Research Article

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The Dialogic Expansion of Garcia's We: Chronotopes, Ethics, and Politics in *The Expanse* Series

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Abstract: Popular culture could be understood as a political battleground where conflicting meanings are inscribed into the "ordinary objects" that constitute that public sphere. This is also true for science fiction television series. This article critically examines how political matters and ethical agencies are represented within *The Expanse*, a series that takes place within a speculative twenty-fourth century milky way. Firstly, I will situate *The Expanse* within its generic "system of reference." Then, I will illustrate how political matters are represented as conjoined with the ethical. While the ethical refers to actions of persons, politics refers to fictional conceptions of what Tristan Garcia's terms *we-ourselves,* understood as conflicting and overlapping conceptions of "we." The conjunction between the political and the ethical in *The Expanse* is spatiotemporal: the characters, the events they are entangled in, and the spaces that connect discrete events develop through fictional and literal time. I argue that the science fictional representations of "we-ourselves," and the specific spatiotemporal representational capacities of the television series format, can be understood through the application of Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of the *chronotope* and the *dialogic*. That is, *The Expanse's* we-representations are chronotopic and the refractive rhetoric of television is dialogic.

Keywords: Tristan Garcia, chronotopes, dialogism, science fiction television, ethics, political representation

1 Introduction

Popular culture could be understood as a political battleground where conflicting meanings are inscribed into the "ordinary objects" that constitute that public sphere.[1] Such objects are typically situated within "accessible" frameworks, within "systems of reference" that contextualize meaning.[2] The objects that belong to the field of popular culture are typically defined, organized, and classified generically. Generic systems of reference are utilized to categorize a multitude of media artefacts, including films, video games,

1 Laugier, "Popular Cultures, Ordinary Criticism," 997.

2 On the notion of accessibility, see Carroll, *Mass Art*, 172–244. On the notion of "systems of reference" and its connection to genre, see Bourdieu, "Stanley Cavell-pour une Esthétique;" Laugier, "Popular Cultures, Ordinary Criticism," 1004. Rose makes a similar argument when he claims that "texts define themselves in relation to the available systems of genres" (*Alien Encounters*, 17).

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novels, and television programmes. Systems of reference are "collectively constituted" (socially constructed), as they concern culture industrial and fan-interpretive practices.[3] In addition, meaning-making practices within the field of popular culture also concern these referential generic systems.[4]

One such referential generic system is televisual science fiction (SF). Stories typical of this genre portray worlds that are "in some respect different from our own," or alternatively "they describe the impact of some strange element upon our world."[5] Many popular series in the twentieth and twenty-first century have been SF programmes; from the original *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966–1969), to the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* (Syfy, 2004–2009), to the dystopian *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011–2014; Netflix, 2016-Present). One of the most striking aspects of these programmes is their emphasis on *political* concerns. For instance, the "new" *Battlestar Galactica* engaged with the social and political issues of post 9/11 America, including terrorism and US foreign policy.[6] These SF series engage with political matters *indirectly and allegorically*, in contra-distinction to shows that explicitly comment on political concerns like *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–2020) and *24* (Fox, 2001–2010). Through "distanciation,"[7] the process of indirect allegorical representation leads to the "thinking-otherwise" of possible futures, pasts, and presents.

This article focuses on one specific SF television series that allegorically engages with contemporary political matters: *The Expanse* (Syfy/Prime Video, 2015-Present). Set in a fictional twenty-fourth century, the (actual – not fictional) solar system has been colonized by humanity. The United-Nations controls Earth and Luna, there is a military dictatorship on Mars, and numerous "others" dwell in asteroid converted space stations, spaceships, and other miscellaneous non-planetary settlements. These "others" are often referred to as "Belters" in the fiction: they labour in what Bellamy and O'Brien term a "peripheral extraction zone for advanced economies in the core."[8] For instance, food production is concentrated in Ganymede, Jupiter's largest moon; ice is mined from Saturn's rings and is converted into water.

While it seems apt to describe *The Expanse* as "a narrative of geopolitical decline and ecological exhaustion against a speculative fantasy of continuity and growth," this article does not utilize a political-economy approach to SF criticism, at least not directly.[9] Rather, this article focuses on the representation of political matters and how they are conjoined to the ethical agency of persons who are situated within a determined world (more specifically, a fictional story world). In other words, the representation of political issues *coincides* with the representation of the fictional characters' ethical actions, and characters' political attitudes change as political issues develop. This political–ethical conjunction in *The Expanse* is spatiotemporal: the fiction's characters, the events they are entangled in, and the spaces where events occur develop through fictional (diegetic) and literal time.

"Fictional time" concerns the diegetic time characters within the series experience, and "literal time" concerns the accumulation of events and actions episode by episode. That is, the particular temporal experience of watching a television series over time. The television series format allows one to follow the

3 To say that genres are "collectively constituted" or socially constructed is to say that generic qualities do *not* inhere within specific texts: they are categories that are pragmatically utilized within specific social contexts. See Reider, "Defining SF," 193, 194–7. This critique is expanded in *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*. See Reider, *Mass Cultural Genre System*, 33–64.

4 Stuart Hall famously connected the analysis of Western generic conventions (i.e. a socially constructed system of reference) to the meaning-making practices at both the levels of production and consumption of television. See Hall, "Encoding and Decoding." A relevant example of the push and pull of televisual meaning-making *vis-à-vis* encoding and decoding is discussed in Chow-White et al., "Media Encoding."

5 Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 3.

6 For instance, Rasmussen's chapter "Cylons in Baghdad" in *Battlestar Galactica and International Relations* interrogates the connection between the series and US foreign policy – specifically the US occupation of Baghdad, and Crane-Seeber's, "Seeing Others" analyses the representation of insurgent politics within the show.

7 This Brechtian idea of a distancing between represented thing and connotative meaning (the "verfremdungseffekt" – or estrangement effect) is taken by Darko Suvin to be one of the principle generic qualities of science fiction. See Suvin, "Estrangement."

8 Bellamy and O'Brien, "Solar Accumulation," 515.

9 Ibid., 516.

development of events and characters over a *long duration*, at least when compared to film as a visual medium.[10] The characters' actions and political events take place within spaces: spaceships, space stations, outer space, on particular planets, and so on. Conceptually, *The Expanse's* political and ethical representations are *chronotopic*. Mikhail Bakhtin defines the chronotope (literally "time space") as the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature."[11] Time and space are, for Bakhtin, *inseparable:* they are unified through artistic expression.[12] While Bakhtin is concerned with literary expression, the concept of the chronotope can be applied to other artistic practices, including film and television.[13]

Before discussing *The Expanse*'s textual content, I will situate the series within the generic context of "space opera" SF television.[14] This sub-genre of SF represents both ethical agency and political action in a particular fashion (through the mobilization of specific chronotopic figures), so it makes sense to detail the relevant qualities of this subgenre. This follows from a broader discussion of the "aboutness" of science fictional modes of storytelling. In such televisual narratives, spatiotemporal dynamics intersect with generic-symbolic figures. I argue that these figures can be positioned as space operatic chronotopes, understood as the spatiotemporal "sites" where the political and the ethical are conjoined within and through "time space."

After situating *The Expanse* within its generic context, I will then illustrate how ethical agency and political issues are represented using textual examples. I argue here that these representations are "refractive" in kind. In her discussion of *Star Trek*, Roberta Pearson contrasts a reflective model of representation with a refractive model: "the reflection paradigm presupposes a direct connection between the society and the text, but fails to take into account the ways in which the specific characteristics of a fictional text can *refract rather than directly reflect dominant assumptions*."[15] The metaphor of refraction (the physical change in direction of a wave passing from one medium to another) here concerns how media indirectly "debates rather than reproduces a cultures dominant assumptions."[16] For Pearson, assumptions, opinions, beliefs are transformed (refracted) within television drama, as the "storytelling mode" of televisual drama "lends itself to the presentation of multiple perspectives on social and cultural issues."[17] Essentially, as a medium of debate, televisual drama constitutes an indirect dialog between creator, text, other texts, and the audience. Refractivity will here be explored from another Bakhtinian vantage point: through the concept of the *dialogic*.

As Michael Holquist emphasizes, Bakhtin's concern with the dialogic can be traced throughout his oeuvre.[18] The dialogic refers to "utterances" that demand some kind of answer. Utterances within a dialogue also refer to previous utterances, in the sense that the dialogic concerns the answerability of utterances.[19] But the dialogic is not exclusively a linguistic phenomenon. For Bakhtin, dialogue is also a moral and existential matter, as dialogue concerns the lived activity of persons in a world.[20] In this sense, any

10 Long duration character development is not specific to television series. This kind of character development can be seen in both the video gaming medium and within the SF novel. However, the temporal pacing of the televisual series is unique, and affords a particular kind of "narrative complexity" that is unique to the televisual experience (see Mittel, "Narrative Complexity").

11 Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 84.

12 Ibid.

13 Jordan-Haladyn illustrates this in his introduction to *Dialogic Materialism*.

14 It should be noted that the television series is based on *The Expanse* series of novels and novellas written by James S. A. Corey (James S. A. Corey is a pen name used by the writers Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck). In this article, I will only be focusing on the television programme, as the programme is not directly analogous to the literary material.

15 Pearson, "Serialized Ideology," 213. My emphasis.

16 Ibid., 214.

17 Ibid.

18 See Holquist, *Dialogism*, 1–12. Much like the notion of "refractivity" – the refractive nature of televisual drama as conceived by Roberta Pearson – the dialogic ("dialogism") "is a phenomenon that is still a very much open event" (Holquist, *Dialogism*, x). Like Holquist's meditation on dialogism, my essay should not be taken as a "comprehensive or authoritative" statement on refractivity: as there are many different kinds of dialogue, one is certain that there are numerous kinds of televisual (or cinematic, novelistic, ludic) refractivity.

19 Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 92–3.

