Meticulous world-building in Space: *The Expanse*, and the current resurgence of Science Fiction on TV

Tobias Steiner, CSTOnline, March 17, 2016

It’s been one of those days. The Christmas holidays had been lurking around the corner, and finally I had some free time on my hands, between the formal end of the academic calendar of 2015, and the big celebration rush that we tend to throw ourselves into, meeting up with family and long-time friends. Free time - priceless. And somewhere, somehow, I had come across an announcement that a new SciFi show would be airing on SyFy; title: *The Expanse*.

Rumour had it this show would be the next big thing, with ambitions to fill the shoes of the mighty mid-2000s re-imagination of *Battlestar Galactica* (SyFy, 2003/4-9). *Battlestar Galactica* (or, simply, “BSG” as it used to be called by its loyal fans), one of those early specimens of “ComplexTV” (Mittell, 2015) that, back then, had left me tremendously impressed with its unique, gritty way of storytelling, visual composition, and a narrative that invited audiences to engage in quasi-philosophical questions of technological determinism, religion, existentialism, and Othering in relation to the Here and Now. Over the years, a veritable collection of reviews, essays and anthologies such as *Cylons in America* or *BSG and Philosophy*, accumulated a diverse spectrum of academic perspectives, dissecting the layered multiplicity of the narrative, and its cultural relevance as a Science Fiction allegory on post-9/11 United States and the War on Terror. All in all, with two pilot movies, the series itself and a later miniseries prequel by the name of *Caprica* (SyFy, 2010) and a total running time of more than seven years, the BSG universe unquestionably left its mark on the history of post-2000 popular culture.

Science Fiction, as J.P. Telotte points out, continues its development of an independent identity for the televisual form of the genre, which has moved from weak imitations of cinematic science fiction, particularly that model found in the movie serials, to its own mature productions, which have, in turn, now begun to reenvision—and energize—the genre itself, making it so remarkable today. (2008, 2).

During the last 15 years, shows such as *Firefly* (FOX, 2002/3), *Fringe* (FOX, 2008-13), *V* (ABC, 2009-11), *Defiance* (SyFy, 2013-15; see Ross Garner’s CST piece on Defiance as Cult TV), *Dark Matter* (Space [CAN], 2015-), *Killjoys* (Space [CAN], 2015), and *Falling Skies* (TNT, 2011-15), but also *Orphan Black* (BBC America, 2013-), *Ascension* (SyFy, 2014), *Extant* (CBS, 2014-15), *Continuum* (Showcase [CAN], 2012-15), *Humans* (Channel4 [UK] & AMC [US], 2015-), and, last but not least, *Lost* (ABC, 2004-10) and *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-), furthered this evolution of Science Fiction. Many of these shows surpass a “classic” notion of SciFi as ‘distant-future-centered narratives in space’ by juxtaposing questions about biotechnology, the spread of diseases, and/or the consequences of Artificial Intelligence development, thus tremendously helping to expand the genre itself. Nowadays, our cultural anxieties *vis à vis* a highly-complex technological and socio-cultural contemporary environment are, as Alexandra Samuel suggests, translated into science fiction dystopias; dystopias which “put a synthetic face on the

dangers of a complicated world, and make the consequences of today’s choices concrete in an imagined tomorrow.”

Enter *The Expanse*: The show’s first season is based on a novel by the name of *Leviathan Wakes*, the celebrated first in a literary series penned by SciFi writers Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck writing under the pseudonym “James S. A. Corey”.

![SyFy's promotional poster for The Expanse](image)

1: *SyFy’s promotional poster for The Expanse*

Framed by an impressive Opener, the series creates an intricate, visually stunning world set more than 200 years in the future, in which the Solar System, including Mars and the so-called Belt (an asteroid ring situated between Mars and Jupiter), has been colonized by humanity. During the first season, we learn that Mars, after its declaration of independence from Earth, has evolved into a military superpower, and that the Belt, neutral territory, is inhabited by rogues and labourers from all corners of the Galaxy, who are barely able to make ends meet working for huge corporations that harvest minerals and ice (since water has become more precious than gold for those away from Earth). Through the first season, we are introduced to a multifocal character tapestry: on the one hand, we follow detective Josephus Miller (played by Thomas Jane), who lives on a space station within the Belt and is handed an investigation into a missing persons case, a young woman of whom we learn that she is the daughter of one of the richest families in the Galaxy. A seemingly-parallel thread places us in medias res with Exec Officer James Holden (Steven Strait) who is in charge of the ice mining vessel *Canterbury*, and is sent on a salvage mission to the edges of the Belt, where he discovers a tragic incident that has the potential to destabilize the current political equilibrium between “the Belters” (inhabitants of the Belt), Earth, and Mars. As a third major point of focalization, we encounter Chrisjen Avasarala (Shohreh Aghdashloo), a United Nations executive, whose highest goal is to prevent a looming war between Earth and Mars by all diplomatic (and any other) means necessary.
When discussing *The Expanse*, many of the reviews out there made sure to tick all of the boxes that are part of nowadays’ Quality TV discourse—considering the Variety review, in some ways even literally:

