

Memories of Future Empire: The Productive Effects of Imperial Imaginaries in Science Fiction – An Analysis of *The Expanse*

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Abstract: Imperialism and colonial practices have been addressed by the scholars throughout the years due to the transcendence of the imperial experience as a phenomenon that articulates and shapes the modern structure of the international system. In this article we argue that imperial imaginaries not only forged our past, but still seem to manifest productive effects, influencing our capacities to think about the future. In that regard, we identify Science Fiction as a political battleground where imaginaries are produced, reinforced and challenged. Engaging critically with the literature, and cultural artefacts from the genre, we propose the notion of Future Imperial Imaginaries. We utilise this conceptual advancement to talk about coming worlds that would force us to relive colonial practices of the past, and thus foreclose future alternative political imaginaries. Next, we analyse the series *The Expanse*, under this conceptual framework and identify the presence of the different dimensions of the Future Imperial Imaginaries in it. In the last section we present our final thoughts and reflections.

Keywords: imaginaries; popular culture; science fiction; imperialism; future imperial imaginaries; *The Expanse*.

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Introduction

In a claustrophobic marketplace inside the spaceport of Ceres, in the asteroid belt of our solar system, a man speaks passionately to a small crowd that gathers to hear his voice:

Ceres was once covered in ice. Enough water for a thousand generations, until Earth and Mars stripped it away for themselves. This station became the most vital port in the Belt. But the immense wealth and resources that flow through our gates were never meant for us. Belters work the docks, loading and unloading precious cargo. We fix the pipes and filters that keep this rock living and breathing. We Belters toil and suffer, without hope and without end and for what? One day Mars will use its might to wrest control of Ceres from Earth and Earth will go to war to take it back.

It's all the same to us. No matter who controls Ceres, our home, to them we will always be slaves. That's all we are to the Earthers and Dusters. They built the solar system on our backs, spilled the blood of a million of our brothers, but in their eyes we're not even human anymore. So, the next time you look in the mirror, say the word. Slave. (*Dulcinea*, 00:04:35-00:05:54)

Chronologically set in the mid-24th century, the geospatial drama *The Expanse* (2015-2022) presents us with a solar system colonised by humanity which is intertwined by dynamics of capitalist expansion and exploitation, class struggle, colonial domination and racial/ethnic discrimination. Based on the literary saga written by James S.A. Corey (*nom de plume* of Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck, who also serves as the series' screenwriter) the series introduces us a solar-political scenario where Earth and the Moon are a stagnant (or even declining) superpower ruled by the United Nations, while Mars (a former Earth colony), governed by the Martian Congressional Republic (MCR), is a rising military and scientific power in a multi-generational endeavour to terraform the red planet.

Beyond the asteroid belt that separates Mars from Jupiter, a myriad of ports, stations, colonies and industrial enclaves are locations where the interior powers extract raw materials and exploit their inhabitants as cheap labour. These people, the Belters, live in oppressive conditions. The *beltalowda*¹ do not have a unified government but a network of different forces, factions and organisations that converge in the Outer Planets Alliance (OPA), the main political actor beyond the Belt and which began its life as a trade union and advocacy group, fighting for the interests of the Belt's inhabitants.

Despite the peculiarities that make this work a particular and interesting object of study for this paper, we recognise that the imperial theme, dynamics and subtexts run through much of science fiction (SF), especially in stories that place humanity transcending the boundaries of the Earth. From a more academic perspective, imperialism, colonial practices and the associated instances of exploitation have been addressed by

the scholars due to the transcendence of the imperial experience as a phenomenon that articulates and shapes the modern structure of the international system.

Therefore, imperial imaginaries not only forged our past, but still seem to manifest productive effects, influencing our capacities to think about the future. As the American SF author Ursula K. Leguin pointed out (1975), we continue to imagine a future in which we only replace the British Empire and its ships with star empires and interplanetary vessels.

In this sense, what prompted us to embark on this work is the awareness that, although current SF – especially the Western narratives – has all the freedom and creativity to imagine a different future, there is a persistent tendency to project one very close to the past. This operation conjures up a future created from the present, which recalls images from the past. Through this mechanism, a discursive closure is produced, which not only hinders our ability to imagine different futures, but simultaneously render ‘commonsensical’ the dynamics of contemporary domination. The question then arises as to how the imperial past and its colonialist practices have been shaping our future political horizons. More specifically, we ask how this future imperial imaginary is constructed in *The Expanse*.

To begin to unravel this question we will proceed as follows. The first step is to approach the analysis of future imaginaries, popular culture, and more specifically SF, as a political battleground where ideas are produced, reinforced and challenged. Secondly, we introduce the concept of Future Imperial Imaginaries which we delineate as conceptions of future worlds that would force us to relive the colonial practices of the past. Thirdly, it is necessary to explore the long and close relationship between SF and Imperialism. All this being said, we address *The Expanse* series as our case study. Finally, we delineate some reflections on the productive effects of imperial imaginaries.

Therefore, we propose a qualitative case study research. We provide an interpretation of the corpus made up of the 62 broadcasted episodes of the series *The Expanse*. In addition, we consider the first novel of the saga and a selection of other bibliography as secondary sources to inform our analysis.

Imaginaries, popular culture and science fiction as a cultural artefact

While imagination has traditionally been understood as an individual mental process, and is treated in this manner by the cognitive sciences (Zittoun and Cerchia 2013), it is nonetheless necessary that we rescue the important social dimension of imagination (Death 2022: 436). The raw ingredients for the generation of ideas, possibilities, values, as well as emotions find their roots in our experiences of the social world around us (Moore and Milkoreit 2020).

Far from the fantasies of a ‘eureka’ moment of epiphany, the ‘[i]magination is situated; [and] our imaginary horizons are affected by the positioning of our gaze’ (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002: 327). In the social sciences, imagination is often conceptualised as ‘imaginary’. These imaginaries refer to a socially shared and (to some degree) institutionally supported or stabilised mental pictures (Bottici and Challand 2011; Jasanoff

and Kim 2015). It is through these images, stories and myths that we make sense of our present social reality (Taylor 2004). Simultaneously, imaginaries allow us to evoke an image of the future, creating representations of possible worlds to come (Jasanoff and Kim 2015; Milkoreit 2017; Moore and Milkoreit 2020).

