Fear of a Black Hobbit

The demand to keep politics out of art is too often a demand for art to conform to conservative politics.

By [Adam Serwer](#)

Maybe you've heard that people are mad about Black actors being cast in [_Lord of the Rings_](#). Or [_Game of Thrones_](#). Or maybe it was [_Star Wars_](#). Or [perhaps _Thor_](#). Wait, maybe [it was _Titans_](#), or [_Superman_](#). [_The Witcher_](#)? Or maybe you heard that people are [angry that _Black Panther_](#) got made in the first place, because Wakanda is fictional, unlike one of those fantasy countries authors seem to think will seem more mysterious if you add enough accents or apostrophes, like Warthéréth'rién. (I just made that up.) Maybe you're wondering why [adults care about a Disney mermaid being Black](#).

Earlier this month, CNN [published a news story](#) featuring an interview with Brandon Morse, an editor for the right-wing website RedState, in which he complained that Amazon's new _Lord of the Rings_ show, _The Rings of Power_, is integrated: "He says 'The Rings of Power' producers have cast non-White actors in a story based on European culture and who look wildly different from how Tolkien originally described them," CNN reported. "He says it's an attempt to embed 'social justice politics' into Tolkien's world." Morse told CNN that "if you focus on introducing modern political sentiments, such as the leftist obsession with identity issues that only go skin deep, then you're no longer focusing on building a good story."

It's worth noting how rapidly right-wing language about colorblind meritocracy melts away when it does not produce the desired results. Perhaps the actors cast were simply the most qualified?

Demanding Jim Crow casting requirements for a show on which the concept of race applies to elves and hobbits indicates a rather profound "obsession with identity issues that only go skin deep." The primary tensions in Middle Earth are among races [even more fictional](#) than the ones that divide contemporary society. The fact that its cultures are inspired by real-world history does not rationalize imposing patterns of migration, conquest, and exploitation onto a fictional universe in which they did not take place. J. R. R. Tolkien's tendency to essentialize his fictional races, giving them intrinsic moral qualities, is the subject of a great [deal of research and commentary](#), but that's not really the issue here. There are stories set in universes where race works similarly to how it does in contemporary society and where it should influence casting choices, but this isn't one of them.

The interesting thing about this particular sort of backlash is that someone is willing to express such sentiments so explicitly. Backlashes against Black actors being cast in prominent genre roles are almost reflexive at this point, but the critics usually avoid stating outright that the integrity of the work requires an all-white cast. Most of the time, they stick to the argument that inserting politics into art diminishes the quality of the acting or storytelling, even if the shows merely acknowledge the existence of people who are not white or straight or men. The benefit of Morse's candor is his clarity that his demand to keep politics out of art is itself a demand for art to conform to conservative politics.

There are a number of reasons these reactionary backlashes happen so often. The first, obviously, is that some people lack the imagination to see themselves in protagonists they do not aspire to resemble, at least in their mind's eye. Another is that some conservative outlets see the screen as just another front

in the culture war. They aim to convince the corporations that make television shows and films that their products will fail commercially if they do not conform to conservative politics, while convincing devoted fans of these properties that the reason newer interpretations are unsatisfying is because of diverse casting.

The refrain "Go woke, go broke" offers a tidy summary of this argument, *wokeness gone mad* being a useful euphemism for a demand like "resegregate popular entertainment," which might turn people off. In a recent Instagram post, for example, Donald Trump Jr. neatly summarized the view that American popular entertainment doesn't have enough exclusively white shows:

How effective this campaign will be, I cannot say. Despite the conservative complaints about "woke capital," the executives in charge of these companies are typically aligned politically and economically with the American right—they simply have a commercial incentive to make things that the broadest number of people want to see. Significant right-wing cultural backlashes have succeeded in narrowing Hollywood's imagination in the past.

These kinds of critiques can also resonate beyond conservative audiences, for a number of reasons. One is that didactic politics can make for bad art (and bad criticism) in a way that is conducive to widespread mockery. Conversely, sometimes art is bad, but the backlash against it is expressed in a prejudiced fashion. And sometimes devoted fans of a particular style of filmmaking try to deflect substantive criticisms by accusing critics of prejudice. More than one of these things can be true at the same time, which can make justified criticism difficult to disentangle from bile, which in turn frustrates those making substantive critiques, because they are unjustly lumped in with bigots.