20 Bakhtin states that "life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life" (*Dostoevsky's*

storytelling medium could be refractive, but a medium refracts content in a particular sense (linguistically, visually, and so forth).[21]

Bakhtin's description of "consciousness" in Dostoevsky's work recalls the multi-perspectival presentation of cultural and social issues in (refractive) televisual drama:

> [...] a consciousness in Dostoevsky's world is presented not on the path of its own evolution and growth, that is, not historically, but rather alongside other consciousnesses, it cannot concentrate on itself and its own idea, on the immanent logical development of that idea; instead, it is pulled into interaction with other consciousnesses. In Dostoevsky, consciousness never gravitates towards itself but is always found in intense relationship with another consciousness. *Every experience, every thought of a character is internally dialogic, adorned with polemic, filled with struggle.*[22]

Analogous to Bakhtin's reading of consciousness in Dostoevsky, in dialogic televisual drama, every experience and thought of a character is adorned with polemic, filled with struggle. Different perspectives on cultural and social matters are debated and contrasted in televisual dramas like *The Expanse*. Furthermore, the dialogically refractive content of *The Expanse* occurs in relation to specific chronotopic sites, pertaining to the generic system of reference that the series can be positioned within.

The latter part of the article concerns Tristan Garcia's conception of "we" (the first-person singular plural). In *We Ourselves: The Politics of Us*, Garcia describes political divisions as the conflict of overlapping (or intersecting) we's.[23] I argue that in *The Expanse*, one of the most predominant political matters represented is how one can belong to different kinds of *we*. Ethical and political actions are committed in the series in the names of different conflicting we's: the poor, the civilized, the "Earthers," the "Belters," the "Martians," humanity *sui generis*, the "crews" of different spaceships, and so on. Here, one can note an intersection between the various (fictional) we-conceptions and the space operatic chronotopes of *The Expanse*. In the series, some we's are presented as more *elastic* (i.e. inclusive) than others; they are more *expansive* than others.[24] To conclude, I argue that the fictional representations of the conflicting and overlapping chronotopic we-conceptions in *The Expanse* have the capacity to alter one's framing (comprehension) of the politics of *we-ourselves*.

2 *The Expanse* and generic systems of reference

The connection between genres and television programmes is evidently a complicated one. There are different senses of the word "genre," and a television programme can be "in" (or, more exactly, can be *positioned* within) multiple genres.[25] Typically, one makes sense of media artefacts through the utilization of generic categories, in the sense that they are recognizably public things. Generic media make internal references to generic categories, by referencing other texts that are positioned within a shared generic category.[26] In media productions, this internal referencing of generic texts (the positioning of a televisual or cinematic text as belonging to a determined genre) concerns the "collective" nature of media production. In the worlds of Sandra Laugier: "the production of a cinematographic work is a collective enterprise that mobilizes not only the film's team, led by its director, but also indirectly, the *entire community* of other filmmakers and *all their works*."[27] This evocation of the "entire community" and "all their works" is

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Poetics, 293). The moral and existential dynamic of the dialogic is expanded on in Holquist, *Dialogism*, 13–38; and in Nielsen, *Norms of Answerability*.

21 Jordan-Haladyn also argues that "utterances" are to some degree visual, from the interpretation of literal images to the visualization of words by an embodied person engaged in dialogue. See *Dialogic Materialism*.

22 Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 32. My emphasis.

23 Garcia, *We Ourselves*.

24 See van Tuinen, "Elasticity and Plasticity" for a critical discussion of the concept of elasticity in contemporary philosophy.

25 On "positioning" texts with generic reference systems, see Reider, "Defining SF," 193–4.

26 Laugier, "Popular Cultures, Ordinary Criticism," 1004.

27 Ibid. My emphasis.

indicative of the situatedness of a text within a generic system of reference that is socially constructed and maintained. In this sense, genres are "collectively constituted." Genres are not reducible to a singular "author and his unique inspiration," they are social things that are reference points for the producers and consumers of SF media.[28]

Generic categorical systems impose limits on representational expression.[29] Such limits are necessary, as "representational form is *infinitely* extensive and open."[30] However, it is difficult to make sense of infinite possibility (for both audiences and creators). Thus, for Tristan Garcia, representational form requires regulation: "each art prepares the ground for possibilities that it opens through smaller territories, limited by rules, codes, and figures. These regions of possibility are precisely what we call *genres*."[31] These regions, or systems of reference, "transform the wasteland of possibility into geography" that affords representational expression:

> Through technical *combinatorial rules* (versification or the rules of harmony, for example), or through *figures* (for the western: cowboys, Indians, a frontier, cattle, steeds, saloons, and so on), a genre imposes the objective representational possibilities and impossibilities on an art's formal possibility … in order to allow combinatorial and accumulated representations.[32]

Systems of reference include both *combinatorial rules* and *determinate figures*.[33] Furthermore, generic representation is accumulative, as artists (whether individual authors or a television production team) both indirectly and directly reference previous works that are positioned within a genre.[34] The science fictional "region of possibility," when defined in broad terms, concerns narratives:

> […] in which the setting differs from our own world (e.g., by the invention of new technology, through contact with aliens, by having a different history, etc.), and in which the difference is based on extrapolations made from one or more changes or suppositions; hence, such a genre in which the difference is explained (explicitly or implicitly) in scientific or rational, as opposed to supernatural, terms.[35]

The "extrapolative" aspect of SF concerns how the "changed worlds of science fiction … are presented as logical extensions of reality."[36] If a difference between the altered world and the real (empirical) world is to be explained through recourse to scientific rationality, then such a difference should build on, to some extent, real empirical science. Of course, this is usually not the case, as SF stories "always contain an element of the fantastic."[37] In much SF, the difference between fiction and reality *seemingly* conforms to empirical science. However, such differences are speculative, they do not concern empirical reality even when a fiction presents itself as "realistic" in quality. As China Miéville argues, the realistic "effect *may* be

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28 Bourdieu, "Stanley Cavell-pour une Esthétique d'un Art Impur," 44. Rick Altman makes a similar claim when he states that "genres are not inert categories shared by all … but discursive claims made by real speakers for particular purposes in specific situations." Altman, *Film/Genre*, 101.

29 See Laugier, "Popular Cultures, Ordinary Criticism," 1004.

30 Garcia, *Form and Object*, 264. My emphasis.

31 Ibid. Emphasis in original. Rose makes this same argument concerning SF when he claims that "genres are *limited*" (*Alien Encounters*, 22. My emphasis). Genres are limited for Rose in the sense that they may exhaust themselves over time: one may exhaustively utilize all of the existing rules, codes, and figures available to the author. Of course, one could possibly reinvent and reinvigorate potentially worn-out tropes, codes, or figures. Jerome Winter's thesis on space opera is indicative of this type of generic reinvigoration: the revitalization of codes, figures, rules. See Winter, *New Space Opera*.

32 Garcia, *Form and Object*, 264. My emphasis.

33 Willems discussion of SF in *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction* demonstrates that SF figures and codes can be "combined," depending on the aesthetic or expressive intent of an author (Willems, "The Zug Effect," 6–39).

34 Laugier, "Popular Culture, Ordinary Criticism," 1003.

35 Prucher, "Science Fiction."

36 Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 22.

37 Ibid., 3. As Rose indicates, this of course raises questions of how to differentiate SF from fantasy. While there is no room in this essay to discuss the differences between SF and fantasy as distinct genres (or if they are distinct genres in the first place), the sharp distinction has been problematized by numerous critics. See Miéville, "Cognition as Ideology."

derived from empirical reality and rigorous rational science: but it is vital to insist on the potentially absolute discontinuity between the two."[38] That is, there is no *necessary* correlation between empirical facts, scientific principles, and the speculations of SF.

This potential discontinuity between speculation and empirical reality is taken to its radical conclusion in Quentin Meillassoux's *Science Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction*, where Meillassoux considers the possibility of (fictional) worlds where "in principle, experimental science is impossible and not unknown in fact … worlds [that] are conceived in such a way that experimental science cannot deploy its theories or constitute its objects within them."[39] But such worlds and narratives are *specifically* extro-science worlds and stories: they are *not*, for Meillassoux, science fictions.[40] Science fictions, for Mark Rose, are fictions that are "composed within the semantic space created by the opposition of human versus nonhuman."[41] This binary opposition between the human and the nonhuman is a constitutive "paradigmatic" element.[42] This opposition can be detected in much SF media, from H.G. Wells" *War of the Worlds* to BioWare's *Mass Effect* video game series.[43] Fictions that engage with the semantic tension between the human and nonhuman categories utilize specific "rules, codes, and figures" that belong to the science fictional system of reference.[44]

Rose introduces four heuristic codes ("four logically related categories") that are paradigmatically characteristic of SF storytelling: space, time, machine, and monster.[45] These codes allow the reader to "locate apparently disparate elements in relation to each other," allowing the reader to "view the genre as a whole."[46] Again, it should be noted that these categories (codes) are heuristic and should not be conceived as "compartments in which to store texts": they are utilized here as analytical categories that allow one to analyse the "thematic structure" of texts like *The Expanse*.[47] The positioning of a text as "belonging" to a referential system, for Rieder, "constitutes an active intervention in [the] distribution and reception" of generic fiction.[48] The positioning of the television series within the SF genre is here "a way of using" the text and drawing internal ("thematic structure") and external ("the entire community of artists and their works") relations between and within the text.[49]

The *spatial* dynamic "projects the nonhuman" as "out there." Characteristically, the spatial code mobilizes specific images of "physical nature" and identifies nonhumanity with "extraterrestrial creatures."[50] In the opening scenes of the first episode of *The Expanse*, a near deserted ship in space is depicted. This scene is the first time the audience encounters a potential nonhuman extraterrestrial thing: the "protomolecule." This is the first spatial projection of the nonhuman in the series. The *temporal* aspect

38 Miéville, "Cognition as Ideology," 236. My emphasis. It should be noted that here Miéville is concerned with "cognition effects," referring to Darko Suvin's notion of "cognitive estrangement" (the cognitive organization of an imaginative framework that differs from an author's empirical environment). But the "realistic" sensibility of SF concerns this apparent cognitive (or rational) aspect of SF. On "cognitive estrangement," see Suvin, "Estrangement."