Understanding these imaginaries as collective and institutionalised, we can affirm that “future imaginaries” are profoundly political’ (Death 2022: 431) and that they yield valuable insights for social analysis. And so, the future manifests itself as a field of contestation in which power exercises its productive effects. In Eshun’s words,

[P]ower also functions through the envisioning, management, and delivery of reliable futures [...] The powerful employ futurists and draw power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past. The present moment is stretching, slipping for some into yesterday, reaching for others into tomorrow. (2003: 289)

For the construction of these futures, science and technological developments play a major role. This is reflected in the concept of ‘sociotechnical imaginaries’ developed by Sheila Jasanoff (2015). The author defines them as ‘collectively held and performed visions of desirable futures (or of resistance against the undesirable),’ which are ‘animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology’ (Jasanoff 2015: 19).

Equally important is the treatment of the idea of time, and how it always works for someone and some purpose. In that regard, Jasanoff’s (2015) sociotechnical imaginaries enable us not to think about time in a linear approach, and give us some clues about the persistence of imperial imagination in SF. Furthermore, according to Jasanoff,

[P]ast and future connect in a complex dialectic that is widely acknowledged. The past is prologue, but it is also a site of memory excavated and reinterpreted in the light of a society’s understanding of the present and its hopes for what lies ahead. Clearly some account of relative embedding, or rootedness, is needed for us to understand both durability and change [...]. (2015: 21)

In this respect, we agree with Annette Markham, who states that ‘the imaginary is a remix, the temporary outcome of a process of analogy, comparison, and pastiche, borrowing from what is already known or supposed about the world’ (2021: 385). That is to say, our capacity to imagine the impossible is limited by past experiences.

This engagement with temporality leads us to pay attention to the way in which different representations of the past and the future interact with each other. Such relationships, interwoven in future imaginaries, lead to concrete implications for thinking about the possibilities of agency and political interventions in the ‘present’ (Death 2022: 432). To conceptualise this idea, Adam and Groves (2007: 28) use the term ‘present futures’ which refers to ‘futures that are imagined, planned, projected, and produced in and for the present.’

Several scholars have recounted in depth the history of the ‘imagined futures.’ In these accounts, the horizon of meaning provided by an idea of the future was the cornerstone for the creation and maintenance of imperial domination (Lothian 2020: 12). Via this operation, popular culture and SF had played a role in consolidating these power structures for the ‘present’ while simultaneously offsetting alternative political possibilities².

Science fiction’s estranged new worlds?

The indivisible nature of popular culture and politics have been thoroughly studied by many prominent cultural studies theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer (2013), Appadurai (1996), Fisher (2018), Jameson (1998) and Said (1979), among others. We, as these authors, identify popular culture as an arena where power, ideology and identity are constituted, produced and/or materialised (Grayson, Davies and Philpott 2009: 155–6). The place where ‘coherent narratives are produced, which in turn serve as the basis for any sense of community and political action’ (Bronfen 2006: 21–23).

The normalisation of certain social orders through the entrenching of the expected social behaviour, namely the implicit political aspect of a work of art, is silently sustained through the ‘unconscious ideologies’ and myths of fictional universes (O’Brien and Bellamy 2018). In this respect, popular culture has the potential to both reinforce and challenge dominant identities, constituting it a principal legitimiser or a space of defiance to the political and economic orders.

Similar to the ‘imaginaries’, popular culture manifests itself as a ‘site of micro-politics where political subjectivities, geopolitical and security imaginations, identities, and imagined communities are (re)produced at the level of the everyday’ (Caso and Hamilton 2015: 2). In other words, it allows us to comprehend the manifestations of popular culture (in this case, a TV series) as a cultural artefact, understood here as a product capable of being explored and interpreted, and therefore subject to social-scientific enquiry (Fletcher and Light 2007).

On a methodological level, we took heed of Kiersey & Neumann’s (2015: 75) precaution. The reading of a cultural artefact has to go beyond the political order it displays, what the authors called ‘in-show political order,’ and must engage in a dialogue with the ‘in-world political orders’ of our everyday life. The extent of the relations between ‘in-world’ and ‘in-show’ will be influenced by the genre of the cultural artefact. In that regard, it proves necessary to provide some further elaboration about SF as a genre of fiction.

One of the most cited definitions of SF is the one elaborated by Darko Suvin, who describes it as ‘a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment’ (Suvin 1979: 4). On the one hand, the notion of estrangement permits the reader to accept the possibility of others states of existence, whereas in contrast, ‘cognition’ refers to that which enables the text to rationally account for the way in which this alternative reality effectively functions (Kiersey and Neumann 2015: 76).

The 'scientific' component of SF, understood as technological innovations, provides the main defining characteristics of the type of cognition that prevails in the genre. Roger Luckhurst (2005) argues that SF has been characterised by the everyday interpenetration of technology, which has been problematised in literature through fictional engagement with the 'mechanism'. In the words of Suvin (1979: 63) 'SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional "novum" (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic.' In this sense, Suvin stresses the importance of the 'novum', i.e. a technological device whose existence and way of functioning is unknown in the reader's universe or, at the very least, in the universe of some of the main characters. Through technology, SF transforms the 'known world' into a strange and alien but not completely unrecognisable 'other', a 'realistic irreality, with humanised nonhumans, this-worldly Other worlds' (Suvin 1977: viii).

This relationship between SF, technological developments and the power of modern Western scientific knowledge is based on a temporal conception, also modern, that guides its gaze towards the future (Jameson 2018). Nonetheless, we draw on the work of Carl Freedman (2013: xvi) and concur in arguing that 'the future is not "a specific chronological register"', but instead 'a locus of radical alterity to the mundane status quo, which is thus estranged and historicised as the concrete past of potential future'.

