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Popular Culture Wars: Racism, Gender and Empire and the Transformations of 21st Century Capitalism

Abstract: Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* and Frank Herbert's *Dune* were considered to be "unadaptable" works. This paper critically discusses Villeneuve's *Dune* and the TV series created by AppleTV+, a revision of the "Foundation", overviewing the controversies surrounding the recreation and transformation of these "grand narratives". The author considers that these transmutations are relevant not only for their storytelling alterations, but also for the transformations of "cinematic capitalism". Proposing as a working concept the notion of chimeric capitalist cinema, the paper also brings into the debate other productions that disclose ideological mutations, like *Rings of Power* and *House of the Dragon*, considering how contemporary cinematic modes of production are changing.

Keywords: Isaac Asimov, Foundation, Frank Herbert, Dune, capitalism, racial cinema, science fiction, racism, imperialism, chimeric cinema.

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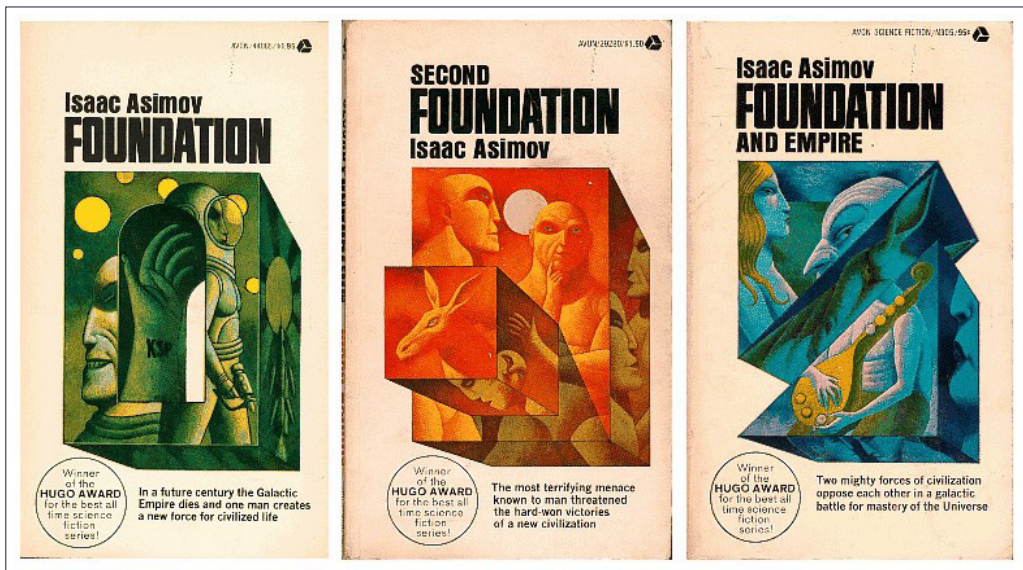
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Considered by many filmmakers and critics (Booker 60) as impossible to adapt for cinema, the last great science fiction literary saga, Isaac Asimov's *Foundation*, was finally made available for popular consumption in September 2021. While Asimov's influence in the history of science fiction and the development of the genre remains profound, his works were a source of inspiration for many cinema-makers, the "Foundation" saga remained without a cinematic version, never transposed into standalone movie. AppleTV+ announced in 2018 the decision to produce the first Asimov adaptation, and a

television series was a logical decision. The production was delayed due to the pandemic and then finally broadcasted after more than four years. The show was presented to viewers all over the world as an ambitious transformation of the “Foundation Cycle”, as the Galaxy imagined by one of the grandfathers of science fiction was improved and altered.. With the approval of Robyn Asimov, the daughter of the author, and with the consent of the Asimov literary estate, showrunner David S. Goyer (Josh Friedman exited the project) attempted to adapt the unadaptable.