39 Meillassoux, *Science Fiction and Extro*, 6. What Meillassoux terms "extro-science fiction worlds" (XSF) are further divided into three types: irregular worlds that do not effect science or consciousness (Type-1); worlds whose irregularity is sufficient to abolish science but not consciousness (Type-2); worlds that are no longer worlds as there are no longer necessary laws of any kind (Type-3). See Meillassoux, *Science Fiction and Extro*, 33–40.

40 Ibid., 4.

41 Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 31.

42 Ibid. 32.

43 H.G. Wells' novel and BioWare's video game series both concern extraterrestrial antagonists (the "Martians" in Wells and the "Reapers" in *Mass Effect*) that attempt to extinguish the extant human populations of their respective fictional worlds. It should be noted that the alien invasion "formula" is one particular mode of engaging with the difference between the human and the nonhuman amongst others.

44 Garcia, *Form and Object*, 264.

45 Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 32. Rose also refers to these heuristic categories as forms.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 34.

48 Reider, "Defining SF," 193–4.

49 Ibid.

50 Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 32.

concerns the representation of temporal processes: "humanity is seen as struggling to survive in an ocean of time."[51] Stories using this form of projection "tend to be set in the future or perhaps in alternative versions of the present." Significantly, such stories characteristically deal with "changes in the human condition wrought by some aspect of time."[52] In *The Expanse*, the bodies of some humans have been physiologically transformed through their long term exposure to low gravity. Those that live in outer space (in the "asteroid belt") are the most affected. This bodily transformation is "wrought about" by an accumulative exposure to low gravity. But as indicated above, the spatial and the temporal cannot be separated here: bodily transformation in the expanse is *chronotopic*, as bodily transformation occurs through time and within specific spaces.[53]

As Rose emphasizes, "in the spatial and temporal forms, the nonhuman figures as the context in which humanity finds itself."[54] In this series, the "context" is the expanse of outer space itself and the voyages that humans undergo through time. In some "contexts" humanity produces the nonhuman: humans can be "the agency for the production of the nonhuman." This concerns the *machinic* category.[55] For instance, in *Battlestar Galactica*, humans create nonhuman machines, the Cylons.[56] But machines can also be intangible, as in the case of "social machines."[57] In *The Expanse*, the political–economic system can be understood as a social machine in Rose's sense. In one of the few scholarly essays on the series, Bellamy and O'Brien interpret the show from a world-system theoretical perspective. The world-system is an intangible social machine in Rose's sense.[58]

Nonhumanity may be located within "humanity itself," as well as spatially projected as an outside.[59] This corresponds to the *monstrous*. For Rose, stories in this form generally depend upon a "transforming agency" that corresponds to the other heuristic codes (space, time, machine).[60] The chronotopic transformation of humanity in *The Expanse's* story world could be understood from this perspective as a monstrous figuration of the human–nonhuman tension: humanity in the series is differentiated into "humanities" (plural), where humanness becomes a debated and contested category. These heuristic categories are combined with determinate figures, and as SF is a broad generic category, it now makes sense to "position" *The Expanse* within its appropriate subgenre (and the relevant rules, codes, and figures of that subgenre).

Historically, one of the most influential subgenres to appear on television is "space opera."[61] Space opera, Gary Westfahl states, "is the most common, and least respected, form of science fiction."[62] The term was a historically pejorative one, created by the writer Wilson Tucker in 1941 to classify negatively "hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn space-ship yarn, or world-saving' interplanetary fiction."[63] If one subtracts the pejorative connotation from Tucker's category of fiction, three characteristics are proposed. Firstly, there is

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., 33.

53 Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 84.

54 Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 33.

55 Ibid.

56 The creation of the Cylons is the focus of the *Caprica* spin-off prequel series.

57 Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 33.

58 See Bellamy and O'Brien, "Solar Accumulation." As a theoretical framework, world-systems theory stipulates that the "world-system" of competing nation states should be the primary unit of critical historical, political, and economic analysis. Usually, the actual world is divided into distinct regions (e.g. core, semi-periphery, and periphery) and the general argument in brief is that peripheral nations are exploited by the core nations (e.g. the British colonization of India is framed as an exercise in exploitative extraction of the peripheries resources). See Wallerstein, *World-Systems*.

59 Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 33.

60 Ibid.

61 Bould, "Film and Television," 87–90; see also Dixon, "Tomorrowland TV," 93–110.

62 Westfahl, "Space Opera," 197. It should be noted that when Westfahl states that space opera is the least respected form of SF, he is generally referring to the critical appraisal of SF by scholarly authors (e.g. Darko Suvin). But if one is concerned with an "ordinary criticism" of popular culture, focusing on how ordinary people engage art from the standpoint of everyday experience, then one should not ignore space opera SF, *even* the "less respected" variety.

63 http://www.midamericon.org/tucker/lez36i.htm (accessed 24 January 2021). Interestingly, Tucker constructs his space opera categorization by reference to two common televisual genres: the western ("horse opera") and the "soap opera."

the notion of a "spaceship." Westfahl writes that "space opera depicts journeys through uncharted realms" in vessels bringing humans into contact with "mysterious stuff."[64] Such journeys are explicitly chronotopic. The encounter with the mysterious leads to the emergence of the second quality of space opera, its "yarn"-like sensibility. "Yarn," or an exciting adventure story, for Tucker, leads directly to the third characteristic of space opera that most serious authors and creators attempt to negate: the "hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn" aspects of the genre, defined for Westfahl by "formulaic plots and mediocrity."[65]

The "adventure" dynamic in space opera SF leads to two important aspects. Firstly, space opera narratives can be appropriately or excessively dramatic. This dynamic is perhaps why space opera lends itself to the televisual medium, a form characterized in part by images that dramatize.[66] This form of SF can easily be represented within what Robert Allen terms a "cinematic mode of address."[67] For Allen, this mode "draws from the conventions of Hollywood-style cinema" and "expends tremendous effort to hide its operation … engaging its viewers covertly."[68] Put another way, the "cinematic mode" typically does not "break the fourth wall." This contrasts with the "rhetorical mode of address" – as can be seen in televisual news media – that addresses the audiences directly *as* an audience.[69] As Bakhtin emphasized, dialogic communication is at minimum a two-step process: there is generally a sender and there is generally a receiver (utterance and answer). In televisual communication, an audience is directly or indirectly invited to dialogically respond to the televisual text.[70]

Secondly, and crucially, Westfahl claims that adventure narratives in space opera soon turn to conflict, "usually with violent resolutions."[71] This arguably leads to a specific form or modality of conflict. While much SF is political in a general sense – even in Rose's sense the distinction between the human and the nonhuman is already in some sense a political distinction between familiar and Other (between different Garcian "we's") – many space operatic conflicts concern military actors, the *militarization* of political conflict.[72] Much of what is termed "political science fiction" could be comprehended generically as militarized space opera: Frank Herbert's *Dune*, Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, *Star Trek*, *Battlestar Galactica*, Blizzard's *StarCraft* video game series; and significantly for this article, *The Expanse*.[73] The militaries of Earth and Mars are key political actors within the fiction, and the radical faction of the "Belters" are depicted as a militant insurgency.

Focusing on *The Expanse*, the show has a spaceship that contains its central cast (the "crew") who go on "adventures," sometimes encountering "mysterious stuff." The show features conflicts of numerous kinds: class struggle, solar-political military conflict (initially "cold" but increasingly "hot" as the series develops) between competing superpowers, existential and ecological conflicts.[74] Significantly, *ethical conflicts* of interest are conjoined with the political aspects of conflict, artistically expressed through the "cinematic" (or more precisely, *dramatic*) mode of address the show utilizes.

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64 Westfahl, "Space Opera," 197.

65 Ibid., 198.

66 The notion of "dramatizing images," arguably, derives from the typical cinematography used within television. "Medium shots," "close-ups," and "extreme close-ups" are predominantly used within the medium. These shots denote intensities of "zoom," creating spatial effects of distance and proximity between the camera and the filmed object(s). Such shots can lead to dramatic effects when certain forms of lighting are utilized. See Zettl, *Sight Sound Motion*, 33–4, 75–6; Lury, *Interpreting Television*.

67 Allen, "Audience-Oriented Criticism," 88–9.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., 89–91.

70 Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*. This dialogic aspect is also emphasized by Stuart Hall when he argues that audiences actively "decode" the content of television programmes. See Hall, "Encoding and Decoding."

71 Westfahl, "Space Opera," 198.

72 For a critical discussion of military SF, see Shippey, *Hard Reading*, 296–310.

73 Ibid. Many of the essays in the edited collection *Political Science Fiction* also focus on such works. See Minowitz, "Prince versus Prophet," 124–47; and Dolman, "Military, Democracy, and the State," 196–214.

74 The term "solar-political" is an extrapolation of the term "geopolitical." See Bellamy and O'Brien, "Solar Accumulation." This analogy to the cold war is explicit within the series. Characters refer to the "cold war" between Earth and Mars and allude to how this cold war is now "something else" (*The Expanse*, Season 1 Episode 2).

The third quality – a narrative that is defined by a formulaic and mediocre plot – seems absent from *The Expanse*. Bellamy and O'Brien argue that the show is a *critical* space opera and should be understood as a New Space Opera text, a "wave" of space opera fiction that focuses on "introspective, experimental work with more immediate sociological and political relevance to the tempestuous social scene of the day."[75] According to Jerome Winter, New Space Opera "produces a riddling, multivalent code on a primary narrative level, which on a secondary level evokes an enigmatic, obscure or indeterminate political resonance."[76] New Space Opera's political allegories, for Winter, highlight "the destabilising force of an unshakeable belief in limitless market-driven technological reproduction."[77] *The Expanse*, situated within its generic system of reference, "*plays* with the [generic] figures and codes to represent the world regionally."[78] That is, it uses the accumulated conventions, codes, and figures of space opera for both rhetorical *and* aesthetic purposes.

