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THEMATIC BLOCK: UTOPIA AND DEMOCRACY

Imaginaries of Planetary Futures: *The Expanse* and Democracy-to-Come

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ABSTRACT
This article looks at *The Expanse* (Syfy/Amazon Prime 2015–2022) as an example of Anthropocene television that stages a form of utopianism that is neither naive nor posthumanly nihilistic but aligned with a notion of "democracy-to-come" under the conditions of the Anthropocene. The program text offers parabolic reflections on the underlying capitalistic and colonial logic of Western anthropocentrism in its depictions of the colonization of worlds beyond the Solar System, thus directly challenging the Earth-centric and anthropocentric stances underlying (human) history. The series challenges the binary logic of the (human) "us" vs. the (nonhuman/alien) "them" and gestures towards the inherent heterogeneity of the human itself. Furthermore, the paper comments on the ways *The Expanse* envisions a future which is always-already deterritorialized and what this means for our lived experiences of crises in relation to concepts of democracy: it comments on what the relation between the pervasiveness of political, economic, and environmental anxieties and the related ethical dilemmas of our present historic time are, and what the nexus between utopianism and democracy reveals about the futures of the human-to-come. (DLP)

KEYWORDS: Anthropocene, democracy-to-come, utopianism, hope, deterritorialization, posthuman futures



> *How can we encourage a politics of empathy and fairness? One just, kind, compassionate, equitable word at a time.*
>
> —David Strathairn, actor, 2021

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Introduction

Few concepts are as habitually and persistently contested and yet inseparable from modern political imagination as utopia and democracy. Both notions are mobilized not only as normative ideals to appeal to, but also as sites of profound anxiety in contemporary societies. At a time when democratic institutions across the globe are increasingly perceived as fragile or ineffective (Brown 18), utopianism might seem naive and irrelevant. And yet, it is precisely the erosion of democratic legitimacy and trust that gives utopias new impetus and a rediscovered relevance. There is a growing desire for alternative, radically different modes of negotiating the socio-economic and political parameters of collective life, and for future forms of coexistence that break away from practices of isolation and exclusion, territorialism, competition, and exploitation that characterize our current situation (see Bloch 9, 127, 145; Moylan 19, 27, 47–48). From this perspective, contemporary utopianism and the erosion of democracy are inherently connected. While utopian speculation provides a means of confronting democracy's precarity, democracy itself takes on a utopian character—not something achieved, but, as Derrida would have it, always deferred, always in the process of becoming (see "Rogues," especially 37, 78–81, 143, and 148).

It is within this complex situation that *The Expanse* (Syfy/Amazon Prime 2015–2022) offers a particularly thought-provoking, though somewhat underappreciated, example of practice of contemporary science fiction television's engagement with the intersections of democracy, utopia, and the lived experiences of crisis. Adapted from the novels of James S. A. Corey (2011–2022), the series unfolds in a meticulously constructed interplanetary setting where Earth, Mars, and the resource-strapped "Belt" are caught up in subtle relations of interdependence, exploitation, and rivalry. The series's depiction of planetary politics revolves around crisis and belonging, situating *The Expanse* within a history of utopian science fiction that addresses questions of justice on a systemic scale. The show's narrative arc builds on armed conflicts, ecological breakdowns, pandemics, alien technologies, and territorial expansion. These events occur not in isolation but as recurrent, structuring conditions of existence in an emergent interplanetary order. *The Expanse* thus resonates strongly with existential anxieties in the Anthropocene: crisis is not what interrupts politics; it is what politics increasingly becomes.

The series highlights how posthumanist imaginaries, far from transcending the human, remain bound to anthropocentric frameworks.

The Protomolecule, an instance of alien technology/life-form, and the most emblematic and pervasive narrative device in the series, could be read as a paradigmatic posthuman force: incomprehensible, inhuman, and resistant to control and commoditization. Yet the human characters are inexorably linked to its existence in terms of their own survival, control, or domination. Humans' encounters with this radical otherness are mediated through anthropocentric anxieties and ambitions. As Mark Bould observes, science fiction's alien worlds inevitably refract human political struggles (18). The supposed posthuman horizon of the Anthropocene, then, folds back on a deeply human concern: who governs, who survives, and what becomes of responsibility in the context of a repositioned human agency?

I argue that *The Expanse* exemplifies a mode of contemporary utopianism that is uniquely conducive to addressing the lived experiences of crises (political, ecological, ethical) in the Anthropocene. By situating itself in the liminal space between utopia and dystopia, between human and posthuman, the series inscribes itself into the proliferating political discourses on the notion of the territory (with its premise drawing on an imagined, although not too farfetched idea of the colonization of the Solar System), on perpetual conflict (the economic rivalry and arms race between Earth and Mars, reminiscent of the Cold War), and, finally, on the dilemmas around the disconcerting state of democracy in our times. *The Expanse* calls attention to the irreducible complexities of imagining democracy in a time of systemic instability. Rather than presenting democracy as either a stable institution or an obsolete political form, *The Expanse* frames it as a practice in perpetual negotiation—a form of becoming that cannot be secured once and for all.

In other words, I argue that the utopianism of *The Expanse* is neither naive nor posthumanly nihilistic, but it is aligned with the Derridean notion of "democracy-to-come" under the conditions of the Anthropocene. The idea of utopia as deferred democratic practice rather than institutional form is relevant for theories of the Anthropocene because while it reframes democracy as an open-ended, anticipatory process, it does not pit the conditions of the Anthropocene against notions of endurance, agency, and hope.