The first episodes of the updated “Foundation” were released just a couple of weeks after another remarkable adaptation was screened in movie theaters all over the world. Denis Villeneuve’s first installment of *Dune* was already acclaimed as a masterpiece, as Frank Herbert’s *Dune* saga was considered to be yet another “problematic” creative work, many also considering it to be impossible to adapt. In fact the few attempts to transpose to cinema the large “Duniverse” faced both financial failure and critical disdain.

Both of these productions, together with many others, like the recent rewriting of *The Lord of the Rings* or the revised version of *Game of Thrones*, are obviously subjected to narrative, conceptual and structural alterations, while also following the social and political need for inclusion and diversity. Discussing these connections and analyzing the controversies surrounding the recreation and transformation of these “grand narratives” are relevant not only for storytelling reasons, but also for understanding how contemporary capitalism is changing. AppleTV+ was denounced for its overt “wokeness” and the explicit efforts to update a classic literary work by serving specific identity politics (Jerzy 2021). A

more ambivalent reception got Villeneuve's *Dune*, also accused of erasing the Middle Eastern roots of the original work, and of being just another "woke" product, an "edulcorated" version of a much more complex world (Guedj 2021). These are important factors for many contemporary cultural products, and specially for cinematic productions, revelatory processes for the inner transformations of "cinematic capitalism", together with the changes in our societies and the structural alteration of the dominant mode of production.

At a more impenetrable level these changes can be considered to be indicative for the multilayered ideological transformations made visible by contemporary popular culture. As these science fiction masters were subjected to alterations, their works transmuted from the original form into newer versions, apparently more adapt for our world today, the immediate effects of transforming character identities, the switching of racial and gender traits, and other overt mutations go beyond screenwriting practices. One simple explanation is the need to present contemporary viewers with more contemporaneous representations, as these alterations are nothing more than old contents "contemporanized". This conversion of familiar characters, storylines and entire worlds is described as a necessity. The conformity to contemporary ideas and values serves their integration within the current context.

My key argument is that the "reimagining" and the transformation of Isaac Asimov's seminal novels by AppleTV+, together with Villeneuve' adaptation of *Dune* and many other recent examples of transmuted works in other popular culture contexts, must be connected with the profound alterations of post-industrial capitalism. Cinema has always been indicative for the inner mechanism of capitalism and its imaginary formations were projections of otherwise obscure operations. As argued by Kracauer (65) in his seminal study about the links between German cinema and the Nazi rise to power, all cinematic characters and storylines embody social, political and ideological tendencies, with cinema capturing many features of a society otherwise less visible. The changes induced in these recent productions are thus indicative for the development of new social forms, for the transformation of the inner mechanics in society and in our collective minds and, more importantly, the alteration of the productive forces of capitalism. The alterations discussed in the following interpretations are only visible markers in larger processes, and the cinematic mode of production, integral part to capitalist production forms, are affected by what some define as **chimeric capitalism** (similar to **parasitic capitalism**), in my interpretation of these film productions movies also enter a new dimension, that of the **chimeric capitalist cinema**.

A chimeric cinematic mode of production

Following Jonathan Beller's (2006) stimulating explanations we must understand that all cinematic modes of production are specific to capitalism. By consequence any transformation in cinema practices (and by that measure of any other visual media, such as television, comic

books or video games) becomes fundamentally linked to capitalist practices and capitalism as a system. My own perspective elaborates on Jonathan Beller's (2016) more recent attempt to further expand his previous observations about the cinematic mode of production. Although I differ with Beller (2021) as he took another explanatory path influenced by the typical mediology approaches, his expounding on the notion of *racial capitalism* and the relevant suggestions about the in-built oppression and genocidal dimensions of capitalist exploitation expanding in cinema, are essential.

