it became the main flaw for the opposite side. This resulted in bombing the ratings (coordinated massive action of displaying negative ratings on leading portals in order to artificially lower the overall rating) even before the premiere and when the show eventually came out, *wokeness*

3 The issue of criticism towards *The Witcher* in relation to the original literary content is another interesting topic, worth discussing separately. It also highlights the discursive trivialization of things, as the agenda of original having been supposedly anti-woke was largely blind to anti-discrimination and anti-racist content of Sapkowski’s books.

have begun to be debated as the main characteristic of the show. Again the accusations of ill-willed subverting the classical tale were made and *Rings of Power* became yet another highlight of what is perceived by some as “modern pop culture going woke.” The outcome was that each opinion about the show was perceived as being more or less associated with taking stance toward the woke issue. In such situation, the opinion about the show as a whole became a form of political statement as such that regarded social processes that are bond to it.

Anthropological problematization

The opposition between two stances seems to be glaring and very much narrowing the discourse into two set binary positions. In everyday practice however, there is a range of in-between options – for instance, male filmmaker, who expressed that he feels being “forced to retreat,” also declares his support for more equal representations, as “it is needed to reflect the diversity, if only to give the voice to those who don’t have it.” In his perspective, the diversity was supposed to be applied mostly to skin color and sexual orientation, however he also mentioned “supporting female voices [...] just not at the expense of male experiences.” The recognition of being on defensive position and criticizing certain elements of current politics regarding gender within industry does not mean that he expresses full hostility against progressive agenda and processes, but rather his experience combines several perspectives. Such dynamics, where seemingly contradictory views are coexisting within one group or person are not something isolated. The heterodox stances, dwelling into different issues, depending on a person or analytical angle, are what I encountered when being in the field. In truth, I have almost never observed very strict realizations of *woke* or *anti-woke* optics in real life or in relation to specific person.

The dynamics that I described in previous section is almost exclusively connected to the internet exchanges, which for one are to be treated with a bit of doubt when it comes to accuracy of expressions regarding actual views of particular person, and also are far from direct ethnographic interaction, that sets proper circumstances for fully understanding and hearing out the complex perspectives. The problem hereby is more that the nature of debates fueled by culture wars forces polarizations and makes the reflection more superficial instead of opening it up to be more critical and fruitful. In fact, the optics where there are indeed culture wars with two opposite worldviews inherently clashing is reductionist at best. While it may serve as a general template to frame some of discursive practice, it at the same time calls for more nuances. This

issue of culture wars is something that anthropology should deeply analyze and understand. We are (as anthropologists) bound to problematize simplistic optics. In this particular case, it would be to try to understand not even “how it is,” but seek for more convoluted reasons for “why.”

In this context, it is interesting to ask why, in fact, we are talking about black elves, queer actors, gay romance and other *woke* stuff so fiercely, to the point that it clouds other issues involved in entertainment industry? While those factors are indeed important to be brought to be represented in broader discourse (Plotz, 2020), I would argue that they are being hijacked to create the gloom of *culture wars* and fuel the divisions around the issue of *wokeness*. When I dwell among film communities, in actual film culture sites, rather than just following internet debates, I observe set of other issues, that are often more pressing than the representation, which, to be fair has been considerably diversified over the last decades. But what gets less attention, are: the problem of increasing fees, overflowing with streaming platforms and weakening distribution chains, overpriced subscriptions, and suffocating financing of the events (Pakula, 2021). However, with the logic of *culture wars*, many of film communities are kind of forced to accept all those issues while the industry fights “conservative backlash,” even becoming reluctant to criticize woke productions where it is due, and in consequence securing gigantic incomes (Oh, 2021). I call this process “alt-washing” or “left-washing” – legitimizing the neoliberal governmentality in day-to-day practice of cinemas and festivals; in this case it might be also called “woke-washing,” where the practices of social actors/institutions are obfuscated by discursive red herrings, which derails public discourse to almost absurd clashes of culture wars. The symptom of alt-washing is utilizing empowerment and equality discourses for the benefit of the system, which in the process receives a pass for inherent inequalities and exploitation – mostly regarding labor. It means for example that companies such as Netflix (as with the case of *The Witcher*) or Amazon (*The Rings of Power*) may redirect the criticism from valid points, like writers’ room cuts or production micromanagement, towards the blatant issues of race, that at least to some extent paralyzes the critique from progressive circles, whose representatives, in turn, are cautious not to be associated with racism-fueled backlashes.