Sci-fi, utopia, and democracy in the Anthropocene

Science fiction has a long, albeit convoluted history of exploring the entanglement of socio-political and ecological discourses. It frequently does so by conflating utopian dreams with dystopian nightmares. It has been

noted that science fiction's unique propensity to think in terms of systems and transformations enable it to situate the present within broader historical or planetary trajectories (see for instance Jameson, "Archeologies" 85, 94–99 and 287–88, and Csicsery Ronay, "The Seven Beauties" 81–83 and 218–25). Science fiction operates within the liminal space between hope and despair, between utopia and dystopia. This liminal position is important to acknowledge. Tom Moylan suggests that dystopias describe "the fictive underside of utopian imagination" (xi). Similarly, John Storey reminds us that dystopias are usually seen as the opposite of utopia because they "depict worlds that we would not want to inhabit" (30), but these worlds still revolve around what he calls "counter-hegemonic moments of hope and resistance" (30), where the recognition of the flaws and unhappiness of a dystopian society leave us with the hope and promise that such dystopias can still be transformed (even if the individuals instigating these transformations are defeated). Through its speculative framework, science fiction offers ways to negotiate the possible future consequences of the technological, ecological, and political shifts in the present epoch frequently dubbed the Anthropocene. As Chakrabarty writes, the Anthropocene confronts us with the paradox of human agency on a geological scale, a paradox that destabilizes inherited categories of politics and subjectivity from the perspective of possible futures (211). It is not surprising that recent science fiction criticism has stressed how the genre functions as a laboratory for ecological and planetary imagination.

Gerry Canavan highlights how science fiction mediates between environmental crisis and utopian possibility (14–18), while Adam Trexler argues that Anthropocene fictions register climate change as a condition that transforms narrative itself (13). In this context, utopian thought often takes a posthumanist turn, envisioning futures in which human agency is displaced, decentered, or absorbed into larger networks of nonhuman forces (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 168, 190; Ferrando 181, 187). Yet, as Elana Gomel has argued, even ostensibly posthuman imaginaries remain bound to humanist ethical frameworks, oscillating between the promise of transcendence and the fear of extinction. Further conceptualizations of the Anthropocene (see Zylinska; Sloterdijk; Braidotti, *Posthuman*; Parikka; Bonneuil and Fressoz) have also been aligned with ideas of a posthuman future, gesturing towards a de-centering of the human. The underlying anxiety of living in the end-times (see Žižek) is prompting critical reflections to reconsider what the human is, and what its de-centering and, in close

connection, what its deterritorialized futures (see Colebrook "The Future") entail for philosophical thought as well as for practices of symbolization.

Over the past decades, scenarios that emphasize the historicity of (decentered, nonhuman) futures have also become central to scientific, philosophical as well as artistic discourses on the Anthropocene (see Malm and Hornborg; Hamilton; Moore). On the other hand, Zoltan Boldizsar Simon calls attention to the epistemic challenges deriving from the idea that the Anthropocene is "best made sense of by narrative means" (Simon, "Limits" 184). The apparent imperative to posit the Anthropocene in narrative terms also necessitates the reconceptualization of history as that which always-already contains (a history of) the future as well: in this sense, history emerges as a temporal unity in which the future is logically connected to the present and the past of humans. Simon critiqued this view in an earlier work by suggesting that it is an instance of "processual temporality" (Simon, "Why" 242). He refers to Dipesh Chakrabarty's critique of history wherein the understanding that past, present, and future are linked by the "continuity of human experience" is challenged by the Anthropocene where our sense of "the current crisis can precipitate a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility" (Chakrabarty 197). Simon thus points out the paradoxical nature of any decentering agenda by calling attention to the inherent challenges we face when constructing discourses about the "unprecedented novelty of the Anthropocene condition about which no stories can be told" (Simon, "Limits" 184). The *par excellence* challenge, therefore, for any instance of science fiction is to find meaningful ways to reconcile the need for narrativization in the face of the collapse of storytelling as a vehicle of understanding the Anthropocene as our current predicament.

In line with the proliferating narratives of crisis and catastrophe, the dystopian mode has become a pivotal feature of a plethora of television drama with examples including *The 100* (CW, 2014–2020), *Incorporated* (Syfy, 2016–2017), *Into the Badlands* (AMC, 2015–2019), *The Expanse* (Syfy, 2015–2022), *Westworld* (HBO, 2016–2022), *Zoo* (CBS, 2015–2017), *Helix* (Syfy, 2014–2015) and *Extant* (CBS, 2014–2015), *For All Mankind* (Apple TV+, 2019–), *Silo* (Apple TV+, 2023–), *Fallout* (Amazon Prime, 2024–), and *The Last of Us* (HBO, 2023–). These narratives reflect cultural anxieties and ethical dilemmas about the future (Palatinus, "Television of the Anthropocene?"). As such, they call into question utopian dreams and offer subversive (albeit frequently predictable) takes on the concept and

perception of (the future of) democracy as well. We have to ask: To what extent are these anxieties rooted in, and influenced by, past cultural ideas about possible futures (Palatinus, "Television of the Anthropocene?"), or in other words, the "history of futures" (see Marshall 530), and to what extent do they offer a progressive critical commentary on them (Palatinus, "Television of the Anthropocene")? What counts, under these circumstances, as "utopia"? How do we negotiate biological, technical, and ethical evolution from the perspective of humanity's desire to transcend itself? How is this transcendence negotiated in the context of existence in a new ecology? Consequently, investigating these narratives of the Anthropocene entails highlighting the broader political and popular cultural contexts in which these narratives unfold, as well as the complex ethical dilemmas they unmask (Palatinus, "Television of the Anthropocene?").