Beller, however, follows the predominant view advanced by some Marxist theories (Fuchs 2021), who claim that we have entered the "age of digital capitalism". This is a new dimension of capitalism, a "novel feature" of capitalist society, which gives a "particular dimension" to capitalist society of the new millennium (Fuchs 27–28). Beller joins in with this relevant idea, that capitalism itself is changing with the rise of digital culture and the ascent of computer technologies, and he re-elaborates his own notion of the cinematic mode of production by developing a newer concept, that of "computational racial capitalism". While the deterministic perspective, which links the technologies and tools with society, is useful, the case of cinema productions shows that this "newer version" of capitalism, the capitalism 2.0 which is able to create profit out of data and information, ultimately transforming "qualities" into "quantities", is less innovative than it seems. In turn this understanding takes the author of the "cinematic mode of production" to conclusions which are remote from his initial and seminal conceptualizations. By rewriting the classical Marxist formula (M–C–M') into a newer model, one in which now "Money" goes through "Information" in order to produce more "Money" (M–I–M'), Beller (2021) now explains that the commodification of Information is affecting society and, by concentrating on "computational capitalism" he makes visible efforts to integrate "digital film" in this model.

This line of arguments does not take into account the more perverted and abstruse connections between production and ideology, extremely important in the cinematic mode of production. While Beller provide one the most succinct and terse descriptions of the phenomenon discussed here, noticing that there is "no race without class, no cinema without gender and imperialism, no computation without capital, no value without murder" (130), he chooses a more practical finality for his observations. Advancing the need for "decolonizing of money" (132), together with an overt anti racist and anti-imperialist perspective, he brings up an optimist solution, as these transformations are described as escape routes from the confines of racial capitalism (7). An antiracist and decolonial project in media studies and film studies, based on a "decolonization of computation" and "a decolonization of money", could be extremely important. Yet they cannot account, nor counterbalance, the colossal capacity of capitalism to devour anything in its path, including race positive discourses and gender integrative practices.

Movie goers and television viewers pay with hard earned money and with precious time from their real lives for cinematic fantasies which are not "Information" or "Data",

even though the transmission of visual productions is now integrated into digitalized environments. As capitalism is reinventing itself in the age of digital technologies, it is also moving its exploitative apparatus into these new profit making machines. As **racial capitalism** was transforming racism, slavery and colonialism into useful commodities, **dematerializing** its imperialistic tendencies into more palatable contents, made visible by photography, cinema or music, all forms of communication in the capitalist society are reintegrated into the profit making tools. This is also the case with the new capitalist forms of consumption, its final products are only profit generating materials.

Movies and television programs are such carriers, they are commodities created for profit only. Following the arguments of Marx closer, who described the omnipotence of the capital residing in its ability to mediate and to nullify identities, this extraordinary power governing the capitalists themselves and the capitalist society altogether remain intact in the age of digital machines. Without contesting Beller's fruitful hypothesis about the impact of *digital capitalism* (or *computational capitalism*), when considering the cinematic mode of production and distribution their digital versions remain instruments for imaginary enslavement, where colonialism, racism or gender driven exploitation continue to be enacted. The main characteristic is not the *computational*, in fact cinematic production forms have not exhausted their profit making potential given by *images*, not by *data*. And, by transforming realities into images and then into commodities, these new products are easily transformed into new capital. Here the old argument put forward by Marx in his discussions about "The power of money", from his posthumously published "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" (Marx 1959), are fundamental, as it will be detailed later.

Cinema is clearly a "derivative machine", as Beller (222) properly observes, albeit it remains an instrument of imperialism, since the recent technological transformations are not alterations of the production practices, they are affecting cultural transmissions, not the mode of production. With the immense capitals now moving into the **chimeric marketplace** of video on demand (VoD) services, a new **digital imperialism** has substituted its "older" colonialist version. As it was during the five long centuries of Western colonialism and imperialism, these expansions are followed by wars. The new capitalist wars of today can be described as the **streaming video wars**.