These figures are *chronotopic*. The spaceship, the space station, "outer" space, "home-worlds" (Earth and Mars) are particular chronotopic figures that recur throughout much televisual space opera SF. Ethical actions and political events in *The Expanse* occur within particular spaces and develop through time. The temporal aspect is significant, as character development and the occurrence of events concern both diegetic (fictional) and literal (viewing) time. Below, I turn towards the connection between the dialogic affordances of televisual drama and the chronotopic figuration of the political–ethical conjunction.

3 Space opera chronotopes, dialogic refractivity, and the representation of the political–ethical conjunction in *The Expanse*

Bellamy and O'Brien argue that there is a social–critical dynamic running through *The Expanse*. The series depicts inequalities between individuals of various sorts, demonstrating how the future – of interstellar economic development and expansion – could intensify and multiply myriad inequalities, simply dispersing them across a wider territorial space (i.e. the milky way). For Bellamy and O'Brien, this also connects to the politics of ecological crisis:

> *The Expanse* is as much a fictional projection of our own moment of ecological crisis as it is an extrapolation of the current world-system from the Earth to the planets and the asteroid belt … in the way *The Expanse* constructs its story world, it hints that the future it offers extends our own world system beyond Earth's possibility for a future of accumulation beyond Earth's ecological limits: bringing capitalism to the stars.[79]

The notion of *extension* is significant. Firstly, it grounds the fictional speculations of the television series in an actual politics of ecological crises and "world-systems," a politics that is presented as a "logical extension of reality."[80] By "ecological crisis," Bellamy and O'Brien are referring to anthropogenic climate change: a fundamental shift in the climactic conditions of Earth caused by human action, conceptualized as the "Anthropocene."[81] This historical and geological aspect is a "realistic" anchor for the speculations within

75 Dozois and Strahan, "Introduction," 4.
76 Winter, *New Space Opera*, 12.
77 Ibid.
78 Garcia, *Form and Object*, 266.
79 Bellamy and O'Brien, "Solar Accumulation," 521.
80 Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 22.
81 This term was popularized by the climate scientist Paul Crutzen. There is much debate concerning the historical and social dynamics of climate change and the national contributions of different nation states to such climactic shifts. See Charkrabarty, "The Climate of History;" Hamilton et al., "Anthropocene." For a discussion of the relation between ecology (broadly conceived)

the series and arguably follows from the science fictional concern with spatially.[82] Secondly, the notion of extension is temporal in character: the extension of our world-system into outer space also concerns the "changes in the human condition wrought by some aspect of time."[83] One common generic trope in space opera SF is the near instantaneous traversal through space and time, commonly referred to as "faster than light travel" (FTL). There is no FTL in *The Expanse*: time matters for the fictional characters. Temporality within *The Expanse*, in the words of Bakhtin, "thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible."[84] Journeys through space in the series "become charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history."[85]

Here, one can see the intrinsic connectedness of the spatiotemporal within the series. The extension of political organization (Bellamy and O'Brien's "world-system" or Mark Rose's intangible "social machine") concerns the first space operatic chronotope "made visible" within *The Expanse*: the *spaceship*. In Season 1: Episode 1, as a spaceship docks at Ceres Station (a major space port and population centre within the series), the viewer is presented with a voiceover spoken by an unnamed OPA activist (Kyle Gatehouse):

> 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 the 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 its 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 (S1:E1).[86]

This initial framing of *The Expanse*'s political organization (Rose's "social machinery") presents the current configurations of power as unjust and exploitive. Throughout Season 1, the intensity of political activism on Ceres and throughout the "belt" increases. This increase is connected to plot events that do not directly concern the Belters – specifically the Outer Planets Alliance's (the OPA) – political struggle against the United Nations (UN) and the Mars Congressional Republic (MCR).[87] The voice over indicates how important "ice mining" is in the story world: water is a fundamental commodity that affords human survivability in an interstellar world. Political unrest on Ceres is caused by the delayed docking of an ice mining spaceship named the Canterbury. While on a mining trip ("extracting" ice), they respond to a distress beacon, leading to an ambush (S1:E1). The Canterbury is destroyed, so the fresh ice (water) never reaches Ceres.

Here, several spaceships are connected through the political–economic universe ("social machinery") of *The Expanse*. These mobile locations and their respective crews – they are localities in the sense that spaceships house a crew – are actors that are implicated in the political events of the world. Such chronotopic particulars (figures) "only signify in so far as they have always already established in the most general way the spatial-temporal worldliness of the world."[88] The possibility of space travel is constitutive of the story world's "worldliness." Through the chronotope of the spaceship, the spatiotemporal dynamics of *The Expanse's* story world "become artistically visible," become "thick."[89]

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and science fictional representation, see the edited collection *Green Planets*. Specifically see Canavan, "Introduction," for an overview.

82 Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 32. Rose also argues that the science fictional concern with the human-nonhuman opposition "generally intersects with a secondary opposition between science and nature" (ibid., 38). Meillassoux also points to this intersection between empirical reality (nature), the sciences, and consciousness ("humanness") in SF. See Meillassoux, *Science Fiction and Extro*.

83 Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 33.

84 Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 84.

85 Ibid.

86 For economic reasons, I will abbreviate season as "S" and episode as "E" (e.g. Season 2: Episode 9 would be referred to as S2:E9). At the time of writing, all episodes of *The Expanse* referred to in this article can be viewed digitally on Amazon Prime Video.

87 The OPA is a heterogeneous political network (or advocacy group) that opposes both the UN and the MCR. Different subfactions within the OPA execute this opposition differently: from verbal protest to militant terrorism.

88 Pechey, *Word in the World*, 85.

89 Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 84.

As much as spaceships are implicated within the political events that occur within the story world, debates between crewmembers also concern ethical actions. The crew of the Canterbury debate whether they should respond to the distress signal emanating from the seemingly derelict ship (S1:E1). Spending time responding affects the crew's "time bonus" (for bringing the ice to Ceres Station on time), there are known pirates in *The Expanse*'s story world and the distress signal could be a trap. The crew initially decide to "wipe" their "logs" (erasing the acknowledgement of a distress signal). However, the crewmember James Holden (Steven Strait) "logs" the response with the company (who own the Canterbury and manage its ice mining activities), and following company policy, the Canterbury must legally respond to the distress signal.

This debate between the crew is rhetorically framed: what should *one* do in this circumstance? What is the *right* thing to do, versus what is the *soundest* thing to do?[90] That is, while it may be the right thing to attempt to give assistance to those potentially in need, it may not be sound: this action may endanger others. The Canterbury's response to the signal is both the catalyst for other debates surrounding ethically just or unjust actions and for the development of political events in the fictional world. The spaceship as chronotope in space opera SF can be compared to other televisual chronotopes, as "in most series, a particular setting or institution forms a show's centre of gravity, structuring the world it engenders."[91] Spaceships in space opera SF, as is the case with *The Expanse*, forms the show's centre of gravity.

The series has multiple "gravitational centres" that are correlated with specifically determined chronotopes. The central spaceship of the show, the "Rocinante," houses the central protagonists of the series. Before the Canterbury is ambushed, some of the crew members – including James Holden, Naomi Nagata (Dominique Tipper), Amos Burton (Wes Chatham), and Alex Kamal (Cas Anvar) – take a shuttle and explore the stranded ship, the Scopuli. Following this excursion, the Canterbury is attacked and destroyed. As this ship was using "stealth technology," the shuttle crew assume that the attack must have been committed by a technologically sophisticated Mars. James Holden records a video stating that the MCR attacked the Canterbury, and soon after the crew is arrested by the MCR (S1:E2).

While the MCR is interrogating the shuttle crew on a Martian ship (the Donnager), it is attacked by a still unknown force (the same group that destroyed the Canterbury). The shuttle crew, as lone survivors of the initial attack, are then led to another ship so they can report what they have witnessed to the MCR (S1:E3). This other ship (the MCR's Tachi) is renamed the "Rocinante" by the survivors. Henceforth (from S1:E4 onwards), the Rocinante's crew is presented as *The Expanse*'s primary cast that the audience follows over the duration of the series. In other words, the Rocinante is one of the chronotopic figures that "forms the shows centre of gravity."[92]

The spaceship is a chronotopic figure that is present in the majority of televisual space opera SF programmes. The ship-as-character and the ensemble of characters that compose a ship's crew appears to be an intertextual reference point for televisual space opera in general. As Romana Fernandez argues: "the chronotope packs a set of signifiers into a very little discursive space by drawing on a subconscious set of signs."[93] Numerous signifiers are "packed into" the spaceship as figure. Here we can see how chronotopes like the spaceship refer to generic systems of reference that mobilize other works,[94] and the "rules,

90 "Soundness" here refers to the expression "that is a sound plan," or "this is a sound proposal." The verb denotes a good quality that is predicated on pragmatic criteria: that is, a "plan" or "proposal" is sound in a contextual sense. The example from *The Expanse* ("I don't want to be killed by pirates"), when generalized, could be interpreted as: "to not put my life at risk is a sound idea" (following a general logic of self-preservation). Of course, a "sound action" could contradict moral principles or ethical conceptions of action (e.g. "I *should* help, but I don't want to die").

91 Tischleder, "Thickening Seriality," 121. Ramona Fernandez emphasizes this point when she discusses the spaceship as chronotope in *Star Trek*: "once we arrive on the Enterprise's bridge, the topos we have entered into is quite distinct; we know we are in deep space and are charged to go "where no man has gone before"" (Fernandez, "Somatope," 1124).