Indeed, it is in the distortion that SF operates in the present (Eshun 2003: 290), where we find a direct tie to what has been developed previously around the notion of imaginaries. To this extent, we can take up Eshun's words in which he states that 'SF was never really concerned with the future but rather with engineering feedback between its preferred future and its becoming present' (2003: 290). In a forthright manner, the writer William Gibson affirmed that 'Science Fiction doesn't predict the future, it determines it, colonises it, preprograms it in the image of the present' (cited in Eshun 1998).

According to Lothian (2020: 29), future projections of utopian idealisations and tenebrous dystopian scenarios in SF are inseparable from the reproduction of practices of imperial domination and spatial and cultural colonisation. As identified by John Rieder (2008), intergalactic voyages and encounters with 'alien' indigenous peoples in SF trace their origins to images emanating from the European colonial experience.

This link between imperialism and SF is reflected in a specific sub-genre known as Space Opera (SO), in which we can locate the object of analysis of this paper, the TV series *The Expanse*.

The imperial undertones of the Space Opera

Understood by Williamson (1988: 433) as an 'expression of the mythic theme of human expansion against an unknown and uncommonly hostile frontier', the SO has elaborated a particular look at political action and power dynamics within the frameworks of 'imaginary futures' (Reid 2022).

In the eclectic universe that makes up SF, the SO is the sub-genre that carries the burden of finding its genesis clearly associated with the imperial past. The fantasies of colonisation, empire and the myth of the missionary frontiersman with the 'white man's

burden' embedded in the DNA of SO are in tune with the 'the full flowering of the British Empire, which was bent on "civilizing" much of the world, and of the settling of the American West' (Dozois and Straham 2007: 7).

Traditionally conceived as 'hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn space-ship yarn, or world-saving' interplanetary fiction' (Tucker cited in Reid 2022: 174), so has come a long way. From *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers* serials to blockbusters like *Star Wars* or the cultural juggernaut that is *Star Trek*, this sub-genre has established itself as one of the most popular in the world of SF (Westfahl 2003).

Along with Westfahl (2003) and Reid (2022) we can construct a characterisation of the sub-genre from a re-reading of Tucker's definition. Additionally, we can point out the elements of this description which are present in *The Expanse* so as to identify the affiliation of our object of study to the sub-genre and at the same time highlight its distinctiveness.

In the first place, one of the most distinctive elements of the SO stories is the idea of the 'spaceship'. By means of formidable vessels humanity boldly crosses the 'final frontier' coming into contact with 'mysterious stuff' in strange new worlds. Ships such as the *Enterprise*, the *Galactica*, the *Serenity*, *Battleship Yamato*, and for our work the *Rocinante* acquire not only a pivotal role in the plot but attain a certain iconic status in popular culture. While each fulfils a different function, based on the lore of its 'universe', they all represent an ode to humanity's technological progress and desire for exploration, expansion and exploitation.

Through these voyages our protagonists, and we, come into contact with the second characteristic element of SO, the 'yarn' conceived as an exciting adventure. As Westfahl (2003: 198) notes, these stories often develop into conflictual interactions, which place military or militarised actors in the spotlight. While we identify 'civilian' actors in *The Expanse*, the political plot of the series is driven by the governments (and armed forces) of both Earth and Mars, as well as by the insurgent elements of the OPA.

The episodic resolution of these 'adventures' resulted in narrative and plot structures that were characterised by Westfahl (2003: 198) as formulaic and mediocre. It should be noted that *The Expanse* is far from this characteristic, laying down complex and nuanced plots that place the series within the NSO. As demonstrated by Jerome Winter (2016: 12), the NSO 'produces a riddling, multivalent code on a primary narrative level, which on a secondary level evokes an enigmatic, obscure or indeterminate political resonance'. These much more introspective, 'critical' and gritty works seek to engage in more direct and clearer ways with issues of political and social relevance (Westfahl 2003).

As we have seen, *The Expanse* draws on SO conventions, tropes, codes and references both thematically and aesthetically. While the series conspicuously takes several positions that we could situate in a progressive political camp, it is our interpretation that the subtext runs across the narrative and continues to reproduce the imperial myth that we have mentioned in this paper. To accommodate this, we will proceed to develop a conceptual proposal on the notion of Future Imperial Imaginaries (FII).

Future Imperial Imaginaries

To a certain extent, as a historical manifestation, imperialism never disappeared; its legacy is what shapes the world in which we live. The material, normative and especially cultural dominance of the West is expressed in ideas that sustain the survival of imperial thought. According to Bayly (2021) world politics continues to echo its imperial pasts and we can find reminders of the ongoing presence of imperial imaginaries daily.

Imperialism is a complex and loaded concept with multiple connotations. An extensive discussion of this phenomenon and its multiple facets is far beyond the scope of this text; however, we have chosen to use a broad enough definition from which to construct our understanding of this phenomenon. In line with Young's description, we can understand imperialism as

[T]he exercise of power either through direct conquest or (latterly) through political and economic influence that effectively amounts to a similar form of domination: both involve the practice of power through facilitating institutions and ideologies. Typically, it is the deliberate product of a political machine that rules from the centre, and extends its control to the furthest reaches of the peripheries (Young 2016: 27).

Then, although the concept of Imperialism is polysemic, we can identify certain patterns of behaviours in imperial governance. Biccum (2018) mentions institutional segregation and racialization of populations, the formation of elites that govern through inherited legal and tax structures, and the management of 'difference', among others.

However, since the middle of the 20th century, with the emergence of master concepts such as neocolonialism and postcolonialism, the distinctions between colonialism and imperialism had become blurred, and according to Young, 'the first almost seemed to have become the practice of the second. If so, this was a retrospective interpretation after the event' (2016: 25). Because of this, the author proposes that while imperialism is susceptible to analysis as a concept, colonialism needs to be analysed primarily as a practice.