Netflix, for a while the main beneficiary of the online distribution market, was growing at an amazing rate which swayed some authors to announce the coming of the "Age of Netflix" (Barker and Wiatrowski 2017). As is always the case with capitalism and crises, the pandemic helped accelerate this process. By 2021 Netflix peaked to a staggering 24.9 billion USD in revenues, with operating profits of 5.1 billion USD, an 85% increase from 2020 and an incredible increase from 2010, when it managed to get 3.1 billion USD in revenues. At one point Netflix had more than 214 million subscribers from 190 countries of the world, and the heads of the company were making plans for reaching 1 billion customers. This **digital**

overinflation was stopped when the majority of homo sapiens returned to real life and stopped binge watching mindlessly waiting for the viral Apocalypse. The price of Netflix shares collapsed, in 2022 alone the shares lost 70% of their value and, in real terms, Netflix's market value fell in a single year from 300 billion to less than 90 billion.

As Netflix was bleeding subscribers, with nearly 1 million leaving in the second quarter of 2022 alone, other capitalists smelled blood in the waters of profit making. In August 2022 Disney announced it surpassed Netflix in terms of subscribers, reaching 221 million subscriptions for its new online service, with Disney+ becoming one of the most expansionist companies in the **global digital imperialism**. No expenses were spared by the "House of the Mouse" in order to conquer the chimeric lands of video-on-demand, the company was bleeding 1,5 billion USD, losses registered by its direct-to-consumer division, with accumulated losses for the entire fiscal year estimated at about 4 billion USD. In order to remain in control of this market, Netflix has spent 17 billion USD on various productions, just one episode of the season 4 of "Stranger Things" was estimated at 30 million dollars. We need to add here the investments made by Disney, estimated at 33 billion, of Amazon, at about 13 billion, and Warner, with about 16.7 billion. In pure economic terms this could seem counterproductive and even absurd. Why would any "capital" purposefully diminish its profits, what is the logic of such expenditures. Yet the administrators of the good fortunes of Mickey Mouse were not alone in this process, other companies like Warner, together with its associated services, joined these wars. Warner announced it reached 92.1 million customers, followed in this ranking by Paramount (Paramount+, which is owned by CBS), with 43 million subscribers, and Peacock (the NBCUniversal service) with only 13 million. In the competition for the billions of viewers who consume online content worldwide, the estimated revenues for the VoD segment were at about 80.8 billion USD in 2022, of which 34 billion USD were generated only in the United States alone. These **chimeric commodities** are clearly profitable and, in this context, we must also take into account the resounding failure of CNN+, a service that closed just a month after its launch. In fact the battleground is not in the field of "Information" or "Data", it is taking place in the realms of **imaginary representations**.

The competition today is to occupy the fantasies and the immaterial elements of human life. In order to conquer the minds of the present and in the competition to colonize the imaginations of the future, these companies are gathering ingredients from the past, trying to exert control on the collective imagination of humanity which can be valued at about 80 billion USD!

The wars of the digital empires

As Netflix, Disney+, HBO or Apple TV are forming the new **empires of imagination**, their new imperialistic wars fought in the **chimeric realm** with dragons, Mandalorians or elves, are designed to influence billions of remote control users all over the planet. Today the digital content distribution market represents a major battleground in a much wider global conflict for dominion over the collective imagination of humanity. **These digital wars of the future are fought in the present, yet with the tools of the past.** Fantastic creatures inspired by Medieval imagination, sorcery and palace intrigues typical for feudal societies, mixed with copious quantities of incest and sexuality, are reused and rearranged in order to contribute to the prolonged siege over our minds. Using Mandel's (1975) conceptualization, this is an "inter-imperialistic" competition, a conjunctural conflict which has no benefit for real people, it is only profitable in terms of transmuting capital.