This process goes deep into the cores of film communities, not only at the level of global companies such as Amazon. “Alt-washing” is also inherent part of modern film festivals, which are sometimes becoming “exhibitions for global capital” (the words said by the employee of one of the biggest film festivals in the world), which associates itself with alternative, ambitious cinema and therefore expands its marketing networks (Ohri, 2016). It also comes down to the mentality of film industry

workers, who are being conditioned to “sacrifice their own wellbeing for the cause [of creating culture]” – which yields profits for someone else while at the same time provides the feeling of “working for something more [than the money].” Such phenomena at various levels may be traced back to the general, global-scaled “woke-washing” that leads the discourse about cinema, both as an art form and as an industry, to the stalemate of “us” versus “them,” declaring pro or against “progress,” “equality” or “diversity.” Somewhat metaphorically, it locks the attention on the screen and film narrative itself, positioning what is behind comfortably beyond the scope of debate, or at least under control and ability to obscure it by “wokeness.”

The trick here is not to see the corporate operations as woke just because they use the discourse and position themselves to be such. A way to make such a shift in perspective is to take into account not merely the identity politics, but rather the class-driven, worker-employer relationships that organize the film industry in the first place. The said discourse is created at the executive level, which often happens to be opposed by workers, as seen in the examples of recent industry strikes (McPherson, 2023). The labor issue is broader, but it is crucial to point out that woke discourse is often used to justify corporate operations, including those that include staff exploitation. Such remark uncovers concealed purpose (or at least one of purposes) of creating so-called woke agenda by the industry subjects. The “us” versus “them” paradigm effectively marginalizes critical movements within the film community itself. The actual axis of tensions within the industry is not “political correctness,” but rather class struggle happening at an uneven battleground between varied labor and corporate executives. Due to the characteristics of distracted production model in film industry, the solidarities are hardly seen and acted upon, and even if they emerge, they are rather weak and struggle to form a cohesive front against the pressure of executive capital. So-called culture wars may be seen as a circumstance that further weakens labor interests by creating and emphasizing external hostilities. At the bare minimum, it creates the situation where such movements are isolated from external support – on the account of “being the part of woke agenda” – and therefore left with no other possible ally than exploiting corporation.

Such a stalemate is something preserved by marketing strategies. It is worth mentioning that sometimes the pure profit from the product (film/series) is not the ultimate goal. Such is the case with Amazon, which promotes their Prime streaming productions mainly in order to support their shipping services (Rashaduzzaman, Jorgensen, 2022). The strategy of kidnapping grassroots woke discourse is therefore not merely an accident or seizing the opportunity, but may rather be seen as a logical element of overall class dynamics (Maskovsky, Susser, 2016)

in late capitalist culture industry (Evans, 2010). It should be noted that, being part of global capital, mainstream entertainment industry does not so much create the trends, but rather reacts to them, seeking to capitalize on existing processes, that are to some extent disarmed in the same process (Graeber, 2018). Therefore, when I speak of shaping the discourse, I mean most of all utilizing the processes that already exist. Such was the case with Black Lives Matter movement and antiracism in general, which as an agenda was incorporated into mainstream cinema after it arose throughout society – not the other way around. If there is an original agenda that global companies would actually introduce into cinema productions, it is the liberal paradigm of scientific, natural status of economic processes and capitalism/neoliberalism as its optimal permutation. But even then, the global culture industry (Lash, Lury, 2005) would be actually reflecting on preexisting ideologies that lay at its foundation. That is not saying that culture industry, cinema in particular, does not have the ability to influence society. In contrary, it has significant role in shaping collective imaginaries, setting dynamics of social debate and providing a platform to different ideologies in the form of narrative vehicles (Rassoukh, Caton, 2021). This, however, comes not on behalf of some mystery political plots, but rather as part of the global structures as they are.

Conclusions – call for anthropological front

Then again, what should anthropology do? My argument is that our role as anthropologists in situations of intensified political discourses, if not to provide empirically-based, critical analysis, then at least to pinpoint broader aspects that are going beyond the question of *wokeness* and determine social processes that lead to the emergence of such thing as *wokeness* in the first place. In this manner, commonly quoted phrase “go/get woke, go broke” may be seen as somewhat ironic. Its common use suggests that media companies are causing their own downfall (financial in particular), by antagonizing audience due to implementation of or overemphasis on *woke* agendas. In consequence, popular culture being *woke* is against public expectations and leads the companies to bankruptcy. The data, however, suggest the contrary tendency, namely, that the companies in question seem to thrive, even shamelessly profiting from their hijacking of the *woke* agenda. So in fact, playing on *woke* discourse/utilizing *woke* discourse and controversies attached to it, not only do not cause big players to lose money, but rather helps them earn more.