1) Genre multiplicity? Check!
2) High production values? Check!
3) Talented and diverse cast? Check!
4) Careful and meticulous world-building? Double-check!
5) Cultural relevance to contemporary concerns? Check, check, check!

Mainly due to the multifocality and its overall world-building aspirations, *The Expanse* has widely been hailed as *Game of Thrones* in space, a notion that—since the show in itself makes a strong attempt at building a whole universe that proves in so many ways that it can proudly stand on its own—I would rather prefer to disagree on. Narrative complexity has been around for quite some time now, and while *Game of Thrones* definitely is a high-profile example and case, I feel that by highlighting the obvious resemblances, this attribution implicitly does more harm than good to a show that genuinely tries to create something excitingly new...

Surely, many of the standard SciFi tropes are full at home in *The Expanse*, but—and yes, I’m echoing John Ellis here—as with all good TV, it’s the crafty and creative recombination of elements that form appealing new shows. And this is, as I argue, one of *The Expanse*’s absolute strengths. Of course, we recognize many of the futuristic elements in the show—space ships, stations, unknown and amazing technology, as well as “the rote space-noir, vessel-in-peril and dying-Earth narratives”, as Hollywood Reporter’s Daniel Fienberg names them ... but it’s the way this is realized, as well as the love for detail that makes one really dive into the show.

2: Technological advancements in *The Expanse*: laser data transfer, LED paper-foil, advanced schematic
Take the depiction of space ship movement in zero-gravity, for example: standard SciFi has it that space ships make use of one giant rear rocket engine that generates thrust to push the ship forward. In contrast, in *The Expanse*, a substantial amount of time (and stunning CGI) is spent displaying people actually having a hard time manoeuvering their ships around, with lots and lots of tiny valves that generate micro-impulses to actually facilitate the desired vector of movement within our three-dimensional universe. You might as well ask, “so, what?” But I think this love for detail makes for the true essence of successful and lovable television.

This also mirrors an underlying philosophy that seeps through the whole narrative universe: Life in space is tough. And the show makes sure to let the viewer experience how hard this can be. *En passant*, the show raises questions large and small, of technological utopianism, cultural differences and similarities, or about the effects that space has on the human body and what that does to our human self-image - questions that do resonate with contemporary debates (e.g. the [White House](https://www.whitehouse.gov) speculating about [how SciFi can help Science](https://www.whitehouse.gov) and underlying anxieties and therefore make this dystopian universe relatable to us (see e.g. the four-part [Indiewire interview](https://www.indiewire.com) with the team of showrunners for a more exhaustive contemplation of those topics).

So, to conclude: For me, *The Expanse* is a prime example of a current wave of elaborate Science Fiction series on television (including the above-mentioned *Extant*, *Humans*, and *Orphan Black*) that helps us to cope with our cultural fears and anxieties. Facilitated on a technological level by the possibilities of nowadays’ highly-advanced CGI, which allows for the visual staging of amazingly-intricate virtual worlds, those contemporary dystopias “allow us to not only make peace with our fears, but to see our own potential contribution to building a world in which the possibilities for good overtake the opportunities for disaster.”(Samuel 2016)

Works Cited:


Author Info:

Tobias Steiner is a part-time PhD candidate at the Dept. of English and American Studies, Universität Hamburg, Germany. His proposed thesis is focusing on the role of Television Drama as a Medium of Cultural Memory. Parallel to his PhD, he works as a research fellow at Universität Hamburg’s Universitätskolleg, and has been teaching American Television history to undergrads at the university’s Dept. of Media and Communications. Tobias currently acts as postgraduate (YECREA) representative of ECREA’s Television Studies section and is enthusiastic about all things Transnational Complex Television, both as a fan and a Cultural Studies-focused academic.