Leading the way in this process is WarnerMedia, the multinational conglomerate recently announcing the completion of "100 years of Storytelling". In fact this centenary is really going to happen only next year, since the foundation of this cinematic monster with humble beginnings took place in 1923, when Warner Bros. was founded. The multibillion cinematographic empire founded by the sons of Benjamin Eichelbaum, a Jewish shoemaker who emigrated from Poland in 1883, today one of the largest media conglomerates is creating and distributing globally various contents available in more than 220 countries. It includes cinema, television, and online streaming services, owning brands such as HBO, CNN, TNT, Warner Bros. Pictures, New Line Cinema and Cartoon Network. WarnerMedia owns the past, it projects the future and makes profits in the present. The portfolio includes all "old films" (**the past**), distributed by its specialized television stations (such as TNT, TCM). It owns children programming services such as Cartoon Network or WB Animation and additionally it has control controls over Looney Tunes, Harry Potter, the DC Universe and all Hanna-Barbera products (it **projects the future minds**). With a powerful streaming service in collaboration with HBO it has a huge portfolio including more than 12,500 feature films, 2,400 television programs, a total of 145,000 hours of programming, which is more than a human lifetime (the present). A human being has only about 219,000 waking hours, out of the 650,000 total hours of life, and these channels can cover more than our entire lifetimes in **chimeric commodities**.

These video streaming wars are, of course, profit driven, with an estimated 1.8 billion users worldwide generating revenues of 86 billion USD in 2021. WB is caught in this epic streaming expansionism, the "new frontiers" are the ratings and market shares, where all possible weapons are used to dominate the digital empires. Some of these weapons were made visible when, in August 2022, WB released the newest episodes of "House of the Dragon", in a direct competition with Amazon Prime. HBO, the WB subsidiary, created

a new program capitalizing on previous success of “Game of Thrones” (GoT). Added a vast number of dragons and multiplying the number of white haired Targaryens, the production costs of this series reached more than 20 million USD per episode (Maas 2022). Amazon Studios threw in their own illusory creatures, elves and gnomes and wizards were involved in the global battle for an imaginary already saturated with fantasies of the past. Disney+ was streaming its own movies developed from the “Star Wars” universe, and the competition between “Rings of Power” (RoP), “House of the Dragon” (HotD) and “The Mandalorian” became fierce. This is not a competition for “information” or a “data” driven marketplace, it is supremacy war between immaterial commodities intent to transform imagination into capital.

After Jeff Bezos, one of the richest men in the world, bought the rights to adapt Tolkien’s books, Amazon began losing money with these adaptations, spending a part of their huge profits from the e-commerce business with fantasies. Could Bezos invest an estimated 250 million USD in this project only because he was an avowed Tolkien admirer? What is the logic of an investment at this scale, one which over five seasons is estimated to cost about 1 billion USD, which makes the “Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power” the most expensive TV production of all time? Using Beller’s formula this does not make any economic sense – M (Money) through I (Information) does not generate M’ (new money), in fact it generates -M’ (loss of capital). The explanation is obviously that this new capital obtained has no “real” financial output, instead it is an immaterial gain, a form of **fictitious capital** or **chimeric capital**. This is today the most important ingredient of Neoliberal capitalism, as indicated by Brazilian economist Reinaldo Carcanholo (2011), who was expanding on the few suggestions advanced by Marx in volume 3 of *Das Kapital*. Carcanholo and many others observed how financial derivatives, such as futures or hedge funds, which helped induce the Greatest Depression of the twenty-first Century, were simply based on future money which existed only in economic fictions. This is actually the most advanced form of money, not the fact that transactions are now made digitally, that physical money is now transferred onto our phones and tablets, but the ability of capital to become a chimera.

Relevantly enough, these “streaming wars” were taking place during another major crisis of capitalism, the pandemic with the new coronavirus. This, in turn, induced major changes in people’s lives and in the practices of cinematographic production and transmission, both deserving an in-depth interpretation. For the purpose of our current discussion it would suffice to say that the nature of these “fictitious” forms of capital, liquid, parasitic and based on appearances, also have a profoundly “cannibalistic” force, as indicated by Nancy Fraser (2022). **Chimeric capital** can devour everything in its path towards profit, including the victims of its own exploitative practices, from the proletariat transformed into the digital precariat and the digitally colonized.

