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The Infinite and the Sublime in *The Expanse*

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It made a damning comment as it looked over Fred Johnson's actions against the Anderson Station civilians ("Back to the Butcher"). It stood over Holden's shoulder as he talked with his mother by the campfire and she gifted him a copy of *Don Quixote* ("New Terra"). And it strolled alongside every character that has donned a suit and ventured out of their craft to walk in space. One of the most important characters in *The Expanse* is not named in the credits. It cannot compete for our attention with Avasarala's Machiavellian cleverness, with Naomi's resourcefulness or even with Holden's dreamy hazel eyes. But this character is onscreen almost constantly. The fact is, it is on camera more than any character in the credits. It is the infinite.[1]

Chiaroscuro

The aesthetic techniques used in *The Expanse* are indicative of the infinite space that is an essential and ever-present character in the show. Even the claustrophobic condition of the Belters on Ceres, Ganymede, and Eros points to the infinite space outside. The design of the show keeps infinite space always present.

In the opening credits, the directors and art designers of *The Expanse* give us the setting of the story in a context of infinite space. Views of several planets—Earth, Mars, Saturn—are framed by black spaces that communicate that these huge objects are mere specks of activity in an endless darkness. The opening shot of Saturn might be the best example. The planet is offset in the camera frame—set to the left side as we look out over the famous rings of the planet. What then is the center of the camera's focus? The darkness beyond Saturn. The cinematography and set design of *The Expanse* make extensive use of *chiaroscuro* (ke-ah-ro-skoor-o)—a

The Expanse and Philosophy: So Far Out Into the Darkness, First Edition. Edited by Jeffery L. Nicholas.

famous artistic technique in the history of painting. The use of dark shadow, and the contrast of light and dark, create the illusion of volume in three dimensions on a canvas. If you have seen a painting (that is, not one of his many portraits) by Rembrandt or by Caravaggio, you have likely seen *chiaroscuro* used.

Of course, the aesthetics of the show are not an accident. *Chiaroscuro* was a technique developed in the seventeenth century. The many references to *Don Quixote* in *The Expanse* point to the same century. Season one, episode one is named "Dulcinea." Dulcinea is the love interest that the delusional Don Quixote de la Mancha idolizes in the story. Season one, episode seven is named "Windmills"—the monsters that the delusional Don Quixote fights on horseback. *Rocinante* is the name of Don Quixote's horse. And, if that were not enough, Holden's mother gifts him a copy of the novel in season four. All of these references bring our attention to the idea that Holden may be a deluded hero on a quest in a universe he does not understand.

However, they also link the show to a time when the human race first confronted the idea of infinite space—the seventeenth century.

Artistic techniques, like technology, forms of language or music, are expressive of the mind of the age from which they arise. The use of *chiaroscuro* in the show is compelling visually and situates the viewer in two times—the twenty-fourth century of *The Expanse* and seventeenth-century Europe. The technique was born of a time when the idea of the infinite space of the universe was working its way into the human imagination. *The Expanse* plays with the idea of infinity and makes it a theme and element in the thoughts and actions of the characters. A quick detour to the seventeenth century will help us understand this theme of the show better.

A New, Infinite (And Wonderful?) Universe

The first time the human race confronted the infinite spaces of the universe, it found itself at a loss to understand its place in that infinity. Galileo (1564–1642) had demonstrated the truth of the heliocentric model of the solar system. (Fun fact—Galileo also discovered one of the Belters' future homes, Ganymede.) The idea that points of light in the night sky were stars, like our sun, which were moving through massive spaces and were far, far away was discussed in the salons of France and the academies of England. In 1687, Isaac Newton (1642–1727) published the first unified mathematical model of the motions of all bodies moving through space. All of the scientific world celebrated. Newton had done it—found the mathematical key to everything! It would be more than 200 years before relativity theory would throw the Newtonian model into question.

Like the presence of the Ring System in *The Expanse*, Newton's model inspired enthusiasm about human possibilities and human enlightenment. Alexander Pope (1688–1744) caught the mood of the late seventeenth century well when he wrote, "Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night: God said, 'Let Newton be!' and all was light."[2] But did this new understanding of the universe have a dark side? Were we on a promontory looking at the beauty of nature newly understood and looking toward a human future full of wonderful possibility? Or were we on a precipice over an empty abyss into which we would fall?

The Abyss Looks Back (Nietzsche Warned You . . .)