It has been suggested that specific forms of science fiction function not so much as predictions about the future as thought-experiments about the present (Le Guin xi). The television programs mentioned above prove to be particularly conducive to arguments and observations about anxieties that characterize the present precisely because they project the potential consequences (in the form of existential threats) into the (near) future, whilst retaining a sense of urgency by affecting our current lived experiences. According to Moylan, the "fictive practice" of science fiction "has the formal potential to re-envision the world in ways that generate pleasurable, probing and potentially subversive responses in its readers" (4). This sense of pleasurable subversion lies at the core of utopias as well as dystopias, making the demarcation of the two modes challenging and problematic. But it also makes them the most emblematic and, at the same time, enigmatic modes that render present anxieties in subversive and yet pleasurable ways and therefore resonate best with audiences in our contemporary times, when our sense of security has become eroded by underlying experiences of pervasive crises. While dystopias serve as a reminder that "the thought of the disappearance of things we take for granted can undermine our sense of the inevitability of where we are now" (Storey 80), the ability of a utopia to offer hope "loosens us from the hold of the present" by ushering in the realization that in order to "escape an oppressive construction of reality, we have to be realistic in a different way and demand what that reality insists is impossible" (105). The most visible case in point is the emerging concern with, and the proliferating (fictional and non-fictional) discourses revolving around the entanglement of pandemic and ecological breakdown "encompassing other intersecting

cataclysms . . . as well as the wider disintegration of ecological systems" (Alberro et al. 5). As Weik von Mossner observes, "the risks of the Anthropocene are therefore potential *future* hazards and catastrophes that have not yet materialized and some of which in fact may never materialize" (206, italics in original).

Crises and otherness

I approach *The Expanse* not only as yet another example of sci-fi television, but also as an exemplary case of what Mark Bould called "the Anthropocene Unconscious." The qualifier "unconscious" in this construct refers to how culture mediates ways in which "the Anthropocene manifests in texts that are not overtly about climate change" (Bould 15). I believe that reducing the Anthropocene to climate change alone would risk narrowing the scope of planetary crisis. For that reason, I like to broaden the concept of the Anthropocene and regard it as the underlying mode through which lived experiences of our times of crises are symbolized without, at the same time, suggesting using the Anthropocene as an all-encompassing master-theory (see Simon). Instead, I want to propose that *The Expanse* embodies what I termed elsewhere "Anthropocene Television," denoting "both an epochal positioning of the medium as well as a political ecology of the screen where we're dealing with a plethora of images relegated to the Anthropocene" (Palatinus, "Television of the Anthropocene: Posthuman"). These involve "narratives, figurations, cultural ideas produced and disseminated via the converging media of literary fiction and television. They engage with contemporary anxieties about the human future." (Palatinus, "Television of the Anthropocene: Posthuman"). These issues are inherently embedded in the premise of the series, which portrays Earth as a colonizing force, whilst Mars is depicted as a primarily military power exerting its own entitlement to what Earth has deprived it from. A somewhat displaced and divergent community of the Belters is caught up in between these two superpowers, and, after taking possession of the weapon, they come to negotiate their own ways of benefitting from the conflict and moving from the position of a marginalized social "other" to the status of a powerful third party.

The series's overarching plot revolves around the mighty Protomolecule, a piece of alien technology and life form, discovered and weaponized by the powerful Earther and tech billionaire Jules-Pierre Mao, who wants to use it to entice a shooting war between Earth and Mars. In this narrative framework, the Protomolecule emerges as the manifestation

of bio-power and genetic engineering in the context of perpetual war and a culture of paranoia (Palatinus, "Television of the Anthropocene Part I."). These intersecting elements become particularly conducive to the expression of an eroded sense of security in the Anthropocene. This narrative framing, then, oscillates between attributing the erosion of the sense of security to an external threat (alien tech/life form), and acknowledging that the real threat humanity faces is humanity itself.

The series emblematically renders the Protomolecule as enemy and as wholly other. It is imprinted on humans via infection (on Phoebe station by accident, and later, on Eros, as a deliberate experiment), and via hybridization (in the experiments of Jules-Pierre Mao and Dr. Strickland to create a super-soldier that can tip the balance of power). The Protomolecule functions as the quintessential manifestation of the nonhuman humanized in the form of hybrids. Even after it is reduced to an instrument of power and warfare, it interestingly remains a lot more Anthropomorphic: it curiously retains its agency with the objective not simply to colonize, but hijack, or assimilate other life forms. As it is emblematically asserted in Episode 4 of Season 3 "Reload," "disassembly reveals useful pathways." In close connection to this, the season reveals that the Protomolecule's aim is to fend off existential threats to itself and to report back to its Creators by constructing the so-called Ring-gates, gigantic structures in outer space that function as wormhole-like transportation and communication technologies between known space and unknown worlds. The Creators are portrayed as mysterious entities whose identity remains hidden in the series in spite of the hints to the "Gods" that the settlers of Laconia, a newly discovered system claimed by renegade Martians, intend to kill. As an organism, however, the Protomolecule can be seen as similar to what W. J. T. Mitchell termed an example of a "structural virus" that decenters the human, rendering it alien within familiar structures.

The exposure to this nonhuman life-form and technology that both poses a threat and at the same time an opportunity that humans could control and capitalize on necessarily subverts the hope of a future utopia. In the series, expansion beyond the Solar System is not simply an economic drive, but appears to be an existential necessity and an inevitable move. Through this framing, *The Expanse* examines and calls into question the notion of democratic ideals not only within societies but within ecosystems and solar systems in a New World redefined by a new Cold War, by another instance of expansive colonialism, and by a novel form of systemic violence underlying emergent practices of dominance facilitated by the possession of

the weaponized Protomolecule. From the perspective of our present historic time in a post-pandemic world of "new normalcy", the full extent (or expanse?) of which we are yet to comprehend, *The Expanse* is also tainted by senses of nostalgia not just for the "old normal," but also for histories of futures past, futures that seem to have eluded us, or the arrival of which has now become contingent. In this situation, our sense of stability is constantly under threat by factors that probe our relation to our own identity as humans.