“Old, but not obsolete”: Reclamation, reconversion and transmutation of meanings

We must return to the second volume of the “Capital”, where Marx interpreted the circuit of “Money” in capitalist economies and described the process as a form of “transmutation”. Marx adequately used more suggestive terms, but the idea of the “alchemical” abilities of capitalism to make “more money from money” is essential. The father of communism understood and then coded this realization into a simple model – famous “money-commodities-money” circuit. This contains the laws governing all the mechanisms of capitalist economy and society. At the first stage, money is turned into commodities ($M > C$), next the mass of commodities (C') go through a “metamorphosis” allowing them to be turned into new money ($C' > M'$). This circuit of capital-commodity is then restarted, over and over again *transmuting* money (M) into new money (M'). This secondary transformation is very important and, in order to describe this process, Marx used some extremely stimulating concepts - reconversion, transformation, retransformation, and, more importantly for my argument here, transmutation.

Nevertheless, there is a problem within this great cycle of profit, in which capital generates capital. It was observed and resolved by Marx with the knowledge he had at that time, when the cyclic economic generation of money was endangered by material over-production. In turn this allowed Marx to develop another important explanation, the recurrence of crises in capitalism. There is always an inherent crisis present at the heart of this cycle of production, when large amounts of commodities are produced at some point they are impeding the transformation of “old” investments into “new” capital.

This process was complicated by the transformations happening in the modes of production and in the nature of commodities in post-industrial capitalism (Bell 1973), or “late capitalism” in the terms of Ernest Mandel (1970). As technologies appeared to evolve towards digitalization, many authors noticed this trend and announced a new stage of capitalism, first described as “information capitalism” (Morris-Suzuki 1984), then “computational capitalism” (Beller 2021). Without entering too deep into this debate, as Morris-Suzuki argued in an 1984 essay, with capitalism entering a “new age” of the robots and other information intensive technologies, this generated a diversification of commodities and allowed a perpetual growth and innovation. The optimistic view was that mass production creating mass prosperity makes possible the achievement of the “age of plenty”. Some even suggested that, as we have entered “The Age of Abundance” (Lindsey 2007), the promised society envisioned by Marx was now attainable not under communism, instead made possible by capitalism.

The reality is, as always, different. This “all consuming” and affluent society (Galbraith 1969) was actually deepening the divide between the rich and the poor. In the United States

the wealth gap between the upper-income and lower-income families has grown constantly, and globally the differences are even larger. The rich have grown richer much faster than during the last decades, with the excess of consumption made possible by digital technologies allowing people like Jeff Bezos, the owner of Amazon Prime, to grow their wealth from 4.7 billion USD in 2000, to a net worth of 171 billion USD in 2022!

The logic behind these transformations must be, once more, linked to the basic mechanisms of capitalism. In *The Consumer Society* (1970/ 1998) French philosopher and media critic Jean Baudrillard, criticizing the classical marxist model, argued that contemporary capitalism was turning traditional commodities into signs (images, data). What we really consume are **hyperreal commodities**, which we exchange for real values. The consumption of objects in this spectacular form of capitalism, as Guy Debord (1967) described it in his seminal work, makes our entire reality to be a commodified fiction, in a ceaseless accumulation of **spectacular objects**. Baudrillard took these arguments one step further, when discussing the relationship between political economy and **death**, observing that the essence of contemporary capitalism was not only **accumulation**, but **accumulation** and **extermination**. From the “dead” materials created by the capitalist excess, a secondary effect of the excessive proliferation of commodities, was the production of emptied signs, continuously cultivated and animated by the spectacular institutions (cinema, advertising, fashion), albeit they are dead materials.

In a society oriented towards the consumption of empty signs, everything can be transformed into a **danse macabre**, the dance of the dead, where kitsch proliferates. The utter emptiness of signs and the dance of the funny specters has now been reached with the arrival of social media platforms such as TikTok. In 2022 the Chinese owned company had more than one billion users from 154 countries, with the most popular “hashtags” on this platform distributing “online content” including pranks, various forms of funny dancing and fitness activities, typical for what Baudrillard (1993) described as the society where there was “no more ideology, only simulacra” (2). In a culture inundated by mass-market objects produced by industrial reproduction, these objects are reduced to their most vulgar dimension.