92 Tischleder, "Thickening Seriality," 121.

93 Fernandez, "Somatope," 1123.

94 Bourdieu, "Stanley Cavell-Pour une Esthétique;" and Laugier, "Popular Cultures, Ordinary Criticism," 1004.

codes, and figures" that constitute regional (generic) representations of the world.[95] The spaceship chronotope fleshes out time "as the serial world expands spatially."[96]

But the spaceship, while significant, is not the only space operatic chronotope that is utilized within *The Expanse's* storytelling. One of the other gravitational centres of the series fiction is the space station. Again, the space station and its variations (e.g. the space port) is a chronotope that is often present in space opera SF narratives, from the "array" of interconnected superweapons in the *Halo* franchise to *The Expanse's* Ceres Station.[97] Like certain spaceships within the series fiction, particular space stations are localities that make the relations between events artistically visible. They are spatiotemporal nexuses that are "built and remade imaginatively over time."[98] That is, these sites for action are affected by the temporal advancement of the plot. As "cities in the sky," space stations are implicated in political events to the same degree spaceships are in *The Expanse*.[99] Ceres is one of the major settlements in the "belt": it is a home for millions of Belters. The station is built into the interior of a dwarf planet, Ceres 1 (the largest asteroid in the system). In the fiction's speculative future, those who live in the belt belong to a solar multitude.[100] The Belters are those persons who are born "off-world" in newly fabricated environs like Ceres Station. The term "world" in "off-world" refers to Earth or the partially terraformed Mars, while the term "Belter" refers to those literally from or "of" the "belt" (the asteroid belt).[101]

Ceres, a spatiotemporal extension of the home-world, is also policed and governed as such. Detective Josephus "Joe" Miller (Thomas Jane), his partner Dimitri Havelock (Jay Hernandez) and his colleague Octavia Muss (Athena Karkanis) attempt to police Ceres: investigating an act of water theft (S1:E2); preventing racist (planetist?) violence against a Martian (S1:E3); attempting to control and calm agitating Belters (S1:E3). Again, we can see how distinct chronotopes (spaceship and space station) are interrelated through the temporal development of the fictional political events: the destruction of the ice-mining vessel (predicated on James Holden doing the right thing – responding to the distress signal) agitates a political matter (water rationing on Ceres), leading to the new political events and new ethical challenges for the show's characters.[102]

Concurrent with the attack on the Canterbury, Joe Miller is given a "side-job" by his employers (Star Helix) to look for a missing woman, Julie Mao (Florence Faivre).[103] Julie Mao was the lone survivor of an incident on the Scopuli, the seemingly derelict ship the Canterbury crew responded to in S1:E1. The Mao investigation and his police duties brought Miller into contact with the OPA insurgency leader on Ceres, Anderson Dawes (Jared Harris). In their numerous conversations, Dawes attempts to convince Miller to join the OPA, to join their political insurgency. In each conversation, Miller expresses scepticism towards

95 Garcia, *Form and Object*, 264–6.

96 Tischleder, "Thickening Seriality," 121.

97 While Isto is not specifically concerned with space opera SF in his critical discussion of "Big Dumb Objects" (the BDO) in SF, many of the space stations represented in space opera narratives are incredibly large in scale. See Isto, "Big Dumb Objects;" and see also Westfahl, "Space Opera."

98 Tischleder, "Thickening Seriality," 121.

99 For an extended discussion on the space station as a community, see Westfahl, *Islands*, 92–103.

100 As Bellamy and O'Brien emphasize, the Belters are presented as an exploitable source of labour-power by the two competing superpowers, the UN and the MCR. See Bellamy and O'Brien, "Solar Accumulation."

101 "Terraforming" refers generally to radical geo-engineering projects that attempt to re-form an ecological environment. Usually, in SF, an environment (e.g. a different planet with its unique ecology) is modified and transformed through geo-engineering projects so humans can live as they did on Earth. For a critical discussion of terraforming in SF, see Pak, *Terraforming*.

102 The connection between James Holden's ethical decision to report the distress signal and political tension is made clear throughout the series. His video claiming that Mars destroyed the Canterbury was somehow picked up and was rebroadcasted throughout the interstellar world. "Remember the Cant" became an OPA slogan: remember what the political powers (the UM and the MCR) could do to us Belters.

103 It should be noted that while Ceres is officially "governed" by the UN, its police force (Star Helix) is a private corporation: it is not a neutral faction within the series fiction. It should also be noted that these two narrative concerns – the search for Julie Mao and the investigation into who destroyed the Canterbury – is developed over two seasons (S1:E1 to S2:E5) and are contained within a singular story arc that ends with the death of Joe Miller.

Dawes' plans: "a Ceres for Belters, run by Belters" (S1:E5). This scepticism is predicated on a generally anti-revolutionary sentiment. As James claimed, "Earth and Mars have been stepping on the necks of the Belters ... for over a hundred years" (S1:E3). OPA radicalism has not evidently improved the situation for Belters in this time. More specifically, Miller is sceptical of Dawes' leadership. Dawes' plan for Ceres involves him being the leader of this new Ceres. It does not seem clear to Miller that Dawes would create a Ceres that is ran for Belters, by the Belters. Miller's reluctance to join the OPA here is not at the same time a denial of the injustices of the UN and the MCR.[104]

The space station chronotope in *The Expanse* is comparable to *The Wire's* Baltimore here: "*The Wire's* Baltimore evolves as an *urban chronotope* by virtue of a spatial dramaturgy that focuses on a particular institution or social network."[105] The spatial dramaturgy of the city – the potential for ethical interactivity between citizens, things, organizations, and institutions is figuratively extended into outer space, as an "out there" displacement of the human drama of Earth-bound cities. Here we see the introduction of another significant chronotope: the *home-world*. The term "off-world" appears in much space opera SF, including *The Expanse*. The extension of the home-world and its population into outer space may lead to a transformation of the human condition, where humanity is subjected to affectations "wrought by some aspect of time."[106] This in the series leads to the formation of differentiated conceptions of "we, ourselves" that are differentiated from each other (the Belters are not Earthers, the Martians are not of Earth, The Martians differ still from the Belters). I will return to this political aspect of the home-world chronotope and its representation within *The Expanse* in the next section.

These distinct chronotopes relate to each other in the fictional world: one travels to a space station via a spaceship; space stations are fabricated environments that are spatial extensions of the home-world (Earth); spaceships are mobile localities (they house a crew – an ensemble of characters). These weaving and overlapping chronotopes constitute what Glen Creeber terms a "complicated world."[107] This complicated world is communicated not only through the use of distinct chronotopic figures, but through the *dialogically refractive* medium of televisual drama. For Roberta Pearson, television drama (including space opera SF) "debates rather than reproduces a culture's dominant assumptions."[108] The debate-oriented address that is utilized by televisual dramas like *The Expanse* is dialogic in Bakhtin's sense. For Bakhtin, to participate in a dialogue means "to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree" and so on.[109] Real speakers (actual persons) who engage in such communication "enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium."[110]

This concept of entering a "world symposium" could be applied to contemporary media, including television. As Newcomb and Hirsh claim, television is a *cultural forum* (i.e. an element within the Bakhtinian world symposium) where conflicting perspectives and opinions are debated, between programmes and within a programme's content (and by extension within the minds of the audience):

> The conflicts we see in television drama, embedded in familiar and nonthreatening frames, are conflicts ongoing in ... social experience and cultural history. In a few cases we might see strong perspectives that argue for the absolute correctness of one point of view or another. But for the most part the rhetoric of television drama is the rhetoric of discussion.[111]

Sandra Laugier makes a similar argument concerning the dialogic quality of television: "the success of [television drama] series comes from the fact that they are polyphonic. They contain a plurality of singular

104 Even here, these points are *debated*: Miller's scepticism towards Dawes introduces debate through the introduction of opposing views.
105 Tischleder, "Thickening Seriality," 121. My Emphasis.
106 Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 33.
107 Creeber, *Serial Television*, 4.
108 Pearson, "Serialized Ideology," 213.
109 Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 293.
110 Ibid.
111 Newcomb and Hirsch, "Cultural Forum," 566.

expressions, stage arguments and debates, and are permeated by a moral atmosphere."[112] The debate-oriented quality of televisual drama concerns the dialogic polyphony of the characters. The characters of *The Expanse* hold different opinions about *and* possess differentiated perspectives towards the unfolding events that characterize their world (*qua* the unfolding narrative the audience is following). The characters of televisual drama series are "*adorned with polemic, filled with struggle*."[113] Televisual drama's dialogic context is refractive rather than reflective. Pearson argues that the problem with presupposing a direct (reflective) connection between text and world (science fictional extrapolation and empirical reality) is that such presuppositions "fail to take into account the ways in which the specific characteristics of a fictional text can *refract* rather than directly reflect dominant assumptions."[114] Fictional extrapolation transforms the situations, events, and concerns that a series is commenting on. If *The Expanse* is concerned with "world-systems" in Bellamy and O'Brien's sense, then such a concern is refractive and dialogic and is not strictly reflecting the existing world-system.[115]

The dialogically rhetorical mode of *The Expanse* becomes clear when one moves from the geopolitical – or solar-political – level towards the actions of persons and the debated justifications of their actions.[116] In other words, the "forum" (symposium-like) quality of the series becomes more apparent when political matters are connected to *ethical* agency, as the characters (actors within the developing drama) personal "moral powers"[117] develop alongside the development of political events, through literal and diegetic time. As argued above, the dialogic presentation of the political and ethical conjunction mobilizes particular chronotopic figures. This argument can be illustrated through reference to a particular event and its wider context within *The Expanse*: the destruction of Anderson Station.

As lone survivors of the Canterbury ambush, the Rocinante's crew visit an OPA advocate Frederick "Fred" Lucius Johnson (Chad L. Coleman). Fred Johnson is known in the belt as "the butcher of Anderson Station." Eleven years before the events of the series, an OPA insurgency took control of a mining facility, Anderson Station. They initiated a labour strike on the station, in response to the company denying that there were health issues caused by low oxygen concentrations in the station's air supply. This station, owned by a private company (Anderson-Hyosung Cooperative Industries Group), branded the striking Belters terrorists and requested UN military support to suppress the strike. A group of military ships, under the command of Fred Johnson, destroyed the station, killing activists and civilians alike. The striking Belters and insurgents attempted to surrender, but Johnson was not informed of the surrender. Johnson resigned from his UN position following the incident.