What do you see when you look over *The Expanse*? Holden sees hope and the need to struggle for justice. Miller sees a quest to find the real Julie Mao. Avasarala sees nothing but the coming of an eventual existential threat to human life. Fred Johnson sees the possibility of redemption. The Mormons, the need for a journey to find God.

For Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), the infinite space discovered by the new physics of the seventeenth century was a terrifying emptiness—proof of the insignificance of human life and the need for faith in God. (He is in both Avasarala's camp and the Mormons, perhaps.) He writes, "For, after all, what is man in nature? A nothing compared to the infinite, a whole compared to the nothing, a middle point between all and nothing, infinitely remote from an understanding of the extremes; the end of things and their principles are unattainably hidden from him in impenetrable secrecy."[3] When you think about something infinitely large, like the universe, are human beings not a "nothing compared to the infinite"? And, when you think about the fact that the molecular, atomic, and subatomic world is infinitely small, are human beings not "a whole compared to the nothing, a middle point between all and nothing"?

Our place as rational creatures would seem to put us in a position of distinction in all of this infinity. But, "the end of things and their principles are unattainably hidden from [us] in impenetrable secrecy." Pascal believes that, despite our scientific achievements, reason cannot seem to see what the goal of life is, what the principles that govern human behavior are, or what the ultimate point of our actions is. For Pascal, science gave us power over the "middle" of things but no insight into the meaning of infinity. It is strange to think that we spend our lives reasoning about what is to be done, how we will prosper, how we will serve the community and our fellow human beings, but do not have rationally justified ends to order our actions.

Put another way, practical reasoning (the thinking we do when we are deciding to act) is both extremely difficult to do well and the most commonly successful activity engaged in by human beings. While the details of

the context in which we reason can be excruciating to master, and our own desires, prejudices, vanity, and other flaws can obscure the thing that we should do—somehow much practical reasoning gets done successfully.

For philosophers, the general formula is relatively simple. We analyze thinking, character, context, the moral ideas applied (rules, duties or virtues, for instance), the end pursued, and then we evaluate any consequences. What is startling to think about for the characters in *The Expanse* is that the formula is truncated, decapitated really—or at least missing a limb. "The end of things and their principles are unattainably hidden from [us] in impenetrable secrecy." In other words, despite our new scientific achievement, knowing whether our actions are right, wrong, foolish, or wise in this new universe of the seventeenth and twenty-fourth centuries is impossible.

Avasarala understands this problem. She is nobody's fool and wants to be wise. Her argument with Nancy Gao over the issue of whether to allow "a new gold rush" of humans into the Ring System shows her concern for the lack of knowledge and information surrounding any decision about the Ring. During their tense exchange, Avasarala warns that, like the Yukon before it, this gold rush will result in piles of body bags with "more fools ready to line up and take their place" ("New Terra"). This issue will eventually cost her the election to United Nations Secretary General—Gao's hopeful view of the possibilities inherent in the Ring will sway voters. The tragedy of Avasarala's political fortunes is that she will never know enough to make an informed decision on the meaning of the Ring System for human beings. She tries to be wise; yet, even as she recruits Holden to make the trip to New Terra, we can see Pascal shaking his head at the futility of it all. "*The ends are hidden in impenetrable secrecy . . .*"

What had changed in the universe for Pascal? Before Galileo and Newton, the prevailing understanding of the universe was that its purpose, the point of why anything existed at all, was so that human beings could live as rational beings who could find their way to God. We were the point. The universe was a small place centered on the earth and human life. It was a stage on which the drama of human life played out. God was understood to intervene directly at times in that drama. What is the point of life in Newton's universe? Pascal writes, "When I consider the short span of my life absorbed into the preceding and subsequent eternity, *memoria hospitis unius diei praetereuntis* [like the memory of a one-day guest (Wisdom 5:15)], the small space which I fill and even can see, swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing and which knows nothing of me, I am terrified, and surprised to find myself here rather than there, for there is no reason why it should be here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who put me here? On whose orders and on whose decision have this place and this time been allotted to me?"[4] For Pascal, this new sense of infinity makes everything we do and are seem random and capricious.

What is the point of an infinitely small human life in this infinitely large *Expanse*?

Is It *Large* Out Here? Or Is It Me?

Pascal's concerns can be seen as a kind of existential agoraphobia—a crisis of meaning brought on by infinitely wide-open spaces. In fairness to him, the problem is a deep and serious one—philosophically speaking. Miller, a child of the claustrophobic Ceres, has this agoraphobia written into his bones. It is not abstract, or philosophical, it is a concrete affliction that he feels. Yet, he still is able to overcome it to continue his quest to find the meaning of Julie's life and her death. This is one reason why he, like Holden, is a quest-hero in the series.