The study of the explicit link between SF and Imperialism was the subject of classic works such as Csicsery-Ronay (2003), Patricia Kerslake (2007), or John Rieder (2008). As Rieder (2008: 2) points out, and as we have previously established in this paper, 'no informed reader can doubt that allusions to colonial history and situations are ubiquitous features of early science fiction motifs and plots'.

Along the same lines, the idea of imperial imaginaries in SF was mentioned by Robert Saunder (2015). Albeit the author revisits ideas about the productive effects of SF and their link with hegemonic consolidation, he fell short of clarifying what he meant by these imperial imaginaries. Nonetheless, we identify in Saunder's idea a fertile avenue of research that can be explored more thoroughly. We thus build upon the literature of Science Fiction, imperialism and future imaginaries, with the aim of a mid-range conceptual proposal: Future Imperial Imaginaries.

We can define the Future Imperial Imaginaries as conceptions in SF where a future reality would force us to relive colonial practices through exploitation of others and corporate domination. The development of science and technology, the conquest of the solar system, the degradation of planet Earth, among other occurrences, can be seen as the motifs that would lead to imperialist forms of socio-political organisation.

Thus, one of the first elements we found is the administration of the peripheries as an outlet for industrial manufactures, a source of raw materials and cheap labour. This 'governance' is cemented and nurtured by the support of enterprises that contributed extensively to the expansion of the colonial frontier and its control. In this way, the corporations of the future reflect a modernised version of the dynamics of the English East India Company or the 16th century Dutch Empire's West Indies Trading Companies in their relationship with the imperial centre and the dominated periphery. In Science Fiction, names like *Weyland-Yutani* (*Aliens* 1986), *Tyrell* (*Blade Runner* 1982), *RDA* (*Avatar* 2009) and *TriOptimum* (Levine 1999) are associated with gargantuan mega-corporations that rival the 'States' in their power and generate symbiotic dynamics of capitalist expansion and reproduction (Bellamy and O'Brien 2018).

The imperial metropolis populates the frontier with celestial bodies and space stations that emulate maritime enclaves, as ports or strategic points for commercial and military purposes, megaprojects that enable extractivism, exploitation and control of the natives. Stations such as *Deep Space 9* (*Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* 1993), *Babylon 5* (*Babylon 5* 1996) or *Ticonderoga* (*Starship Troopers* 1998) emulate 'cities in the sky' that become ports of exchange, spaces of interrelation between species or cultures and garrisons from which imperial military power is projected, oases of 'civilisation' in the wildland.

In direct contrast to the barbarism and savagery of the empire's spatial periphery, which is characterised as 'off-world', stands the 'homeworld', the capital. Whether this is *Coruscant* (*Star Wars: Episode I* 1999), *Trantor* (Asimov 2004) or Earth, this planet is positioned as the imperial axis from which power, oppression, laws and the valid culture emanate.

The centre-periphery relation, as we have mentioned, is organised around practices of exploitation and discrimination. The operationalisation of these practices hinges on an ontological division between the imperial 'self' and a colonised 'other' that is classified as non-human, and thus a life of lesser value. As in *Dune's* Arrakis (Herbert 2005) or *Avatar's* Pandora (*Avatar* 2009), native populations are infantilised and subjugated in pursuit of the plunder of the planet's natural resources.

The construction of this non-human 'other' is not limited to 'exotic extraterrestrial beings' but can even be produced on members of the same species through processes of dehumanisation. In the context of terrestrial collapse, the imperial centre may export the surplus population who will depend on the mother country for its development. This exodus (voluntary or not) entails a transformation of the human condition not only physically, but also politically, of these new 'stellar subjects'. The 'First Hundred' of Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* (2003) or Heinlein's 'Loonies' (1997) are examples

of this otherisation that leads to the formation of differentiated conceptions of ‘we’ and ‘ourselves’ (Reid 2022).

We argue that the practices that constitute these FII, embedded in SF, could be thought of as acting as discursive closure, shutting down or closing off options for thinking alternatives. In other words, they function like negative feedback loops discouraging change and showing how hegemony works (Markham 2021). The unfurling of these dynamics of domination as ‘commonsensical’ strengthens their present deployment by immobilising the capacity to harness political creativity in order to design alternative futures.

However, we do not claim that this operation is rationalised. Here we do not point to a conscious strategy, as these discussions are not held in obscure offices to produce these results, which make it all the more significant. In the same way that Foucault spoke of strategies of dominance without strategists, this reproduction is carried out unconsciously by conveying instances of social power to the way in which the world is interpreted and what kind of future is possible and valid to think about³.

The FII are a mechanism that condition us to think that certain futures are inevitable, that certain models of social organisation are unavoidable. These images conjured from our history reinforce hierarchical structures of domination, discrimination, oppression and capitalist exploitation in the future, at some point they are exacerbations of the ‘present’.

As we have seen so far, future imaginaries constitute mechanisms that condition our capacity to think about political alternatives for the future and hereby consolidate present structures of domination. These imaginaries have been materialised in SF, and more specifically, in SO through what we have termed FIIs. We argue that the strength and pervasiveness of these FIIs permeates even into NSO, despite the fact that it ostensibly proposes socially and politically critical plots. In the next section we will look at this concept in our case study, namely the television series *The Expanse*.

In order to carry out our analysis, we engaged in a series of viewings of *The Expanse*, keeping our analytical framework in mind. We employed a combination of narrative and visual analysis techniques, including close reading of specific scenes, frames and dialogues, to gain a more profound understanding of the key conflicts and character arcs. Firstly, narrative analysis allowed us to deeply examine the progression of the plot, identifying major turning points and moments of conflict resolution.

Secondly, visual analysis was crucial to the understanding of how *The Expanse* visually constructs its imperial world. The audiovisual medium allows for the incorporation of iconography and symbolism, thereby increasing the viewer’s immersion and emotional involvement, and potentially influencing their interpretation of the imperial themes portrayed. Visual symbols and icons carry cultural significance, reinforcing the political and social dynamics within the series.