This event is conveyed to the television audience through flashbacks during S1:E5, "Back to the Butcher." The representation of this event utilizes particular chronotopic figures (the spaceship, the space station) to conjoin the ethical and the political within a determinate context (militaristic suppression of a miner's strike). The event becomes more interesting when connected to other scenes, events, characters, and figurative chronotopes. Much screen time in the series is devoted to the actions and life of the U.N deputy undersecretary – a high ranking official in Earth's government – Chrisjen Avasarala (Shohreh Aghdashloo). In S1:E1, she is depicted torturing an OPA agent, using Earth's gravity as a weapon, even though this is apparently a "disavowed" interrogation technique (S1:E2). She is frequently contrasted to other characters, including Fred Johnson. When she betrays her friend, Earth's diplomat to Mars, he claims that she "will do *anything* to win" (S1:E3). In another episode, when pressuring an ex-U.N "intel desk"

112 Laugier, "Popular Culture, Ordinary Criticism," 1007.

113 Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 32. My emphasis.

114 Ibid.

115 Bellamy and O'Brien, "Solar Accumulation." This is not to say that Bellamy and O'Brien are arguing that the series operates on a world-systems theoretical framework. The argument here is that the (real) world-system is refracted (or the traces of such a system is mediated) by the series, and such a refraction can be inferred from a reading of the extant imaginary story-world content.

116 See Dolan, "Science Fiction as Moral Allegory" for a discussion of the connection between science fictional forms of representation and ethics broadly conceived.

117 Carroll, "Moral Understanding," 141.

employee for a favour, he claims that he stopped working for "intel" as he "could no longer tell anymore if [he] was still working for the good guys" (S1:E6). Throughout the first and second season, Avasarala decries an "Earth must come first" rhetoric. This is echoed by other high-ranking government officials (see S2:E3).

Fred Johnson was acting within this rhetorical space: claiming Anderson Station by force, defeating the OPA insurgents and striking Belters, because "Earth comes first." But as a first-hand witness to the consequences following from this type of rhetoric (Avasarala's political activity), Fred decided to walk away, resigning from service. In this regard, he is also compared to another ex-UN military figure James Holden. This initially comes up during the MCR's interrogation of the Canterbury survivors. James claims that he left the UN military because "Earth and Mars have been stepping on the necks of the Belters … for over a hundred years, and [he] didn't want to be the boot" (S1:E3). Throughout the series, James struggles with the notion of taking another life. He struggles to kill a UN spy that attempted to kill him and his crew – the crew of the Rocinante (see S1:E10).

James is presented as, according to the character Amos Burton, "the closest thing to righteousness out here" (S2:E3). This "righteousness" derives from the notion that James is *principled*, or, at least he is presented as always wanting to do the *right* thing. Fred Johnson is also depicted, *despite* the Anderson Station incident in S1:E5, as a principled ("moral") man. In S2:E2, Avasarala is questioning the ex-Admiral of the UN Navy about Fred Johnson. This is where the audience learns that the UN were jamming Anderson Station's communications, and Johnson ordered a strike on a station without information. The ex-Admiral claims that Johnson "is an honourable man who held onto his soul" (S2:E2). This presentation of Fred Johnson is itself dialogic, as Bakhtin writes: "there is neither a first nor a last world and there are no limits to the dialogic context … the dialogue of the past centuries can never be stable …."[118] The "forgotten contextual meanings" of an event could be rediscovered and rearticulated at any moment.[119] Johnson's actions are positioned polyphonically, as contestable, as a multifaceted argument to be debated.

Johnson committed an action that, at the time, he thought was justified. Later, this action was deemed to be unethical and problematic. Johnson *himself* decided this was the case: politically, this was perceived as an act of patriotic duty (coded as "right") by Earth's government and was seen as a brutally authoritarian act (coded as "wrong") by those in the belt. Like Johnson, James left the UN military as he did not want to be the "boot" – the enforcer of authoritarian political practices. Acting as the "boot" (i.e. Fred's actions at Anderson station; Avasarala's political gameplaying) in the series sometimes leads to further OPA's political resistance and insurgent activities.[120]

The show poses ethical and political questions that it does not answer. For instance: are all military acts of war that involve civilian casualties unjust and unethical? Should one join insurgent political causes in the name of political independence? These questions are posed through the presentation of different *arguments*: for and against military intervention; for and against insurrectionary insurgency. Such arguments are, in the Bakhtinian sense, dialogic. Different characters signify and embody different perspectives, orientations, and beliefs. Through character relations and interactions, debates are enacted within the televisual-dramatic medium. In these representative examples, political issues and their development are conjoined to the ethical expressions of individual characters. The characters of the series are situated in relation to specific chronotopes that are characteristic of space opera SF television: the spaceship, the space station, the home-world.

Bellamy and O'Brien's claim that *The Expanse* "reflects and inverts ecological limits on contemporary political possibilities" could be modified for the analytical framework proposed here: the series *refracts and debates* the ecological limits that constrain contemporary political possibilities.[121] Bellamy and O'Brien also

118 Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 170.

119 Ibid.

120 In the series, it is not just the UN (Earth) acting as the "boot" (enforcing an authoritarian us–them relation to the Belters). In S1:E6, we see Martian marines shake down two Belters (the Belter ships "transponder" – comparable to a driver's licence – was expired). The Martian marines in this scene justify their unempathetic treatment of the Belters through recourse to the idea that the OPA are taking credit for the destruction of a Martian warship.

121 Bellamy and O'Brien, "Solar Accumulation," 526.

state that there is a "political unconscious" of *The Expanse*.[122] As I have tried to illustrate in this section, there are refractively dialogic rhetorics – conscious and unconscious – that use the "cultural forum" of televisual representation to contrast conflicting perspectives on events and actions.[123] In the above examples, we see contrasting characters (e.g. Fred Johnson and Chrisjen Avasarala; Joe Miller and Anderson Dawes) express conflicting arguments that are constitutive of a debate-oriented dialogue. These arguments are not ultimately resolved: the "persistence" of dialogic refractivity follows, for Bakhtin, from the impossibility of absolutely sealing off a dialogue, drawing a dialogue to a final close.[124]

One can infer from the above discussion that the particular chronotopes in *The Expanse* are not static figures: they acquire determinations through their contextualization within the fictional world. For instance, not every spaceship is just a spaceship: there are specific spaceships with specifically determined crews. The crew of the Rocinante is a determined "we"; there is a "we *of* the Rocinante." Dialogically, an individual person is not alone; there are *individuals*. There are smaller we's and larger we's presented in the series: from ship crews to the populations of space stations, to interstellar nation states (i.e. the UN and the MCR) and Tristan Garcia even argues that an individual, in some capacity, is a "we."[125]

Below, I argue that the series dialogically refracts different conceptions of what Garcia in *We Ourselves* defines as "the grounds of we": the differing "concentric circles" that contain or position individuals within "we" groupings (different senses of belonging to a "we").[126] The fictional representation of the "concentric circles" of we, the more or less visible transparencies of we, are also *chronotopic*. We's in *The Expanse* are also specific conjunctions of the ethical and the political, as some we's in the series are more or less elastic (inclusive) than other we's. In other words, some we's are represented as more chronotopically *extensive* than others.

4 We-representations and the elasticity of we-conceptions in *The Expanse*

Above, I attempted to illustrate how personal action (ethical agency) was represented within *The Expanse* as conjoined with the political: there is not one without the other. I also argued that these representations are refractive and dialogical: the combination of serialized representations construct a fictional debate about ethics and politics. This series mobilizes the rules, codes, and figures of space opera SF. The series utilizes the "cinematic mode of address" (the medium affordances of television), in the sense that the generic play of "signs and figures" in the series are understood to be "cinematic" or, better yet, *dramatic*.[127] This dramatic mode of address is dialogic in tone and orientation and uses the contrasting perspectives and opinions of characters to refractively debate "social and cultural issues."[128]

One of the most represented "debates" in *The Expanse* is the status of what Tristan Garica in *We Ourselves* terms the *differing conceptions of we*. There are numerous conflicting "we's" in *The Expanse*: Earth, Mars, the Belters, the OPA, and so on. Each of these we's is *internally* divided (for instance, the different competing factions within the OPA). A we for Garcia is, first and foremost, an imperfect and

122 Ibid., 518. The "political unconscious" is a Jamesonian concept that designates the alleged implicit political aspect of an artwork. This aspect or dynamic is not necessarily explicit: the argument is that all texts have an inherent political aspect, or, that political interpretation of any text should be the primary form of interpretation. See Jameson, *Political Unconscious*.

123 Newcomb and Hirsch, "Cultural Forum," 566.

124 Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 170. For an extended discussion of "dialectics of persistence" (i.e. the persistence of irresolvable antinomies – here conceived as poles within a dialogic debate), see Cogburn, *Garcian Meditations*.

125 Garcia writes that "the I can also be a we. I am certainly many [...] I'm not the only me in me" (*We Ourselves*, 31). The "I" is not *only* an externally assigned singularity (or a self-conceived singularity). It is also a dialogic population of differing "I's" that "demands representation as the we within" (ibid).