Miller's quest really begins when he is fired by Captain Shaddid ("Rock Bottom"). Before that moment he had been doing (in a somewhat shoddy way) his job. He then became intrigued by the mystery of Julie's disappearance, fell in love with the idea of her, and eventually found the object of his quest. Once he is fired, his decision to follow the investigation is his own. After searching Julie's apartment, he hangs up his hat—a symbolic removal of the superficial Earth culture he emulates and a return to his authentic Belter self—and he commits to his quest to find the real Julie. Before leaving, he brings Julie's necklace as a token with him (like a good quest-hero). Then, the show gives us the irony of a Belter who hates space buying a ticket for a voyage into the infinity outside.

On the transport to Eros, Miller has a conversation with a Mormon missionary who has joined the 100-year expedition on the ship that Fred Johnson is building for them (soon to be renamed the *Behemoth*). Miller asks him, "Nobody really knows what's out there . . . Doesn't that scare the shit out of you?" The missionary tells Miller that his faith is what sustains him in the face of the infinite unknown that he will confront on his journey. Miller responds, "You guys are gonna get on this big ship, ride out into the great beyond for 100 years. What happens when you get out there and there's nothing?" ("Salvage"). Pascal's confrontation with infinity occurs in his imagination. Miller has to literally step into it.

Miller's courage in overcoming his fear of space is a good metaphor for the way the characters of *The Expanse* address their situation in the void. Some sci-fi treats science as a kind of alchemy that can always be called on to decipher the unknown—problems are solved by mixing together just the right kind of particle and, like the fabled magical art that could turn lead into gold, return all that had been radically changed during the episode back to normal. (I'm looking at you, *Star Trek*.) *The Expanse* is different. It does not allow for neatly wrapped-up solutions. How could it? When the ends of things are hidden in impenetrable secrecy?

Problems in *The Expanse* are solved by negotiating with the unknown. We see this idea in Holden's series of negotiations with the mental projection of Miller. Holden is deliberating with an interstellar being that is itself unaware of the meaning of its own purpose, through a proxy that is generated by his own brain. That situation is, to say the least, complicated.

Before Miller is liberated from the protomolecule, he is driven by the purpose inscribed in it. Like the Katoa hybrid in the lab on Io who cries out to Jules-Pierre Mao that he "must finish the work" ("Triple Point"), Miller too feels driven to complete the protomolecule's work—"the case," as he calls it. He is focused on the protomolecule's immediate goal—a goal given to it (and him) by an extinct civilization and situated within an overall plan that he does not know or understand. Holden could be forgiven for thinking that this endeavor is pointless and inconceivable.

However, Holden and the characters of *The Expanse*, even though they are adrift in the infinity of space, do not give up or lay down and die in the face of a universe in which their lives are so small as to be insignificant. Why do they struggle against injustice? Against an alien threat? Against each other? Where do they find the source of motivation for their actions? Are they simply unaware that their lives and goals are insignificant in the way Pascal understands the universe? It is not simply that they stoically endure this sense of their smallness in the scheme of things. They do something else; they assert themselves. They stand up and demand that they be heard and recognized as dignified. Perhaps Captain Camina Drummer said it best on the bridge of the OPA's *Behemoth* as the ship entered the Gate, "We are Belters, nothing in the void is foreign to us. The place we go is the place we belong!" ("Intransigence").

Freedom and the Sublime in *The Expanse*

For some reason, the infinity of *The Expanse* attracts us. The confrontation with infinity brings us a certain kind of pleasure. We feel awe, wonder. What is it about this experience that draws us to it? The look and design of the show indulges us in an experience of the *sublime*.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) understood the power and importance of this experience. For Kant, the experience of the sublime is the experience of something formless, something without limit. It is the experience of reason's ability to understand being completely overwhelmed.[5] The design of *The Expanse* returns to *chiaroscuro* again and again as a way of tapping into this experience for the viewer. The cinematography attempts to take the inconceivable and represent it artistically.

Consider Holden's conversation on Earth with his mother in "New Terra." They sit together by a fire. She gifts him a copy of *Don Quixote*. During the entire scene, the fire lights the faces of both characters. However, the shot is framed so that the darkness behind each of them is prominent. We are left with the understanding that this conversation is unique and individual but situated in infinite space.