Deterritorialization

The Expanse brings into play anxieties that Claire Colebrook describes in her study "The Future is Already Deterritorialized" as existential threats to "the Anthropos" ("The Future" 346). These anxieties unmask the existential fragility of the human: these are "viral pandemics, zombie or alien invasions, runaway technology, systemic collapse, resource depletion and a supposedly accidental climate catastrophe" (347). All this, from today's perspective, could be supplemented with conflicts, wars, waves of migration in the wake of displacement resulting in a perpetual sense of global existential insecurity, the depletion of resources, and climate catastrophe. *The Expanse* trades in the vision of a utopian society predicated on a concept of democracy-to-come but framed by the context of a dystopia revolving around the trope of survival. It is set in a future where humanity is pitted against its own "non-being" and is constituted as that which needs to be saved by destroying the existential threat. But the nature and origin of this threat is not that straightforward. The main narrative arcs revolve around the colonial logic of "us vs. them." The imperative of "our" survival is constantly pitted against threats posed by some form of otherness, but this otherness is repeatedly constituted via practices of exclusion and demarcation deriving "from within," underscoring the presence of systemic violence underpinning the structures of these societies. As a consequence, the societies of the Expanse: Earth, Mars, and the Belt, might be envisioning their own versions of utopia, but the contest for the possession of the Protomolecule and, later on, for the control of the Ring Gates (and by extension, of the access routes to new worlds) unmasks them as ultimate dystopias, for their existence can only be negotiated in opposition to, in contest to, that of the others.

Where *The Expanse* changes the usual post-apocalyptic SF narrative is precisely the re-positioning of the "we," because it constantly asks who this "we" refers to. The conflicts of *The Expanse* offer parabolic reflections

on capitalistic and colonial logic not simply in the colonization and terraforming of Mars. It meticulously unpacks the ensuing conflict and rivalry between Earth and Mars and between the Inners and the Belt: Earth is privileged and wealthy but is in the state of environmental and systemic collapse due to climate change, overpopulation, and a depletion of resources, which makes it dependent on the Belt. Mars, by contrast, is an emerging military power boasting advanced military technology—but whose citizens are also described as "dreamers"—with the "Dream of Mars" becoming a trope that gets gradually eroded and eventually deconstructed through the seasons. And while Earth and Mars are caught up in constant (military and economic) rivalry, they also see in one another the manifestation of a (promise of a) utopian thinking that they feel lacking from their own society: Martian marine Bobby Draper dreams about oceans on Mars. She visits the ocean when she visits Earth and is appalled by the extreme levels of pollution she witnesses. Arjun, UN Secretary Chrisjen Avasarala's husband memorably expresses these Earther sentiments about the "Dream of Mars":

> Arjun: They [the Martians] made their own clouds. Brings to mind the people who built the great Gothic cathedrals, knowing they'd be long dead before the work was finished, trusting that their great grandchildren would lay the final stones. We've lost that kind of generational thinking on Earth. Here, you see it in everything they do. ("Assured Destruction")

The rivalry between the "Inners" (Earth and Mars) and the Belt (more particularly the Outer Planet Alliance, which the Inners brand as a terror organization) is given a new incentive when the Protomolecule creates the Ring Gates that function as portals to unknown universes with dozens of habitable planets. This newly found opportunity is bound to offset the balance of powers between the three players.

The Expanse echoes post-colonial discourses with its gesture towards the spread of humanity into the Solar System, driven by societies' increasing need for resources and strategic advantages. Season 4's focus on the ordeals of a small Belter community trying to establish a colony on Ilus only to be contested by a powerful Earth corporation provides a case in point for this. But *The Expanse* also revels in instances of social polarization, not simply by portraying the intricate power-dynamics between Earth, Mars, and the Belt, but also by offering a sobering depiction of the disconnect between the socio-economic realities of Earth's political elite and the unemployed

masses living in deep poverty or on basic assistance provided by the government. So even though the narrative mobilizes basic income in the context of Earth economy, instead of presenting it as a hallmark of the welfare state operating under democratic principles that govern the distribution of wealth, basic income becomes the symbol of inequality: it is a necessity that has more to do with subsistence rather than economic power, and instead of functioning as a springboard (it rarely does in real-life societies either), it keeps disenfranchised demographics in a constant downward social spiral. The poor of Earth do not have access to healthcare and education, the two fundamental services that Fredric Jameson identifies as the cornerstones of his vision of a utopia (see Jameson, *American Utopia*).

By contrast, Mars prides itself on having eliminated unemployment through a utopian, technocratic, militarized system that accommodates every Martian within the great ideological scheme of "turning a lifeless rock into a garden" ("Assured Destruction"). Terraforming is the single most important project that seems to prop up the entirety of the culture or Mars. This ideology is brought to the brink of collapse with the opening of the Ring Gates and the discovery of new habitable worlds in Seasons 4 and 5, where, in the wake of the massive disarmament of the Martian Fleet, thousands lose their jobs.

The disenfranchised groups of Earth, Mars, and the Belt are equally framed as subaltern identities in that they struggle to be heard, are permanently exploited, but assert themselves to be working towards a better (utopian) future for themselves. As a consequence, the utopias of *The Expanse* are constantly reshaped and called into question by forces of unbecoming and becoming. The political and economic shift within each society and the constant need to renegotiate responses and identities unmask democracy as a spectral presence, a democracy-to-come. In this sense, the notion of utopia functions as an orientational force rather than a clearly defined future state or ideological goal.