By combining both narrative and visual analysis, we have illuminated the multi-layered and complex representations of Future Imperial Imaginaries within *The Expanse*.

The manifestation of Future Imperial Imaginaries in *The Expanse*

Although *The Expanse* is a recent series, the narrative caught the attention of the academic world. Works like Benjamin (2018), Bellamy and O'Brien (2018) Nicholas (2021), Scodari (2022) and Reid (2022) discuss the many complex ethical, economic, social and identitary aspects addressed in the series, but these works are rather tangential in their development of the political discussion and the role of imperial and colonial practices that unfold in the solar system over the course of the series. In order to address such vacancy, in this article we will delve in-depth into the fate of the Belters and the evolution of the protomolecule across the story and its political implications.

The first frame of the series informs us that 'In the 23rd century, humans have colonised the Solar System', then it presents the inner planets, Earth and Mars, which 'depend on the resources of the Asteroid Belt'. The series then conveys to us that 'Belters live and work in Space' and immediately alerts us that 'In the Belt, air and water are more precious than gold' (*Dulcinea*, 00:01:00-00:01:25). These are the building blocks of the universe of *The Expanse*.

At an undetermined point in the future, Earth's environmental deterioration forces humankind to reach out for the stars as a way to export the population surplus that strains the planet's resources. In this future, humanity found its Planet B, Mars, as well as some asteroids and satellites forming the Belt, in which, through processes of technological adaptation, artificial conditions for the development of life were generated. However, the conditions for life are not the optimum, as the gravity reached is less than 1g, which will have social and political consequences in the future.

With the possibility of reaching and inhabiting these celestial bodies, the terrestrial government found a way forward by moving part of its surplus population into space. Given that at the beginning of the series almost 50% of the 30 billion inhabitants of the Earth subsist on a universal income – 'basic' –, we can understand that the continuation of this trend was only limited by the technical and spatial incapacity to continue populating new frontiers.

Despite its hardships, in the solar socio-economic structure, the Earth established itself as the imperial centre, not only because of its material and symbolic power – 'the Homeworld of Mankind' – but also as the sole provider of organic materials indispensable for life. Faced with an impending catastrophe that would cause the Earth to perish, the captain of the *Rocinante*, James Holden, reflects that 'without Earth, everything would eventually die. Humans had been out of the gravity well a long time. Long enough to have developed the technology to cut that umbilical cord, but they'd just never bothered to do it' (Corey 2011: 466).

Colonisation, however, is not just a synonym for exploration and settlement. Historically it is intertwined with resource extraction, dehumanization, and genocide (Simpson 2022: 96). The descendants of those original displaced people, those who are born, live and die on the asteroids, are known as Belters. Generations of living in low gravity brought physical consequences for these humans: taller, thinner, more fragile

bodies. From these differences resulting from physical, temporal distances, and material conditions, an 'Other' is constructed in *The Expanse*. As Reid points out, 'humanity in the series is differentiated into "humanities" (plural), where humanness becomes a debated and contested category' (2021: 174), in other words the 'non-human' can be located within humanity itself but simultaneously projected outside of it.

In this sense, the result of physiological differences devolved into a new form of racism against the inhabitants of the Belt. This racialisation is based on a founding logic of colonialism, as set out by Franz Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (2009). In the words of the Martinican intellectual, colonialism depends on establishing and exploiting an ontological division between the colonisers and the colonised.

This distinction allows them to be exploited as cheap labour in extractivist space mining, without labour rights and heavily repressed whenever they raise their voices. Struggling day to day to procure the biological means of subsistence (water and oxygen, as well as food) without access to medicine to forestall the effects of living in low-gravity and high radiation environments, and victims of organised crime and corrupt biotech corporations, it is no surprise that the average lifespan on a station like Ceres (68) is only half of what it is on Earth (123) (CQB, 00:01:41-00:01:50). In other words, they are the proletariat of the solar system that evokes the brutal capitalism of 19th century Manchester.

As generations go by, these 'wretched of the stars' begin to build their own culture. They develop a form of non-verbal communication (due to their need during spacewalks), their language (Belter Creole), values (loyalty to the ship, crew as family) and aesthetics (tattooed bodies). By all accounts the *beltalowda* possess the traits of a nation, yet this cultural heritage is denigrated by the Inners. As Fanon (2009) argues, colonialism not only designates who is 'truly' human but also what is the 'genuine' culture. In this light, the colonised who do not conform to these standards are seen as a degradation thereof.

We have made it clear so far that in the eyes of the Inners, the inhabitants of the Belt appear inferior, if not truly alien. As a result, Inners place Belters into what Agamben (2014) calls a 'state of exception' where the sovereign – the UN, the MRC or the corporations associated with the colonial rule – place them in the position of *zoë* or bare life. The bare life is, as the metaphor of *homo sacer* – a figure of archaic Roman law – indicates, the life of the people who can be killed without consequences. They are those who can be sacrificed to establish a new order or to sustain one that has already been established. In *The Expanse*, that translates as excluding the Belters from sovereign citizenship, and, therefore, from rights guaranteed to those born and raised on Earth and Mars (Wenger Bro 2022).

A domination based on suffocating material conditions of life, on the fragility of scarce resources such as air and water, and on humiliations, generated in the Belters a different way of relating to life and death, a way tied to the certainty of their conditions of 'homo sacer' for the Inners. As Detective Miller muses: 'no one who had lived with the certainty and support of a natural atmosphere could ever come to terms with the power

and fragility of a society based on doing what is necessary at any given moment' (Corey 2011: 426).

Throughout chapters that make up this universe, we can affirm that the story of *The Expanse* is inseparable from the Inners' oppression of the Belters. This dynamic does not disappear even with an event as disruptive as the discovery of the protomolecule.

The protomolecule is the novum that kicks off the plot. The extrasolar entity was discovered by Mars eight years before the beginning of the events of the series in Phoebe, one of Saturn's satellites. After that, the MCR commissioned the research to *ProtoGen*, one of the largest corporations on Earth and the solar system.