A particularly clever example of this technique is the use of the exterior on Ilus/New Terra (I do not want to take sides in that naming debate!). When you watch the characters move across the landscape, notice what

the director has done with the sky on Ilus (ok, I took sides). With few exceptions, the sky is an uninterrupted white—a white that is unbroken and infinite. It is a photonegative of *chiaroscuro* and produces the same effect. We are pointed back to the fact of infinity.

Kant ruminated on the significance of infinity, and the infinite space of the universe, for the meaning of human life. He understood Pascal's concerns well. Kant took the measure of human beings situated in infinite space and came up with a different account of its meaning. Where Pascal saw insignificance except for our capacity for belief in God, Kant saw a creature that had the capacity to confront the infinite and immeasurable power of nature and, rather than being overwhelmed by it, find in itself something larger, more profoundly powerful and dignified than all of the power of nature combined.

Kant spoke of two kinds of sublime experiences, the mathematically sublime and the dynamically sublime. In each experience, reason is overwhelmed by something so enormous and formless that it cannot be conceptualized. This experience of having our reason overwhelmed throws us into a new understanding of ourselves.

For Kant, the mathematically sublime experience is an experience of reason being overwhelmed in the presence of something infinite in size. You lie on your back looking up at the night sky, seeing the infinite space and uncountable number of stars; the mind spins and cannot grasp what it is experiencing. We feel wonder and awe—that is the mathematically sublime. Taking a spacewalk outside the *Rocinante* is mathematically sublime. The view of the *Behemoth*, as its own massive size is dwarfed by the infinity around it, is mathematically sublime. The battlefield of the UN Marines and the MCRN Marines against the first protomolecule hybrids on the surface of Ganymede is mathematically sublime set as it is, without an atmosphere, against an infinite sky. A sublime setting in which to die, but of course, Bobbie Draper refuses to go gently into that good night—you get the idea.

Dynamically Sublime

The dynamically sublime is an experience of infinite power, but not where our survival is threatened by it (that part is important). You are in your living room looking out at the hurricane howling outside, filled with awe at the infinite power of nature outside your window. The mind spins again and cannot gather this experience into a concept—that is the dynamically sublime. It is important that you have this experience while at a slight distance from it, as an observer.

If you were ever to actually confront the sublime directly, two issues would emerge. First, because of the danger to your life involved in a direct

experience of the dynamically sublime, you might have other things to think about rather than the meaning of the event. It is hard to be reflectively aware of an experience you are having while you are fighting for your life! Second, and this is definitely related to the first problem, infinitely large natural forces have a good chance of killing you. As far as we know, the dead do not experience the sublime.

The fate of the civilian survey ship *Arboghast* illustrates the need for some distance from the dynamically sublime. On its mission to Venus to monitor the activity of the protomolecule, the research ship descends into the atmosphere and, in a stunning visual, is completely disassembled in an instant. We see the shock and terror of the experience frozen on the faces of Colonel Janus and Dr. Iturbi ("Abaddon's Gate"). The confrontation with the sublime in this case is a direct one and it is horrifying. Before descending into Venus' atmosphere, Colonel Janus and Dr. Iturbi have a brief discussion about whether to bring the ship closer to the surface to get a better idea of what the protomolecule was up to. We see the wry smiles on their faces and the twinkle in their eyes as they both understand that their "debate" is just a formality. They are pulled toward the event below them. It is not just about their mission. They are drawn to it by a kind of primal curiosity.

As the decision is made and the *Arboghast* begins its descent, we can almost see Pascal shake his head in pity.

As shocking as the fate of the *Arboghast* is, Marco Inaros' attack on Earth using stealth-tech cloaked asteroids is more horrifying ("Mother"). It is the first time in the show we see the weaponization of the infinite. We are given the image of a man on the beach (ironically throwing pebbles into the sea) as the asteroid hits Earth. We see the man's skin begin to blister as the shockwave annihilates him—his experience is one of horror, not sublimity. As we watch the scene unfold, we are confronted with the added challenge that this infinite horror is a *human creation*. That the attack is intentional, deliberate, adds an element of dread and repugnance to our evaluation of it.

After Inaros' attack on Earth, Avasarala is told that there has been a report of a "200–300 kiloton explosion" at the impact site. (To put that number in some perspective, the combined power of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 was 40 kilotons.) The quantification of the event seems to reduce the scope of it. But "200–300 kilotons" is not a number that is very informative—like a blood pressure, a test score or a speed limit. What is the point of this report? How is it supposed to influence our thinking about this event?