Posthuman sensibilities of becoming

Whereas in a typical post-apocalyptic narrative humans "triumph over a foe that is humanity in a lesser form" (Colebrook 345), in *The Expanse*, it is not merely a question of Mars and Earth viewing one another in these terms, or of both viewing the Belters this way. Season 5 further opens up the question about "we" by gesturing towards the diversity of humans as the species that alters a planet and generates a deterritorialized future. This is emblematically represented by the maneuverings of certain

shadow-organizations from Earth, Mars, as well as the Belt, with more sinister agendas, such as Marco Inaros' Free Belter Navy, and by Martian Admiral Sauveterre's plans to use the Protomolecule to his own advantage (as suggested by his mysterious report from beyond the Ring Gate about commencing "phase three construction" in "Nemesis Games," the final episode of season 5).

We have established that the Anthropocene presents us with anxieties and challenges, the representations of which the serial narrative mode of science fiction is particularly conducive to. This is because the genre hinges on an underlying interest in the human and its relation to the nonhuman such as the machine, the animal, the alien, and more broadly to all figurations of Otherness. What this also means is that we have to revamp the human as that which is defined not only against this Otherness, but whose definition this Otherness forms an integral part of, whose definition this Otherness is a condition of.

These observations lead us to the realization that *The Expanse* is haunted by the specter of posthuman sensibilities that make humans both resilient to the prospect of annihilation and, at the same time, vulnerable to the unpredictability of their future: humans probe and transcend the boundaries of their existence both in regards to their habitat (by venturing beyond Earth), as well as in regards to the borders of their bodies (via technological supplementation, be it in the form of spacecraft, power armors, autodocs or limbs regrown with prosthetic gel). The vulnerabilities derive partially from the implications of expansion to space and the consequent erosion of stability and calculability of its political and socio-economic consequences, and finally, from the physiological tolls life beyond Earth's gravity has on human bodies. Not only is "human" no longer a monolithic notion, but, due to the differences in Earther, Martian, and Belter physiology, the question arises to what extent we can still speak about the human as we know it, and to what extent the species becomes posthuman. What are the new challenges, and what becomes of the human in light of such systemic changes?

The hauntology of the uncanny repetition of paranoia underlies our anxieties about the future. These sensibilities (that is, ideas and concepts about possible posthuman futures) are characterized by heterogeneity, just like conceptualizations of what the Anthropocene entails with regard to (conceptualizations of) the future. The extent of radicalism (and nihilism) that underlies the predictions of the possible consequences of human impact on the planet's ecosystem occupies a very broad scale: some of these

predictions envision the accelerated deterioration of the Earth system (and consequently, the destruction of the planet). Others will go "only" as far as stipulating the inevitability of an extinction-level cataclysmic event bringing human history as we know it to an end. Drawing on Srnicek and Williams, Irmgard Emmelhainz argues that the Anthropocene announces the collapse of the future through "slow fragmentation towards primitivism, perpetual crisis and planetary ecological collapse" (1). Or as Roy Scranton succinctly puts it at the beginning of his ironically titled book *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*: "We're fucked. The only question is how soon, and how badly" (4). What his project entails is the recognition that "for humanity to survive in the Anthropocene, we need to learn to live with and through the end of our current situation" (22). I would not go as far as suggesting this is what explains the popularity of programs like *The Expanse* with its replication of the Žižekian idea of the militarization of society with its obvious dystopian aesthetics, or its reliance on the conceptual legacies of the *Resident Evil* franchise (Capcom and Sony Pictures, 2002–2021) as well as of *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–2022) in the rendition of the Protomolecule; however, viewing these characteristics as symbolic figurations of the experience of crisis and an eroded sense of security might help understand why especially young audiences tend to respond so strongly to them.

As a consequence, we have to remind ourselves that narratives of emancipation, reconciliation, and redemption via green technology, sustainability, climate control, and romanticized ideas of scientists finding technological solutions are not going to save us because not only are these ideas unsustainable at present, but they are also depoliticized, removing agency and responsibility from governments and society as a whole. In the light of these changes, we might have to prepare ourselves for the possibility of a non-human future where the concepts of human dominance and control (epitomized by the concept of nature-culture dichotomy), capitalist and colonial ideologies, and with them, concepts of the border will have to be re-thought (see Nail 221–24). The central plot of *The Expanse* serves as an example of how these changes could play out in practice. But as the lack of a satisfying closure and the lingering uncertainty about the new structures that emerge in the wake of shifting power dynamics at the end of the series demonstrate, the real question is not so much who the dominant actor is going to be; rather, it is whether we, humans, are able to recognize the gravity of responsibility and the fact that our habitats rely on limited resources. Bruno Latour formulates this enforced shift in orientation by

calling attention to the disappearance of the illusion of distance and exteriority. In his view, "[t]here is no longer any outside. No reserve. No place where one could flee. This is what it means to live in the Anthropocene" ("Facing Gaia" 38). Colebrook reiterates Latour's ideas by highlighting that politics, knowledge, and agency are no longer directed towards an infinite outside (as if there was always going to be newer and newer versions of a plan(et) B), but towards our own fragile, limited condition: "awareness of the Anthropocene closes down the modern conception of the infinite universe, drawing us back once again to the parochial, limited and exhausted earth. Rather than an open horizon of possibility limited only by the pure laws of logic or universal reason, we are now 'earthbound'" (4).

So, the question arises: how do we reverse-engineer the role that the television of the Anthropocene plays from the perspective of the future? Does it effectively help erase the nature–culture dichotomy reminiscent of the late nineteenth century (and instead suggest that humans are "just" one of many other species, together with animals and machines, promoting ideas of equality), or does it contribute to a re-inscription of colonial power-structures where the symbiotic co-existence of species is unmasked as another attempt at domination? Don't these narratives represent a return to a more silent, slower form of (ecological) violence? (see Žižek; Zylinska). Do imaginings of the future disclose a specific form of nostalgia in so far as they inscribe themselves into the narrative of history itself? A relatively clear consequence of these considerations would be to assume that our representational imperative prevents us from thinking outside of, and beyond the Anthropocene.