Despite its biological appearance, the closest match to reality may be a cluster of nanomachines that possesses the ability to use animate and inanimate material elements to replicate itself and fulfil its programming. Throughout the series we see that the functions and capabilities of the protomolecule evolve and become more complex as the humans jockey for its control. However, the implications of this discovery are met with fear and uncertainty by the human leadership, as the Secretary-General of the UN Chrisjen Avasarala states bluntly 'My file for what to do if an advanced alien species comes calling is three pages long, and it begins with, "Step one, find God"' (*Paradigm Shift*, 00:14:58-00:15:10).

Given its destructive potential, the protomolecule quickly becomes the focus of an arms race engineered by the *ProtoGen* corporation between the two imperial powers, Earth and Mars. A superficial analysis of this plotline could lead us to an interpretation within the theoretical confines of realism. After all, it is a scenario in which two military powers aspire to dominate the ultimate weapon that could alter the balance of power and consolidate military hegemony.

This element in a way also prefigures our present, normalising the inescapability of the 'polar' disputes of the moment and the subordinated role of the 'Global South' (the Belters), over which the powers wrestle for control. This habit is not only reflected in SF, but is also constantly reproduced in the discipline of International Relations (Sanahuja 2020).

The protomolecule changed the scales of the conflict, as one of the OPA leaders Fred Johnson assured, 'Earth and Mars are scared. And whenever that happens, Belters always lose' (*Paradigm Shift*, 00:17:56-00:18:02). This was most evident in the skirmish over the asteroid Ganimedes between the UN and MCR fleets. A border clash between two states caught in a spiral of tensions was triggered by an unknown 'creature' that attacked infantry units of both Earth and Mars. We later discover that these 'beasts' were none other than the weaponisation by *ProtoGen* of the protomolecule, through its hybridisation with human children of Belter origin. What we should note about this episode is that the 'weapons tests' conducted always consume Belter lives. This is predicated on the Belters as cannon fodder to be exploited by corporations and collateral damage in the wars between the powers, in other words, the homo sacer of human expansion into the stars.

As detailed above, the two major imperial centres have planetary governments that control their respective celestial bodies. And yet, due to the inability of the regular UN

or MCR military to put up with the economic cost and the logistical limitations of space, the day-to-day policing of the colonised is outsourced to private corporations like *Star Helix Security* and *Carne Por la Machina*. However, should any rebellion reach a critical state, the metropolis will not hesitate to intervene with its full military capability as in the Anderson Station incident.

Eleven years before the start of the show, at the space refinery owned by *Anderson-Hyosung Cooperative Industries Group*, there was a massacre of Belters workers. The labourers went on strike in response to the company's disregard of the health issues caused by low oxygen concentrations in the station's air supply. The company called for UN intervention, and despite the fact that the protesters were unarmed and had lifted the strike, they were slaughtered by a Marine boarding party.

Spaceports like Anderson Station along with asteroids like Ceres, Vesta, Pallas, and Hygiea constitute the Belters' home and workplace; they form the enclaves from which resources are extracted and native labour is exploited: 'The Belt is a network', Naomi explained, 'like a huge ship. We have nodes that provide us with air, water, energy or building materials. They may be millions of miles away, but that doesn't mean they are not still connected' (Corey 2011: 436-437).

Eros station was one of such nodes. Among the first asteroids populated by mankind and the launchpad of the subsequent expansion, it was a symbolic place for the Belter people, and the second most important port after Ceres. As part of a massive experiment by *Protogen* with the protomolecule, the corporation decides to sacrifice its population for the sake of 'science' and profit. Eros Station was converted into a large *petri dish* for biological experimentation. For the Inners in charge they were 'just like bugs in a dish. That's why they picked Eros. They don't consider these people human' (*Leviathan Wakes*, 00:18:31-00:18:38).

Eros represents yet another example of how imperial sovereign power positions the lives of the Belters, the colonised, the excluded, outside the framework of the protection of the law. In the corridors covered by the protomolecule of Eros Station, it is more than clear that the coloniser expects no repercussions from the elimination of these disposable lives. The ontological division posited by Fanon, which these cultural artefacts thoughtlessly reproduce, and which account for the colonial practices that run through the FIIs also designate which lives deserve to be mourned (Butler 2010). The massacre of Eros was nothing more than a segment on prime-time television on Earth and Mars, a story that disappeared at the end of the news cycle.

The genocide on Eros gives rise to a new evolution of the protomolecule. Nourished by the biomass of over 100 000 Belters, this out-of-control technology launches the asteroid on a collision course towards Earth, however, its final destination ends up being to impact with Venus. On the Venusian surface the protomolecule continues to expand and develop, until it emerges from the planet to travel to the edge of the solar system and form a ring, a gateway to new systems.

Once again, we are confronted with familiar reactions of fear and uncertainty, emotions that could bring the sides of the 'great human family' back together again. And so, Avasarala calls, in a press conference, to 'join hands with our brothers and sisters

throughout the system... Earth, Mars, and the Belt... And dedicate ourselves to being one people with a shared purpose' (*Delta-V*, 00:01:42-00:01:55). And yet, Avasarala's words and her call for 'humanity' to act collectively obscure the tensions, mistrust and asymmetries that have permeated the history of humanity in the solar system. The gates opened new worlds, 'a new frontier. 1,300 habitable systems on the other side of those Rings' and with that came the threat of repeating the mistakes of the past 'We won't be able to resist. It's gonna be another blood-soaked gold rush' (*Abaddon's Gate*, 01:17:52-01:18:06).