In the wake of this insight, going woke can be utilized as a caution for anthropology approaching *culture wars* – we can go “broke” (analytically) if we go too eagerly “woke.” In this case it would mean uncritically following the takeover of the discourse, without reflecting on the deeper, broader construction of this issue. If I were to analyze the case of *Rings of Power* backlash in this manner, I would stop at the recognition of the clash between the *progressive* and *conservative* worldviews whose essence is the production and certain elements of it, succumbing to the identity perspective (see: Wielgosz, 2020). This way I would extract quite an attractive anthropological narrative about the changing dynamics of popular culture and entertainment. But after exploring ethnographic sites and meeting with much less clear and easily classified processes, I rather take further step and recognize something parallel to what Mark Goodale called “dark matter[s]”: the ineluctable, constant, and veiled presence of transnational (primarily extractive) capital working not against, but with, policies of indigenous rights” (Goodale, 2016: 441). His observation refers to the discourses of indigenous ethnic groups, but may be aptly extrapolated to politicized identity in general, as it sets the optics of social discourses onto the issues such as race and gender, when the economic background remains obscured (see: Graeber, 2018; Wielgosz, 2020). In other words, we should stay alert (or maybe: stay woke) about the neoliberal takeover, “woke-washing” of capitalist practice that hijacks grassroots social discourses and uses them to adapt and thrive.

Following Goodale, who notes that “the shaping, even defining, influence of the dark matter must be teased out from what are more often than not vague allusions to ‘resource issues’ or ‘economic pressures’ says much about both the sidelining of political economy within contemporary anthropology and the urgent need to reorient our analytical priorities going forward examine these accounts for signs of ‘dark matter’” (Goodale, 2016: 441), I see anthropology as being able to unveil the entanglement of wokeness in capital. Examining pop-cultural dark matters would require intersectional approach that enables taking into account multiple issues interfering with each other. In some cases it will mean distancing ourselves from the identity-oriented stances (no matter how righteous we could find them), but not in order to obtain scientific objectivity, but rather to bring up inner processes of capitalist ventures fueling and shaping the discourses in everlasting game of securing financial profit (Graeber, 2018). Anthropology should not follow the common threads and let ourselves being put into the corners of taking particular stances as expected within the “progressive” and “reactionary” opposition. Rather, we should go across them, elicit what discursive practices actually mean and how are they constructed. The way to doing that

is very simple – to use in-depth ethnographical research that allows us to be for a longer periods of time with the people, and by doing so, gaining the access to more nuanced knowledge that could help us to dismantle the rigid and unproductive state of taking part in *culture wars*.

The problem then is not whether there ought to transpire a change in film representation; whether we should follow queer heroes or elves should be black. The problem is why we are talking about it so fiercely. This is how, in my opinion, anthropologists need to approach popular culture in its “hot” areas – asking deeper questions and constructing stances to provide more critical view that surpasses the limitations of binary clashes. In such manner, as anthropologist asked whether elves should be black, I would say – that is not the right question. Actually, why should not they be black? But when it comes to Amazon’s biggest yet production, why are we discussing it and not questionable politics of production company? Why is the *wokeness* a token that seemingly shields the production from criticism that might be read as reactionary support of toxic backlash against diversity? I am not saying that we should abandon discussing (popular) culture in order to begin structural anti-capitalist critique. But why should we not discuss films, TV series or franchises for what they are – a projection of industry/capital that they represent? One and actually quite productive way to do it would be to examine our own spontaneous attitudes towards “controversial” issues – for example guilt about involuntarily associating with discourse that we would ethically prefer to be distanced from – and try to follow this self-reflection in order to find personal problematization (Lutz, White, 1986), then extended by anthropological perspective.

What I propose is by no means revolutionary. It is rather to just go back to the basics of our field as seen by Marcus and Fischer (1999) – empirically-based cultural critique that often actually refuses to take political stances before researching the issue. The important factor here would be going back to the more economically oriented approach – as Goodale (2016) puts it, return of economic thinking that goes beyond the issues of identity treated as the entity as such, but rather following the intersecting thread of identity, politics, and capitalist economy. As I call for more informed and nuanced stances specifically in the aspect of popular culture, I would end on yet another note that would be a call for broad cooperation and fruitful discussions. As we are not able to be experts at everything, and therefore we are not able to provide our own research-based opinions on everything, we should use each other’s research, cross-referencing and create more of a cooperative anthropological hive mind. Constant awareness of multi-layered game going on in pop culture should be something that defines anthropological studies of the subject, as it is the only way to see properly the contexts of culture

wars and how and why certain discourses are being spread and strengthened. In this manner, this article rather than an exhaustive case study, is supposed to be an invitation to the reflection and discussion not only about the social reality, but also the methods we, as anthropologists, use to examine it.

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