Therefore, it is essential for us to re-think the relationships between human and non-human domination and responsibility in a progressive way, with respect to their spatial and temporal contexts, and to outline the phenomenological, epistemological, aesthetic, and historical conditions under which representations of these concepts develop and intertwine. Narratives of the Anthropocene are still very anthropomorphic in the sense that they use the language of anthropocentrism in the negative—typically not being able to not present a world (and the pertaining discourses) as not anthropocentric. They even present crises and catastrophes from the point of view of humans; that is to say, humans are the par excellence agents of them, and at the same time, they are also the ones acted upon. Consequently, the question of responsibility is also focused on humans as a species; a responsibility humans (as agents) have towards their own species

as well as other species via the human–nonhuman processes of evolution (adaptation to the natural environment) vs. domestication (adaptation to the artificial one) (see Sloterdijk).

Some critics dismiss our inability to take into account the possibility of our own extinction and the possibility of an Earth without humans—or no Earth at all, although the documentary series *Life After People* (History, 2008–2025) is predicated exactly on such imaginary scenarios, and argues, rather optimistically, that with humans gone, the Earth system is likely to bounce back to a state of equilibrium. One might conclude that this is just a human quality (it is an anthropological trait) to go with the drive to survive (see Limpár 234). As humans, we indulge in narratives of redemption and reconciliation, especially in times of crisis.

Utopia and redemption in a time of crisis?

It might be tempting to collate a study of classical utopianism in *The Expanse* with a study of nostalgic sentiments for a specific dimension of (late) modernism where subjectivity was still central to our understanding of who we are and what we do. Sometimes one might think the deconstruction and bracketing-out of subjectivity in favor of a not-yet-fully-fathomed posthuman condition is a dead-end for critical thinking. To my mind, in many cases, this is nothing else but a purely theoretical (perhaps even over-theorized and over-complicated) dismantling of humanity almost exclusively for the sake of creating an agenda that institutionalizes a new nihilism, the purpose of which is yet unknown. The key to a utopia in *The Expanse* is the belief that a repositioning/rethinking of the human (that is, understanding its place, purpose, function, value) does not entail its deconstruction/dethroning/dislocation/systematic and radical abolition, but rather a rehabilitation of it—an extension of previously restrictive, and therefore exclusionary, categories and attributes, something that would be based on acts of inclusion rather than demarcation. This should not mean an absolutization of the human but rather an appreciation of what the human is, what it stands for, and also of what it is not, and where its limits are.

When we think of the Anthropocene as a humanist(ic) category, especially when approached through the lens of utopianism—and we do not necessarily try to dislodge it from its anthropocentric contexts—we ultimately arrive at the question of what the human is in terms of agency. In this sense, Bernard Stiegler's "neganthropocene" entails a negation/reversal of the nihilistic, radically anti-humanist agendas so popular on the left. The

beyond in "beyond humanism" is not a denial but rather, a deconstruction of it in a Derridean sense where we recognize and embrace the paradoxes at the core of these concepts. We deconstruct not only humanism (that is to say, a humanist, anthropocentric concept of humanism), but also any (deliberate or inadvertent) misreadings of it too. Consequently, deconstructing the human should not be equated with an act of radical dethroning, which would necessarily assume the human sitting on some throne, at the apex of creation, a somewhat metaphysical framework even in the act of suspending metaphysics. Instead, it should entail a gesture towards repositioning, not abandoning the relevance and centrality of human agency, reframing it in terms of positive—that is, creative, emancipatory, healing—potentialities in regard to ecosystemic thinking. It should aim at redeeming the human not necessarily in terms of acquittal from planetary responsibility, but neither in the sense of a nihilistic embracing of the potential end of the species. Earth-bound, in this sense, would mean we understand and accept our responsibility (as constituent of our agency) as well as our limitations in both temporal and spatial terms, and recognize the finite character of our existence. Embracing responsibility for our habitat, inhabiting it with care and humility, embracing responsibility for it beyond our time, and abandoning ideas of a plan(et) B—that is Earth's true gravity. In other words, utopianism, even if manifest in the form of questions or orientations rather than definitive answers or clearly established goals, may provide a response to the eschatological nihilism of postapocalyptic logic. This hope will have an emancipatory (if not democratic) character in the sense that it will prompt humans to acknowledge the sovereignty of nature and, by extension, the universe we inhabit. It will connect self-preservation to self-reflection that does not recreate the universe with the human self in the center but rather place the human self in relation with the whole universe.

These are the questions *The Expanse* raises by making the viewer wonder what is on the other side of the Ring Gates and what is in the void. If we discard our quintessential anthropocentrism/logocentrism/supremacy and assume that Earth must not come first and the dream of Mars is dead, then where are we to go? Where is our place? Where do we find a new beginning if, in the first place, it is a new beginning that we really need?