The Ring and the opportunity to colonise new planets destabilise the solar system as the possibility of improving the material conditions of life opens up for the entire human race. Mars abandons its intergenerational terraforming project and experiences not only an identity crisis but also an economic one. Meanwhile, on Earth the debate between the main candidates for the UN's high office, Nancy Gao and Christen Avasarala, revolves around this central issue and the further exportation of its surplus population. Gao makes it clear that it is 'the biggest opportunity to give them jobs, to give them a purpose in a century' while the veteran Avasarala fears what lies beyond the gates knowing that 'you can't control a goddamn gold rush. When the stacks of body bags came back from the Yukon, thousands of hopeful idiots lined up to be the next corpses' (*New Terra*, 00:11:58-00:12:36).

With the opening of the Ring systems, *The Expanse* lays out a new frontier to commit the same sins of the past. Despite the blockade of the gate established by the UN and Mars, a ship of Belters refugees from Ganymede manages to break through and settles on a planet they call Ilus, where they discover a vast deposit of lithium. On their part, the UN government grants the *Royal Charter Energy* (RCE) company a licence to exploit and explore the planet, which they call New Terra. Since the arrival of RCE on the planet, clashes flare up between the employees and the Belters. With tensions mounting, Adolphus Murtry, head of the RCE security forces, wielding a 'legally binding charter from a legitimate government', states that 'there is no version of this where we abandon our charter and we leave these squatters and murderers in possession of this planet'. Settlement leader Carol Chiewe in turn replies that 'your government does not own every planet in the sky', which makes clear the underlying logic of Murtry's actions (*Oppressor*, 00:40:08-00:40:14). For Earth's envoy (and its government) there is no doubt, the claim of the metropolis trumps that of the miners. The arrogance of the Earther is met with stubbornness by the Ilus Belters who refuse to yield to the usual excesses. Chiewe stated that '[o]ur people have been locked in their quarters by corporate soldiers, they have been executed without trial, and now we are being ordered to evacuate. [...] we will not be forced from our homes again' (*Oppressor*, 00:19:59-00:20:16).

As in other cultural artefacts, the imperialism deployed in *The Expanse* breeds its own resistance. The Belters, as subjects of these colonial practices, engage from small acts of rebellion to insurgency and direct confrontation with the oppressor. At this point it is time to elaborate on the characteristics of the OPA, the heterogeneous political group that seeks to unite the Belter people.

Understood by us as an anti-colonial movement, its factions are seen by the Innies as being all the same, even though they differ in their strategies as well as in the links they

develop with them. Thus, we see the contradictions of working for or with the Inners, without ever being treated as equals: for example, at the Medina station, one faction is left in charge of controlling traffic through the Ring, and is seen by others as ‘kissing the Inners’ boot’, doing the dirty work of border patrol.

In the wake of more than a century of colonial subjugation, the final two seasons show us the rise of a radicalised faction led by the charismatic Marco Inaros and his Free Navy. After launching a devastating asteroid attack on Earth, he makes his revolutionary proclamation:

My name is Marco Inaros. I am the commander of the Free Navy. We are the military arm and voice of the outer planets, and we are the ones responsible for striking our oppressors on Earth and Mars. This attack was retribution for generations of atrocities committed by the Inners against innocent Belters. [...] We recognize the right of Earth and Mars to exist, but their sovereignty ends at their respective atmospheres. The vacuum, the Ring Gates, and the Ring Worlds belong to the Belt, to Belters. With the opening of the alien gates, we are at a crossroads in human history. Already, we are seeing how easy it would be to carry on legacies of exploitation, injustice, prejudice, and oppression into the new worlds, but there is a better path. Under the protection of the Free Navy, the society and culture of the Belt will begin again and remake humanity without the corruption, greed, and hatred that the inner planets could not transcend. We will take what is ours by right, yes, but more than that, we will lead the Belt to a new, better form, a more human form. (*Gaugamela*, 00:40:47-00:42:52)

The attack sparks a war, but Earth and Mars, weakened by previous attacks and conflicts, are not strong enough to face Inaros and, in search of allies, they call upon the Belter faction of Camina Drummer. The former second in command of Fred Johnson understands that ‘[a] century of oppression made Marco Inaros inevitable. If not him, there would have been another’ (*Why We Fight*, 00:17:02-00:17:07), yet she does not share his method and, despite her distrust of Earth and Mars, agrees to join.

In the final episode a great battle ensues where the Allies – the UN, MCR and allied Belter factions – manage to defeat the Free Navy. At the trilateral peace summit, on which Holden is also present, Avasarala states that ‘War doesn’t end on the battlefield. It ends at the negotiating table, or it doesn’t end at all. We all agree we must control traffic through the Rings’ (*Babylon’s Ashes*, 00:48:53-00:49:06), an understanding that both the Martian Prime Minister and Camina Drummer agree upon. Differences arise, however, when Drummer proposes that the Belters should be the ones who control traffic through the Ring Space. The Martians objected and Avasarala asked the Belters to trust that they will be represented with equal status and dignity to Mars and Earth. But the Belters remind her that such promises have been made and broken many times in the past. It was Holden who stepped in and pointed out to the Inner leadership that Inaros ‘was able to

do what he did because so many people were angry and frightened. They saw the future, and they weren't in it. That's what this has to fix' (*Babylon's Ashes*, 00:51:50-00:51:57). Avasarala, therefore, proposes the creation of an entity, a union, which would be 'an independent agency based in Medina Station, headed by someone with no allegiances, a friend of the Belt. [...]. A person above reproach, apolitical, with a history of working honorably with all sides' (*Babylon's Ashes*, 00:52:22-00:52:44). It was time for James Holden, our protagonist, to make history yet again.

The following scene shows the ceremony in which the creation of the union is announced. Holden gives a speech in which he expresses his gratitude for the appointment and explains that he asked for a number of conditions, one of them being that Camina Drummer would be vice president. Holden recognises the historic opportunity to incorporate the Belters into a future shared by all humanity, so he surprisingly announces that as his first official act as President of the Transport Union, he resigns, the message is clear 'The future of the Belt has to speak with a Belter's voice, and in that spirit, [Holden is] proud to introduce the new President of the Transport Union, Camina Drummer' (*Babylon's Ashes*, 00:55:05-00:55:14).