Movies, television productions, advertising and the innumerable social media contents are all contributing to this accumulation of empty symbolic commodities. The contemporary popular culture is transformed into a waste landfill, where derelict and dilapidated meanings are constantly thrown, abandoned, waiting to be recycled in even cheaper versions. As argued in “The Age of Promiscuity”, my own critical take on contemporary popular culture (Pop 2014), the constant recycling of old materials and the reusing of derelict works into newer representations has become one of the major mechanisms of the **chimeric cinema**. One of the effects of the capital, which Marx tended to minimize, remains its ability to generate over-production and an excess of commodities which can be turned into waste. Recuperating the

trashed-out materials, characters and narrations, presumes a constant cycle of denegation, typical for contemporary meaning making practices. This mechanism can be explained by using a dialectical principle I called “the double negation” (47–49) in which, by taking its own empty signifiers, considered to be **obsolete** or **overused**, the **chimeric capitalism** repurposes them into eternally renewed forms. Thus, just like consumption goods which are recycled into the flow of goods and reintroduced in the market, many cultural items are transmuted and brought back into the marketplace of artistic and aesthetic consumption by “reclamation”. Old narratives, abandoned in cultural landfills are “ecologized”, returning cleaned and repurposed in the cycle devouring empty commodities. Without any ideological value or meaning, they are easily integrated into the profit-making mechanisms of spectacular capitalism

“As time goes by”: A brief interlude for quantum explanations appertaining to cinema

As suggestively indicated by Russian filmmaker and theorist Andrei Tarkovsky (1986), cinema is an art form profoundly dependent on time. Tarkovsky himself was practicing a type of “sculpture in time”, modeling temporality into a coherent signification. This practice is even more important in science fiction movies where, just as in Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1972), the cinematic processes are explorations of time alteration and temporal uncertainty.

When defined as a broad genre, science fiction incorporates all forms of *temporal estrangement*. As in the famous work of H. G. Wells, published in 1895, sci-fi storytelling represents the ultimate time traveling machine. Narrowing these complex arguments to a more relevant aspect for the current discussion, the genre discloses a profound and essential temporal paradox. Sometimes this paradox provokes temporal incongruities; many science fiction films and novels, as is the case with Orwell’s “Nineteen Eighty-Four”, are surpassed by time itself. Anticipated events which are supposed to happen in the future become dilapidated and even ridiculous when confronted with the present.

While the basic formula for science fiction narrations is that they are representing characters and events taking place *in the future*, the works themselves cannot be anything else than *products of the past*, while simultaneously addressing *the present*. We can formulate this fundamental temporal paradox as: $W(P-) > P = P+ > W-$. A work (W) created in the past (P-) is projecting (>) into the present (P) events of an imagined future (P+), only to then make the work obsolete (W-). This provides a starting formula, allowing us to understand the processes by which cinema operates as a wayward time machine. As the present quickly takes over the future, the past is catching the future from behind and the viewers (as consumers) in their actual present are always dealing with objects of the past filled with incongruities.