The series revolves around the question of habitation and the concept of the habitat. The planet Ilus appears to be dominated by extraterrestrial technology that is not simply technology but also a life-form. While the concept of technology as enabler or as something that brings

about change is a recurring motif in the series, propping up societal superstructures through which power is expressed and negotiated, seeing it as a life-form that is in a symbiotic relation with the planet opens up new dimensions to the concept of the habitat as well. This view is in sharp contrast to humans' understanding of the Protomolecule as "just" technology, and the underlying imperative to commoditize it. This paradox is addressed in a particularly provocative and controversial explanation that one of the main characters, Naomi Nagata, a mechanical engineer from the Belt offers:

> The Protomolecule has changed everything, except everything it didn't. I don't ever remember a time when Earth, Mars and the Belt weren't fighting. The sides change sometimes. What we think we are fighting for. Who we tell ourselves are the good people. But it just seems we can't ever stop fighting war after war after war. It's part of being human. An ugly part, but I don't think it will ever change. Technology certainly hasn't changed it. Guns. Railguns. Nuclear bombs. No weapon ever brings peace. No one knows what the Protomolecule wants or what it's doing, but they are using it anyways. It's already scattered too far to ever be sure it'll all be gone. It's part of the equation now, and it will be from now on. We can't change that. We can't wish it away. Earth has it. Marth has it. And the Belt needs it too. I didn't destroy our sample. I never sent our torpedo into the sun. . . . I gave the Protomolecule to Fred Johnson. ("Caliban's War")

By shifting the focus on the colonization of Ilus and the subsequent encounter with the alien technology/life-form, Season 4 clearly revolves around the recognition that humans have become a multiplanetary species. And a deterritorialized species at that, which needs to negotiate ways to cope with their radically changed circumstances. The juxtaposition and apparent discrepancy between habitat and dwelling serve as a reminder that most contemporary science fiction gestures at an innate, fundamental human desire to move from subsistence to existence (or at least to the promise/hope of it). The recognition of this nexus highlights how science fiction is impossible to depoliticize, and how conducive all forms of science fiction are to political allegory: one can easily read into these considerations the questions why individuals migrate in contemporary times. And the responses do not seem to change, for the motives look very similar, ranging from economic migration to displacement, to depleted resources, to political oppression, and so forth. In this regard, Belters are the

quintessential migrants: displaced and disprivileged identities, who, consequently, are most easily radicalized, as episodes 5 and 6 underline by showing Inaros as a charismatic freedom fighter as well as a terrorist. The interesting thing about the depiction of the Free Navy and of the OPA is that it mobilizes a working-class analogy alongside the terrorist one in order to set a contrast between ideology and economic displacement. Belters, therefore, are totally in the grey zone, which is why the fandom finds it easy to sympathize with them: the Belter creole, with their characteristic tattoos and gestures are iconic examples of fan favorites. However, the most relatable and positive Belter characters are all female. This stands in sharp contrast with the controversial/non-redeemable characters who, on the other hand, and not surprisingly, tend to be male.

The conclusion of the Ilus incident, as summarized by UN Secretary Avasarala, stands before us as though it was a metanarrative commentary on how most such stories about space colonization end. Avasarala's assessment of the ways Nancy Gao (her rival, and contender for the position of UN Secretary) and the media were to spin the story is the series's way to ironically gesture towards (the history of) the kind of SF that Colebrook sees as the example of the Anthropos being defined by its ability to overcome existential threats (Colebrook, "The Future" 346). "The Anthropos is constituted as that which must be saved, and as that which must destroy all threats" (347), whether emerging from without (such as an alien planet or the Protomolecule), or from within (such as OPA extremists and the murderous corporate security). What/who emerges as morally superior and victorious, gesturing at the promise of humanity transcending itself, is the group of

> desperate Belters refugees and Earth scientists [who] overcome their prejudices to stand together against disaster on an alien world. And they made a fortune. The villains are dead OPA extremists and murderous corporate security, defeated by the forces of good for the benefit of all. Nancy Gao couldn't have a better narrative if she had written it herself. ("Cibola Burn")

The Ilus incident thus really inscribes itself into the political legacy of disaster capitalism that fetishizes the "redemption of humanity by way of a violent destruction of all that renders humanity fragile" (Colebrook, "We Have" 347). For the survivors of Ilus, what is at stake is not simply survival, but also the saving and retention of the instruments of wealth: their right to

mine ore in Ilus, thereby providing yet another quintessential example of an old exploitative practice that changes the face of a planet and effectuates potentially irreversible changes on an ecosystem. In this respect, the agendas of the Belter settlers of Ilus are not so different from those pushed by Avasarala, which, albeit for completely different reasons, is predicated on the idea of a deterritorialized future. For her, the future is nothing more than the project of saving humanity in its emergent complexity (or, as a matter of fact, in spite of it) by securing a livable future, balance, peace, and equity for Belters and Inners alike. The big difference between the motives of the survivors of Ilus, echoed by Nancy Gao, and those of Avasarala is that Avasarala represents an Earth-bound and, consequently, irrevocably Anthropocentric logic, not necessarily out of cosmic ethical responsibility (we don't go where we don't belong), but rather out of a cautiousness that considers, yet again, the potential threats to the survival of the species.

As established before, the opening of the Ring Gates and the first settlement on Ilus constitute a turning point in (post-)human and galactic history (also in the history of deep time), something that will have yet incomprehensible reverberations not just for the history of the species, but also for the history of the future as well. James Holden, the protagonist of the series (and in the current context, Avasarala's envoy to Ilus), comments on humans becoming a "galaxy-spanning civilization" when he points out to Dr. Okoye why it is necessary to make sure the artifacts no longer pose a threat to humanity ("Cibola Burn"). However, his words of wisdom guarding against threat also mark the end of human history as we know it. They signal perhaps not the singularity Ray Kurzweil referred to, as that moment will have been passed in the story with humans inhabiting space via technological structures that literally keep them alive. Rather, his words indicate a turning point beyond which humans need to rethink their own place in the universe also from the point of view of an inter-galactic, inter-species, and thus truly posthuman future.