126 Ibid., 85.

127 Allen, "Audience-Oriented Criticism," 88–9.

128 Pearson, "Serialized Ideology."

inadequate political concept ("no we is completely adequate in politics"), as "when it comes to we, there is neither justice nor political truth."[129] We is, for Garcia, the "subject of politics" in the first instance:

> The essence of political discourse lies in defining how we understand this 'we,' what our rights and legitimate claims are, and our conception of society as a whole. However, political discourse also requires us to negatively identify those who oppose us, the enemies whom we designate as 'you' and them' ... everyone who says 'we' speaks as the same person, which is to say that they *take on the being of a people* who speak that way.[130]

Garcia names numerous categories of "we": racial we's (we-whites, we-blacks, we-indigenous); class we's (we-proletariat, we-bourgeois); we's of gender, sex, and sexuality (we-women, we-men, we-straights, we-gays, we-nonbinaries); we's of political parties and social movements (the Communist Party, Nazism, LGBTQI activists).[131] These categories are internally divided, they are forms of visibility that are more or less transparent. The concept of "we" is not exhaustive, there is "not only one we."[132] Garcia poses that these "we's" are like "concentric" or "overlapping" circles that both intersect and resist one another, in the sense that one can belong to a "we-indigenous" and a "we-nonbinaries" at the same time. For conceptual reasons, Garcia argues that an intersectional model of we "doesn't quite do justice to the situation," as the concept of intersectionality focuses on systems of oppression, rather than the "ways in which identities are distributed to everyone *in general*."[133] Garcia argues that "the only possible model requires us to stack up we's on top of one another like a pile of transparencies."[134]

Of course, these transparencies (again, the different divisions and demarcations of "we"), are not all alike, as belonging to a political party is not synonymous with the being-determined by a racial or ethnic identity, being born into a rich or poor family. Garcia distinguishes between two different kinds of we: we's-of-ideas and we's-of-interest.[135] Garcia speaks of a we-of interest as to "refer to every we in which a particular subject is raised," a we that is "inherited."[136] We may also claim here that we's-of-interests follow from our pre-determined situatedness.[137] As Withy emphasizes, "we are thrown into dealing with a particular set of entities, into a particular life, and into a particular culture or tradition," we are in part determined by our situation.[138] But one is never *absolutely* determined by one's situatedness. Garcia's we-of-ideas is "characterised by a we that a subject is able to choose and that can be changed at will."[139] I could be a member of the Labour Party, the next day a Conservative. I follow, so to speak, these ideas. Importantly, for Garcia, "the dividing line is never fixed because there is no definitive border between absolute we's-of-interests and absolute we's-of-ideas."[140]

In space opera SF television (and other SF media), we see myriad forms of "we-representations," that is, fictional and allegorical ways of representing "we-groupings." In *The Expanse*, characters even talk about politics in terms of we. For instance, the recurring line "Earth must come first" (S2:E3). This can be

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129 Garcia, *We Ourselves*, 219, 223. It should be noted here that I will not engage with every aspect of Garcia's reconstruction of the "logic of we" (ibid). His account is complex, outlining a historical and conceptual genealogy of the concept. In this article, I simply want to utilize the concept to argue that SF (specifically space opera) modes of representation allegorise "we-formations," as to represent the elastic contingency of we-conceptions. In some cases, representations challenge said beliefs about we-categories (e.g. illustrate the arbitrariness of racial discrimination, the economic inequalities between core and periphery – developed and developing world, and so on).

130 Ibid., 6. Emphasis in original.

131 In "Book I: Transparencies" of *We Ourselves*, Garcia reconstructs a brief but dense history of these particular forms of we (5–30). In "Book II: Constraints," Garcia posits that there are "grounds of we" (105–48); that are, in effect, "disconnected transparencies" that function "as a means of visualising our conception of our identities" (148).

132 Ibid., 6.

133 Ibid., 64. Emphasis in original.

134 Ibid.

135 Ibid., 42–3.

136 Ibid., 42.

137 Withy, "Situation and Limitation," 65.

138 Ibid.

139 Garcia, *We Ourselves*, 43.

140 Ibid.

translated as *we* come first, us before them. The UN in this sense is also a kind of we – a militarized us-grouping. The UN, supposedly, defends the interests of Earth and its citizens. The same relationship connects the MCR, *vis-à-vis* the Martian military, to the interests of Martians, the people of Mars. One could interpret the Martians, "Earthers," and the Belters as we's-of-interests.[141] However, Earth, Mars, and the Belters are simultaneously ideas: Earth, for instance, is a unity of different national we's, racial we's, social and economic (i.e. class) we's.

In *The Expanse*'s story world, each of these "national" (or planetary?) we's are "contained" by another transparency: we, *humans*. "Earthers" are humans, Martians are humans (ex-Earther's), and finally, Belters are also humans. Through refractive allegorical representation, the possible *elasticities* of we-belonging can be conceptualized. The notion of elasticity implies a "to and fro," the stretching of a rubber band and its recoil. In this section, I will focus on the Belters, as the Belters are in some sense one of the most elastic we's within the series (they are presented as a "we-of-ideas"), and in another sense, the Belters still persist as a "we-of-interests."

Arguably, the Belters are the most peculiar we, as the Belters are a "kind of we" that "inextricably intertwines an inherited ethnic identity with a constructed political identity."[142] The we of the Belters is represented as *more elastic* than other we's. By elastic, I literally mean that the Belter we (both in the sense of "interests" and "ideas') can be stretched further before it collapses and destabilizes.[143] Like an elastic band, one can stretch the "dividing line" between their we-of-interest and their we-of-ideas. Eventually, however, this we will "snap" – interests and ideas only stretch so far before they become something completely different. Put another way, the Belters are presented as a more *inclusive* we. In this way, the fiction representation of the Belters (in Seasons 1 and 2, at least) *refracts* the elasticity of our (non-fictional) senses of we-belonging.

To the degree that the Belters possess an "ethnic" identity that is rooted in the collective interest of a multitude, their bodies are "marked" by difference. Put another way, bodies in *The Expanse* are chronotopic.[144] Again, the tension between the senses of we (of interests and of ideas) can be seen in how Joe Miller relates to his Belter identity. In a bar scene, an OPA radical notes that Miller's body is marked physiologically as a Belter body: "this one, he has spurs at the top of his spine where the bones didn't fuse right. He got that cheap bone density juice when he was a child" (S1:E1). The implication in this scene is that because Joe Miller is a Belter (he is physiologically marked as such), he is *like* the OPA radical. Miller refuses this identification: one we (being a Belter) is not synonymous with another we-identification (OPA's we-of-ideas). In the series, the Belters (we-of-interests) never possess political agency as such: the OPA acts in the name of the Belters – in an analogous way as the UN acts in the name of Earth and its citizens.

However, Miller *does* see himself as belonging to the Belter-we. In the same bar scene, he is describing the physiological appearance of another Belter to another police officer, an Earth native:

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141 These national-planetary states are perhaps allegories for the national we's that Garcia characterizes as "enormous geopolitical or geostrategic we's that flatten all other identities" (*We Ourselves*, 19). The cold war allegory in *The Expanse* can be seen as an extension of the notion of competing geostrategic we's: "perhaps the Cold War was nothing more than the passage from disjunction ("or") to a stable conjunction ("and"). This conjunction indicates a simultaneous coexistence and irreducible difference" (Ibid). Of course, in *The Expanse*, this cold war "heats up" gradually, over (diegetic and literal) time.

142 Ibid. 48.

143 My usage of the term elasticity here is less technically precise than van Tuinen's and is used primarily as a metaphor for the inclusiveness of we's-of-interest and we's-of-ideas (see "Elasticity and Plasticity"). Elasticity, following Garcia, is an *intensive* concept in this application: a we-grouping is *more or less inclusive*, can be stretched more or less before destabilization. The Garcian concept of intensity is present in both *Form and Object* and *The Life Intense*. For a critical discussion of Garcia's usage of the concept, see Cogburn et al., "Translators' Introduction," xiv–xx.

144 Fernandez ascribes the body-as-chronotope a specific conceptual place: "representations of the body are increasingly central to contemporary narrative … we take "soma" to signify "the body of an organism," and "tope" to signify "place." Hence, the body place names the somatope" ("Somatope," 1124). But *The Expanse* is not a "somatopic" narrative in Fernandez's sense: it not a central chronotopic category like the spaceship or the space station.

> [See that], skin hanging off his bones. You get that red eyes, the shakes: you get that when your body rejects the growth hormones … tremors man, that's from growing up in LG [low gravity]. Muscles don't develop right. (S1:E1)

The idea here is that, as he is from Ceres (from the belt), Miller can identify these physiological traits even if some individuals attempt to mask these signifiers of difference. This entire discussion follows from a conversation between Miller and his partner (Dimitri Havelock) where Miller emphasizes that Havelock even "dresses like an "Earther"" (S1:E1). These physiological aspects are also connected to economic dynamics, as in "he [Miller] got that cheap bone density juice." This could be understood as "Miller is from a lower-class we." Bellamy and O'Brien claim with some accuracy that the Belters stand in as an allegory for the proletarianized workers of our global periphery.[145] This transparency is "stacked on top of other" kinds (ethnic, physiological, so on). If Garcia is correct in claiming that "rebellion arises from an inherited we that has been a target of discrimination," then the Belters are not *just* an allegorical proletariat.[146]

The Belter tension between the poles of the different conceptions of we – of interests and ideas – can be seen through Havelock's enthusiasm for Belter culture. In S1:E3, Havelock is attempting to learn Belter language. As well as physiological markings, the Belters are linguistically marked: they have their own language and distinct culture that is differentiated from "Earther" or Martian culture, they are *dialogically* differentiated. Later in the episode, Havelock is critically wounded by an OPA radical: his inconsistent and non-fluent use of Belter language (and body language) does nothing to prevent the OPA radical designating the "Earther" an enemy of their we-of-ideas. In S1:E5, in a scene where Miller visits Havelock in hospital (recovering from the OPA attack), Miller expresses his cynicism of Havelock's attempts: "you think this [Belter speech and expressive body language] is going to help you?" (S1:E5). For Miller, speaking a language and comprehending cultural expressions is *not* synonymous with the inheritance of a we-of-interests.

This is representationally ambiguous. On the one hand, Havelock's attempts at cultural integration illustrate that at least some aspect of the Belters we-of-interests can be conceived as a we-of-ideas. After all, both the Belters and "Earthers" are still *we-human*, even if the Belters cannot return to Earth (because of their inherited situatedness in different gravitational ecologies) or they have no current place on Mars.[147] One can possibly become a Belter, can situate themselves within Belter forms of life and culture. On the other hand, the we-Belters multitude is represented in the series as an interest group that one is born into. However, when this we-of-interests in the series is articulated in specifically political terms, the we-of-interests becomes what Garcia designates a "strategic we": the OPA *qua* we-of-ideas.[148] These kinds of we's (strategic) are "*partly* based on ethnicity," or other inherited we's – but not *exclusively* based on inherited kinds.[149]

One of the key spokespersons and agents of the OPA is none other than Fred Johnson, the "butcher of Anderson Station." After resigning from the UN (one conflicting form of we), he is recruited by Anderson Dawes and joins the OPA (another we). Evidently in the series, political groups are presented as elastic we's-of-ideas. Why would an Earther join the OPA, a political faction that (supposedly) expresses and engages in political actions that advance the Belters we-of-interests? Because in some sense, the idea of the OPA is not necessarily connected to the Belters we-of-interests, but to what Garcia calls the most extended we: the "we, everyone."[150] Garcia frames this democratic (broadly understood) politics of the "we, everyone," the maximal we-of-ideas, through the notion of counter-domination:

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145 Bellamy and O'Brien, "Solar Accumulation."