And herein lie some issues that we wish to highlight in our analysis, which are closely related to our conceptual proposal. Mainly, the possibility of an imaginary future that includes the oppressed on an equal footing was only enabled by a man from Earth, someone who spoke for the Belters without being one of them. This fact negates all the agency achieved by the beltters despite having fought side by side with the Inners against one of their own.

With this move by Holden, Avasarala feels betrayed, but he tells her something she knows: 'It was the only way to secure the peace, the only way we all move forward together', and the woman we saw Machiavellianly wielding power throughout the series simply says 'I hope you're right' (*Babylon's Ashes*, 00:55:38-00:55:57). As we have shown throughout this paper, the Belters are the key actors in the story of *The Expanse*, they have self-awareness, agency to resist and even confront their oppressors, but gaining their place in history happened just because it was arranged by an Inner and legitimised by the highest terrestrial authority. Or, as Alex Mell-Taylor wrote, their autonomy 'happens because colonizers let it happen' (2022).

Final thoughts

Science Fiction has the capacity to dream up impossible worlds, fantastic technologies and alternative futures, yet we continue to notice a tendency to revisit some dark chapters of our history. Throughout this paper we have outlined some thoughts on the persistent return of imperial imagery in SF, and in particular, which elements of these future imperial imaginaries are constructed in *The Expanse*.

Initially, we carried out a conceptual development that allowed us to retrieve the social and political nature of the imagination in the concept of imaginaries. These 'desirable futures', which are constructed in dialectical relation with the past, operate like horizons of meaning for the political action of the present. The creation and dissemination of

images, concepts and social structures that represent ‘the future’ legitimise the strategies of domination of today by closing off the possibilities of dreaming of alternatives for tomorrow. These imaginaries are materialised through different media, but they find a fertile ground to develop in SF. It is in this genre of speculative fiction that the estrangement of the present, as the past of a future to come, is most efficiently produced. What seems noteworthy about this is that the predominant mainstream images of the genre are related to an imperial imaginary.

This brings us back to the ‘desirability’ element of these futures mentioned above, the idea of their desired nature brings to the forefront the question of who benefits from them. The utopia/dystopia classification itself is also politically charged, and in this sense it is indisputable that for those living in the ‘Global South’ such futures are near to nightmares of continued exploitation.

As we point out, the importance of the cultural artefacts of science fiction lies in their ability to render the dynamics of present domination ‘commonsensical’ to mass audiences and to hint at the ‘inevitability’ of future oppression. If there is no future outside the current neoliberal-neocolonial capitalist model, the political response of the present is resignation or despair. So, if our present represents the past of a possible future, then we are living the memories of future imperial domination.

Upon this theoretical foundation, we make our conceptual proposal, the Future Imperial Imaginaries. Although academia has repeatedly pointed out the connections between imperialism and SF, we find a certain vacancy when it comes to proposing a concept that can travel to analyse different cultural artefacts. In this sense, we delineate a set of practices that constitute these FII, identifying examples in relevant works of SF. Our aim with this approach was not simply to carry out a template to identify imperialist traits in SF works, but also to account for the elements where the discursive closure produced by these imaginaries operate. Signalling the presence of these FII goes beyond recognising tropes in a genre, it implies pointing out fields in which to dispute meaning.

Finally, we took as a case study, to observe the scope of the proposed conceptual scheme, the NSO series *The Expanse*, where we identified the presence of the different dimensions of the FIIs. Although the series performs a progressive treatment of several social issues, the basis from which it constructs its narrative or ‘world building’ is traversed by these FIIs. Consequently, the selected example becomes even more relevant as it highlights the difficulties of thinking about other political horizons. It would appear to be easier for humanity to bend the laws of physics than to break away from capitalist and colonial social relations.

Notes

- 1 This word belongs to a language called Belter Creole and means ‘people of the Belt.’ In the lore of the series, the Creole is the result of the hybridisation of the original languages of those individuals who set out to populate the Belt.
- 2 In this paper we concentrate on the discussion of SF works that could be framed within the mainstream of the genre. There is a rich literature of SF that identifies as critical, claiming postcolonial or feminist themes. See Hoagland and Sarwal 2010.

- 3 What has been developed so far could lead to a deterministic reading, as one reviewer has rightly pointed out, i.e. that we ourselves impose an interpretive closure and remove the possibility of *The Expanse* functioning as a 'call to action' against these imperial futures. What is puzzling, however, in spite of the progressive credentials of this case, is that the authors are still inadvertently perpetuating imperial tropes, as we will argue in the following pages. In narrowing this paper's focus to one particular interpretation, we also seek to maintain analytical coherence and depth, ensuring a comprehensive examination of the themes we explore.

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Memórias do império futuro: Os efeitos produtivos do imaginário imperial na ficção científica – Uma análise de *The Expanse*

Resumo: O imperialismo e as práticas coloniais têm sido abordados pelos estudos ao longo dos anos devido à transcendência da experiência imperial como um fenômeno que articula e molda a estrutura moderna do sistema internacional. Neste artigo, argumentamos que os imaginários imperiais não apenas forjaram nosso passado, mas ainda parecem manifestar efeitos produtivos, influenciando nossa capacidade de pensar sobre o futuro. Nesse sentido, identificamos a ficção científica como um campo de batalha político onde os imaginários são produzidos, reforçados e desafiados. Ao nos envolvermos criticamente com a literatura e os artefatos culturais do gênero, propomos a noção de Imaginários Imperiais Futuros. Utilizamos esse avanço conceitual para falar sobre mundos vindouros que nos forçariam a reviver as práticas coloniais do passado e, assim, impedir futuros imaginários políticos alternativos. Em seguida, analisamos a série *The Expanse* sob essa estrutura conceitual e identificamos a presença das diferentes dimensões dos imaginários imperiais futuros nela. Na última seção, apresentamos nossos pensamentos e reflexões finais.

Palavras-chave: imaginários; cultura popular; ficção científica; imperialismo; imaginários imperiais futuros; *The Expanse*.

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