Such attempts at description and explanation of sublime events are a way that our psyche tries to assert power over our dread of the infinite. Having a number to measure a phenomenon seems to make it accessible, understandable. It is as if we are telling ourselves, "No need for existential dread here—there is nothing beyond our understanding!" But attempts at

explanation cannot contain an infinite moral horror nor can they explain away a sublime experience. Our dread of ourselves and reason's inability to capture the infinite remain. The infinite and the sublime cannot be explained. But they can be experienced.

No one experience can be *more* sublime than another. By definition, the sublime is an experience of the infinite and formless. An experience is simply sublime or not. To be clear, only those safely removed from an event can view it as sublime. Attacks of the kind imagined by Marco Inaros are unfathomable moral horrors—they are not strictly speaking sublime. Kant's view of the sublime is rooted in an experience of nature—either of its infinite size or infinite power. Kant, like many of the Romantic thinkers of his day, saw the sublime in nature as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

Despite its overwhelming power and size, the experience of the sublime can be inspiring—standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon, the Hoover Dam, or the bow of a ship looking at the night sky, being out in the woods while the thunderstorm rolls in, or anywhere when an earthquake shakes your surroundings. If we were pressed, we might admit that we enjoyed them all at some level. Why? Yes, the experiences evoke emotions of wonder and awe at the power and infinity around us. Kant wants to say, however, that something else is going on inside us during these experiences, something that shows us our true value as beings in the cosmos.

Howl at the Moon If You Want To

When we confront the infinite in the form of the dynamically sublime, we could be forgiven for thinking that a good hiding place is the best response. What can an animal do during a big storm or during an earthquake? Only obey instinct. The forest is intensely silent just before a thunderstorm—every creature alive in the vicinity goes to its home. Except human beings, we just might want to hang around and feel what happens. However, if you wanted to, you could stand out in a field during that thunderstorm. You could dance a jig in the middle of the street during an earthquake, if the impulse so moved you.

That option, of staying around and feeling what happens, is an experience of our own freedom in direct contrast to our instincts. All of the animals have gone to ground because that is what their programming demands. We can face the infinitely powerful, defy our instincts, and in the confrontation with the sublime, experience a pure intuition of our own freedom. Yes, we feel wonder and awe. These are the emotions that arise, not from the challenge of the infinite and infinitely powerful, but from the recognition that we are free. For Kant, because we are free, we are greater than the whole of the power of nature.

Holden, as he descends alone in his space suit to the Ring station, discusses why he is doing what he is doing with Miller. Miller says with a

smile, "You are following your program, just like me." Holden replies, "I always had this crazy notion about free will." Miller replies, "Then how come it is that every time there is some clusterfuck shitstorm situation in the universe—there's James Holden?! Shrugging his shoulders, saying, 'How the hell did I end up here?'" ("Dandelion Sky"). Holden has the correct intuition of his own freedom. He just does not have Kant around to tutor him on what to say to Miller. But Holden has had the experience of the sublime—repeatedly. Ironically, his conversation with Miller is set within the mathematically sublime experience of space.

You are free and responsible for that freedom. The experience of the sublime is one proof of your freedom. Because you are free, you are different from the rest of creation. You are significant. The absence of your ability to know the significance of what you do in the context of the infinite does not diminish the significance of what you do. The characters of *The Expanse* know this. They act because they know they must, and they have faith that what they do matters.

It may seem strange to end with a quote from Amos, whose amorality is more on display in the show than his morality. But the truth is, Amos spends the show looking for guidance and slowly, but clearly, articulates the moral situation the characters are in. In a heated exchange with Alex, he says, "Do you want me to say this is some weird shit? Yeah, it's some weird shit!" Alex replies, "Thank you! We are playing way out of our league here!" Amos finishes, "That's been true ever since we've been sharpening sticks and going after lions, but we're still here" ("Dandelion Sky").

Look again at *The Expanse*. You will find the cinematography, the art direction, and the film direction, all try to bring the sublime into artistic representation. That feeling you have when you see infinite space represented on screen that tickles you at the back of your psyche may be an intuition of your own freedom.

It may be proof that you are more than the infinity that is the setting of *The Expanse*.

Notes

1. By "infinite" in this chapter we don't necessarily mean literally without end. Instead, we mean inconceivably large or great.
2. Alexander Pope, "Epitaph on Sir Isaac Newton," in James L. Ford and Mary K. Ford, eds., *Every Day in the Year: A Poetical Epitome of History* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1902). Online https://www.bartleby.com/297/154.html.
3. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), §199.
4. Pascal, §102.
5. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1987), §§23–24 and 28.