146 Garcia, *We Ourselves*, 48–9.

147 This is discussed for the first time in S1:E3 and is referred to again in Anderson Dawes conversation with Joe Miller in S1:E5: "[the] "Earthers" have a home, its time the Belters had one to." This notion of a "home for Belters" situates the chronotope "home-world" as interrelated to the chronotope "space station."

148 Garcia, *We Ourselves*, 49.

149 Ibid. My emphasis.

150 Ibid., 222.

> Domination is not a necessary constraint. We can always fight against it and try to create an idea of we without domination. Systems of domination themselves oblige us to oppose them with the idea of our shared emancipation.[151]

This obligation to oppose domination is perhaps rooted in an *ethical attitude*. While Garcia claims that there can be no just or true politics as such,[152] in *The Life Intense*, he argues that one can *act* ethically in general, as "ethics … is a question of ways and manners of doing things." Ethics for Garcia is "not concerned with content": ethics is *adverbial* (words that modifies or further determines the sense of a verb) and morality is *adjectival* (a word that modifies a noun, modifying information given by the noun).[153] As Garcia argues:

> Morality calls me to be just, worthy, and respectful. Ethics demands that I act *justly, worthily*, and *respectfully* what I am. We can exercise justice unjustly, and we can be good at doing bad, just as we can be bad at doing good … the value that people see in themselves either pertains to a way of doing things or to the contents of a thing they do.[154]

We can see this as applicable to the ethics of political acts in *The Expanse*. For instance, Chrisjen Avasarala's betrayal of her friends was unethical, but this unethical action was grounded in her moral principle that Earth (one we) comes first, before more local we's (her friends, family, and so on). James Holden struggles with taking a life based on the moral principle that murder is wrong, and this is also connected to an ethic of *acting mercifully*. Again, we see representations of politics as conjoined to the ethical capacities of characters. This intersection between political action, moral content, and ethical ways of doing is clear in Fred Johnson's rhetorical plea to the "system" (the galaxy and all the we's contained within it) in S1:E8:

> Many of you know me one way or another. I come before you today, not as a member of the OPA, thought I am proud to call myself one, but a citizen of the system. At this moment, the U.N.N [U.N Navy] Nathan Hale is headed for Tycho Station to arrest me. Because the U.N believes I am involved in the attacks on the Donnager. That is not true … None of us can change the things we've done, but we can all change what we do next. I've seen battle. I've taken many lives. I've been the oppressor and I know his mind. I now hear the drumbeats of war. It's the sounds of lies and the love of power and I cannot stand idly by. The Belters serve the inner planets for generations. Belters give, Earth and Mars take. Our language has changed, the things we care about have changed, even our bodies have changed. We look upon each other as different and we have grown to hate each other for that […] (S1:E8).

In this dialogue, the audience can detect the conflict between particular interests and extended ideas of we (proud to be OPA, speaking as a "citizen of the system," the "we, everyone"), ethical statements (we can't change our past but we can change our future), the politics of domination and counter-domination ("lies and the love of power," inequalities between the Belt, Earth, and Mars), the politics of difference and attempting to see something beyond that (cultural difference and hatred). Again, the dramatic mode of address is being used here rhetorically and dialogically to pose different questions within the "cultural forum of television."[155]

In the above examples, the Belters are represented as an elastic we. An elastic we is not a *totally inclusive* we, nor it is a *totally exclusive* we. One can intuit the elasticity of certain we-conceptions from the ethical and political actions of existentially situated characters within the fictional story world of the series. Each determined we in *The Expanse* is presented as both elastic and chronotopic: the development of the fictional we's in the series metamorphose through time and within space. They are also connected to certain localities (we *of* the Belt, we *of* Earth and so on) and not others. The particular we-representations in the series seem to refer back to Rose's modes of science fictional storytelling: the spatial and temporal forms of projecting the human–nonhuman semantic distinction.[156] But the literal presence of the nonhuman protomolecule in the fiction takes a backseat to the human drama of competing we-conceptions.

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151 Ibid. Garcia discusses domination and counter-domination at greater length in Book II of *We Ourselves* (186–212).
152 Ibid., 223.
153 Garcia, *The Life Intense*, 77.
154 Ibid.
155 Newcomb and Hirsch, "Cultural Forum," 566.
156 Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 32–3.

In *The Expanse*, the concern with the human–nonhuman binary is not just literal (encountering extra-terrestrial life): it is dialogically and metaphorically displaced onto humanity itself. This displacement can be comprehended through recourse to Rose's fourth heuristic category (the monstrous), in the sense that the human colonization of the interstellar world is presented as a "transforming agency" in which humankind is the "agent of his own metamorphosis."[157] This metamorphosis is the division of we-everybody (we-humans) into distinctly enormous geostrategic we's.[158] It is also not necessarily negative or positive.[159]

Approaching the horizon of a we-everyone is a particular journey that starts from one's situatedness (we's-of-interests) and develops into an extensive project of counter-domination, through the articulation of a new we-of-ideas. This, for Garcia, does not entail the end of we: the approach towards any horizon will lead to a secondary movement towards an even newer horizon; from one conception of we-everyone to a new conception. This is because, for Garcia, we can never totally free ourselves from domination: "a political idea is a reasoned negotiation that involves exchanging a little less domination for a few more effects of domination."[160]

The Expanse represents the varying struggles of different overlapping we's, domination versus counter-domination. Again, as argued above, politics and ethics are represented as conjoined. While ethics and politics are not identical, one can *act* ethically within the political space. One can also act in a seemingly unjust way, based on sound and defensible moral principles (including the Avasarala's politicking). *The Expanse* refracts our contemporary debates concerning the elasticity of our we's, and the extent to which we should defend our we's against opposing we's. Arguably, this idea of elastic inclusivity (not totally inclusive, not totally exclusive) may force us to draw new conclusions from our "previous beliefs" about our we's-of-interest and we's-of-ideas, by "forcing us" to take up a new perspective on the open dialogic book that is the *idea* of we-belonging.[161] In this sense, watching *The Expanse* arguably involves an empathetic comprehension of the characters' situated struggles within and against various conceptions of we.[162] If the series can be considered a logical extension of reality or a realistic extrapolation from our empirical present, this extension includes the contemporaneity of our we-struggles as one of its extrapolative elements.

5 Conclusion

In this article, I attempted to illustrate how ethics and politics in *The Expanse* represent political matters and ethical agency *together*. I situated the series within its space operatic generic system of reference. I argued that the generic elements of space opera are well suited to televisual adaptation, specifically televisual forms of representation that utilize cinematic modes of address. I then used examples from *The Expanse* to illustrate how ethics and politics is represented as conjoined. Such representations were posited as both chronotopic and dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense. Finally, I argued that the notion of the competing and overlapping politics of "we" is what is most predominantly represented within the series. Through empathetic engagement with the fictional characters of televisual drama, we may come to see the dividing line between we's-of-interest and we's-of-ideas as *more elastic and flexible*. If the Belters are a

157 Ibid., 33.

158 Garcia, *We Ourselves*, 19.

159 Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 33.

160 Garcia, *We Ourselves*, 223.

161 Connolly and Haydar, "Narrative Art and Moral Knowledge," 121. See also Carroll, *Mass Art*; and Carroll, "Moral Understanding."

162 Watching *The Expanse* (or another televisual drama) is empathetic in the sense that one may attempt to empathize with a character's situation, their fictional situatedness. Garcia, in an interview with Sandra Laugier, contrasts empathetic understanding with compassion: "compassion consists in pretending to share someone else's suffering ... ultimately, you suffer alone; we should not pretend to commune in pain." See https://bombmagazine.org/articles/tristan-garcia/ (accessed 30 January 2021).

generalized refractive allegory for the marginalized, then perhaps by empathizing with fictional representations of the marginal, we can more vividly comprehend empirically marginal "we's."

However, this also holds true for those who apparently exploit the Belters. There are reasoned arguments presented within *The Expanse* for why, "Earth must come first." Perhaps granting the OPA more political power within the "system" (the belt specifically) will lead to new and undesirable domination-effects. The "story" of emancipation and domination is not a linear one: it is *dialogic*.[163] It is here where one could argue that *The Expanse* represents a democratic form of politics, understood as an ongoing dialogue *about* domination and counter-domination. This applies to both represented content *and* to the forms of representation, as for Mark Rose, "form is finally inseparable from content."[164]

Donald Hassler and Clyde Wilcox, in their introduction to their edited volume *Political Science Fiction*, claim that "the art of fiction and the art of data collecting and exposition in political science seem to us to contain remarkable affinities."[165] From the perspective of a politics of we, fiction can be subjected to the same criticisms Garcia makes of political science: "political science cannot provide the image that we seek because [its] understanding of the social world cannot escape the lofty viewpoint of the third person plural [...]."[166] The issue with this for Garcia is that "this approach always sees "we" as if it was always a "*them*."[167] Garcia aims to give a "causal account of the reasons that underlie the feeling of belonging to a we."[168] Political science fiction series like *The Expanse* cannot do this: they create and represent hypothetical fictional we's that an audience will *always* see as a them – these characters are not *us*. But this does not mean engaging with space opera SF series like *The Expanse* is "a waste of time." Like conducting scientific experiments, when one watches televisual dramas, one can think through the idea of being more elastic without negating the reality of one's situatedness.

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163 Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*; *Dialogic Imagination*.

164 Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 27.

165 Hassler and Wilcox, "Introduction," 2.

166 Garcia, *We Ourselves*, 49.

167 Ibid. My emphasis.

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