Yet the fact that the actors themselves are often targeted by prejudiced harassment campaigns is an obvious tell that such campaigns are not about the integrity of the art, but about who gets to see themselves in it. And there is no performance strong enough to overcome a demand that actors who are not white simply not be cast.

Although this may seem like an utterly silly and superficial dispute, representation shapes how people think of themselves and others, for good or for ill. And beneath the culture war nonsense are real questions not just of representation but of labor, of who gets to make a living in the entertainment industry as an artist or creator. These controversies and harassment campaigns seek to narrow not just the industry's imagination, but also who can get paid to do this kind of work. People enraged by Black actors playing elves or mermaids are not any happier about Black writers or directors.

What is ultimately true, though, is that the "right" politics cannot make art succeed, and the "wrong" politics won't prevent it from succeeding, at least in a commercial and popular sense. The work has to resonate. Most people's tastes do not align neatly with their politics, and to the extent that people want such alignment, they typically just talk themselves into thinking the art they like shares their politics. This is not to say all political art or criticism is bad, or that popularity is by itself a measure of artistic merit. But weaving political themes into a story line, or evaluating a film or movie solely through the prism of one's politics, is insufficient to make it brilliant or profound. Sometimes, in fact, doing so inadvertently exposes the shallowness of the art or the argument.

However, the reflexive conservative criticism of any art that includes even weakly perceptible progressive elements, or that could be used to exacerbate existing resentments, aims to persuade

studios to just make films like *Top Gun,* which [right-wing critics perceive as having](#) "anti-woke, pro-America politics," over and over again. (I heard the new sequel is great, by the way, but I have two small children and no time to go to the movies.)

Hollywood's reliance on well-known intellectual properties, moreover, means that much of what it produces is consumed by an aging audience used to seeing themselves as the protagonists of these stories, and a vocal minority resents even minor digressions from this format. Remarkably, this blind nostalgia attaches even to properties [like *Star Trek*](#) and *X-Men*, whose progressive politics have always been a significant part of their fictional universes. To present these stories as having suddenly gone "woke" is to ignore almost everything about them, including the X-Men's overt use of the anti-mutant dystopia Genosha as an [analogy for South Africa in the 1980s and '90s](#), or *Star Trek*'s depiction of the first interracial kiss on American television. Sorry, buddy, some of this stuff has always been this way. And given Tolkien's [own real-world racial politics](#), it's unlikely that, were he alive today, he would echo the views of those demanding a country-club *Lord of the Rings*.

Making profitable films and shows for a broader audience means having more than just square-jawed white guys in leading roles. Moreover, it is not as though genre fare is *lacking* in traditional narratives that feature white protagonists realizing their greatness; [this remains the prevailing formula](#). But if the diverse fan bases of these properties can relate to and enjoy these stories despite rarely seeing themselves represented in them, then people like Morse can learn to cope with seeing a Black elf on-screen every once in a while.

Prominent genre brands like *Star Wars*, or Marvel, or *Lord of the Rings* also have the difficult task of creating content for children while still satisfying their middle-aged stalwarts, whose nostalgia is ultimately insatiable because they cannot look upon novel material with the same emotional intensity they felt as children. Many older fans are convinced they can't recapture that intensity only because the producers themselves have failed to create stories of the same fundamental quality, when in reality they have simply outgrown the sentiment they are chasing. These campaigns seek to convince this audience that the feeling they are pursuing can be recaptured, if only those making popular art would reject modern progressive dogma—thus creating a well of cultural resentment they can manipulate for political purposes.

That is the deception of this campaign, which is not about protecting the integrity of art at all, but ensuring it serves a particular political purpose. In other words, these critics seek to turn art into propaganda for one cause rather than another. Maybe it'll actually work. But even if it does, it will not make *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, or any of the other stuff you liked as a kid Great Again, at least not in the way you want. People hoping otherwise will just have to grow up.

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