The inescapable challenge, therefore, about utopian and democratic futures is that they are hardly expressible in discourse under Anthropocene conditions, as I pointed out earlier. For these reasons, the notion of a nonhuman future is inexorably linked to a utopianism that revolves around relationalities rather than the assertion of the autonomy of the self. This does not mean a suspension or erasure of posthuman agency. Instead, it reimagines the agency of the self under the structures of a democracy-to-come that unfold through multilateral entanglements and asymmetrical relations of responsibility, and temporalities that exceed human-centered

political imaginaries. Such a democracy cannot be stabilized as a program, a telos, or an institutional form. It foregrounds vulnerability and interdependence as well as existential hope. It remains *à venir* (see Derrida), exposed to alterity and constitutively open to what cannot be anticipated, mastered, or rendered fully legible within the horizon of human sovereignty. Its utopian force resides precisely in this deferral, in the insistence on an ethical demand that exceeds the calculable, the governable, and the present.

Conclusion

If we accept (with Colebrook) that the Anthropocene is always-already post-Anthropocene ("We Have") in the sense that it entails a necessary gesture towards the decentering (dethroning) of the human, the dynamics of utopian hope for a more democratic society begin to function as a misplaced and in the long run counter-productive reappropriation of certain political agendas, along the lines of unacknowledged and hidden instrumentalizations of minority rights movements and displaced identities. Marco Inaros's Free Navy becomes an instrument of terror directed towards Earth as well as towards those Belters who do not side with him. At the same time, he himself (and the cause he stands for, the emancipation of the Belt) becomes instrumentalized by renegade Martians who just use him as useful distraction while they take possession of new planets, cutting off access to everyone else. These considerations indicate that in utopian thinking humans are still concerned with humanity's future constructs. We still make painstaking attempts to symbolize human futures culturally, scientifically, and politically, even if in the negative. We engage in a dance around these acts of decentering our own anthropocentric views and yet come to recognize that eventually no narrative of the Anthropocene can be non-anthropocentric. Nor should it be. Paradoxically, embracing planetary responsibility, and situating ourselves in the logic of the Earth system as constituent of humanity would be the first step to a possible rehabilitation of (post-)human agency and, eventually, real change. Destroying idols is easy, what we are to build in their place is the real challenge.

What makes *The Expanse* particularly compelling for the study of contemporary utopianism is its refusal to settle into either an optimistic or a pessimistic register. On the one hand, none of the societies depicted in the series can be adequately described by or aligned with currently existing political categories and discourses, for their existence is predicated on a radically changed ecosystemic logic governed by the parallel acting forces of expansion, survival drive, and Earth-bound determinism. On the other

hand, the series insists on the possibility of solidarity across differences, often dramatized through the fragile alliances of its diverse protagonists. It continually underscores the persistence of inequality, violence, and exclusion, showing how every resolution generates new tensions. This ambivalence recalls Darko Suvin's foregrounding of the cognitive estrangement of science fiction as a dialectical process (4–7), but it also exemplifies how SF destabilizes ethical and political certainties through its staging of alien encounters. In *The Expanse*, utopia is not a stable blueprint but a fleeting and precarious achievement, constantly shadowed by dystopian collapse. This ambivalence allows the series to capture the way democracy functions today: not as an achieved state, nor as a mere façade, but as a horizon that is always deferred, or, borrowing Derrida's description, a "democracy to come" (see especially 37, 78–81).

The Expanse inscribes itself into that growing body of space-themed screen texts that draw on a kind of hyperrealism that excels in attention to detail. The authentic presentation of the science behind life in space and the colonization of the solar system comes with a visually hyped but at the same time relatable, believable aesthetic design as far as the representation of spacecraft and interior spaces are concerned. The common denominator, interestingly, for these narratives is the emphasis on the fact that "space sucks." Their manner of telling stories about space deconstructs both narratively and visually any attempt at the glamorization of the colonization of space, as it focuses on the realities of hardship in an environment that is unwelcoming, lonely, and curiously claustrophobic. Inevitably, one arrives at the realization that the current structures, the current ontological and epistemological frameworks that prop up our existence will change, and humans will have to change with them. Utopianism in this sense entails rebuilding ourselves on the ruins of past social, economic, military and cultural systems. It entails reimagining the familiar within alien structures.

The Expanse ultimately presents versions of utopia (for Earth, Mars and the Belt) not as a perfected end-state, but as fragile, continually deferred horizon. It is constantly probed and subject to negotiation, rather than bringing a triumphalist resolution. The series repeatedly gestures toward posthuman futures shaped by alien technology, multiplanetary engagements, transformed human bodies, and an internalized sense of crisis manifest through ecological breakdown, political instability, and vulnerability. But it also persistently re-centers hope by appealing to the notion of endurance and agency. This hope can be described, in the words of S. J. Beard, as "existential" in the sense that it allows for the possibility of "things human

beings can do now that, collectively, will move us towards safe, joyous, and inclusive futures" (5), but it is also "reasonably demanding: requiring substantial commitment from us to maintain it while still allowing that we are imperfect and limited by our capabilities and abilities" (6). Science fiction functions as a critical laboratory: it estranges the present, makes visible systemic flaws such as social polarization, ecological precarity, and displacement, and probes the limits of democratic imagination in a time of planetary crisis. But the portrayal of the intricate entanglement of utopia, the notion of democracy, and the conditions of the Anthropocene shifts attention to a longer temporal horizon instead of the short-term accountabilities that institutional models of democracy presume. Viewing utopia and democracy as deferred practices allows them to remain adaptive, experimental, and responsive in the face of emergent ecological conditions instead of being bogged down by institutional fixity and static constitutional arrangements. This view also accommodates the agency of absent, future, and nonhuman actors within Earth systems without running the risk of absolutizing planetary logic or pitting it against the boundaries of present human interests. But most importantly, it allows for the repoliticization of inevitability narratives that Anthropocene discourses tend to naturalize. These insights suggest that utopia operates as a critical orientation, not as a destination, in an epoch where stability and linear progress are increasingly called into question.

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