When George Orwell wrote his dystopian vision about the dark future in “Nineteen Eighty-Four”, the real 1984 seemed to be far away. Relative to 1949 it might have appeared to be a lifetime, yet due to the implacable path of historical time, this remarkable novel about the future was soon turned into a derelict story about a never happening past. This troublesome relationship science fiction has with time is made even more acute when we take a closer look at the “future inventions” of the genre. The most famous examples are provided by Jules Verne, the prodigious French writer who created several popular stories about the future, imagining several “technological futures” of humanity. This type of imagination provides a suggestive illustration for the process of **temporal transmutation**. In a novel entitled “20,000 Leagues Under the Sea”, first published in a serialized form starting with 1869, it might seem that Verne was able to anticipate life in a submarine. The fantastic machine driven by the nefarious captain Nemo, the “Nautilus”, might have appeared to be a glimpse of the future from the perspective of a poor technological past. Yet Verne does little more than taking cues from his own *present*, and projects this information forward into time. Just two years before he was writing the story about the incredible underwater apparatus powered by electricity, Spanish inventor, Isaac Peral, already created a prototype. In fact diving boats were not a novelty, and the French writer was not imagining the *future*, he was altering the *present*. The real “Nautilus” was invented almost a century before, in 1800 American inventor Robert Fulton designed a cigar-shaped submerging metal craft for the French government. Many experiments were already done with underwater ships at that time, one of the most infamous of these was making headlines in 1863, when the Union vessel USS Housatonic was attacked and scuttled by Confederate submarine lead by one Lieutenant fighting for slavery, named George Dixon. Verne imagined many other stories which seemed to be **ahead of their time**, such as the moon landing (Around the Moon/ Autour de la Lune, 1869), radio and television broadcasting (In the Year 2889) or the helicopter (in Robur the Conqueror/ Robur-le-Conquérant, 1886). When we take a closer look at these *future inventions*, some of them were not functional, since the giant ship called “Albatross” was a flying machine that could not fly, and the Moon canon, which was supposed to send humans to our satellite, was an impossible concoction killing the passengers due to pressure.

This is not a new mechanism or a cinema novelty, instead I would argue it represents a law of culture. Oftentimes “old” technologies or ideas belonging in the **past**, considered to be outmoded or antiquated, were recuperated in the **present**, then recirculated into the **future**. Perhaps the best cultural example for this type of **cultural time traveling** are the Judeo-Christian scriptures, the Holy Bible. Our postindustrial, silicone based and digital societies are still influenced by cultural items which were created during the Bronze Age. When taking into consideration that the texts of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, were circulating and recirculating for more than 5000 years, then the temporal paradox is even

bigger. At the center of the spirituality of more than half of the humans living on this planet, as Christians represent 2.3 billion and Muslims 1.8 billion of the total population, these texts are powerful time traveling artifacts. As biblical criticism and hermeneutics have shown, some of the most ancient scribes who wrote the Bible (the so-called Deuteronomist, also known as “D” source, and the Yahwist, the “J” source) were compiling even older narratives. One of the most famous biblical stories, the events surrounding Noah and the Great Flood, were recirculating old Sumerian stories about Ziusudra, combined with Old Babylonian legends about Utnapishtim, which makes the Bible a conveyor of ideas from the late Stone Age. Some of these stories were then recuperated in the present, with many movies returning to the trope of catastrophic events. These stories are indicative of the coexistence of the past and the primitive within the minds of modern men in the present and their projection into the future.

We can understand such temporal coexistence by using a concept borrowed from quantum theory, based on Einstein’s observations about “special” relativity. When looking at space and time, they appear to be separate entities. In fact the function is a single continuum, characterized by entanglement, a notion introduced in 1935 by Schrödinger. This remains one of the most bizarre properties of time, thus some physicists even suggested that time might be only a side effect of entanglement – an explanation known as the “Wheeler–DeWitt equation”. Represented by the formula: $\hat{H}(x)|\psi\rangle=0$, it accounts for a “spooky effect” of particles, we now know they are connected over time and space. This mysterious quantum correlation between pairs of polarized photons allows them to display the same properties, while separated. To put the complex math into simpler terms, what happens in the present is always correlated with what happens in the future and, more strangely, the components of time are linked into a knot so tight that the connections themselves do not allow us to ascertain which comes first and which comes later. This quantum property is woven into the very fabric of the Universe.

Media representations exist in a similar space-time continuum. Paraphrasing Marshall McLuhan’s prophetic insight, all “new media” are coexisting with the “old media”, and every new content is a “reclaimed” version of another body of meanings. While a medium might appear to be obsolete, it never disappears completely, returning into newer forms, as a transformed carrier.

“BI-POC-a-Lula, I don’t mean maybe”

The controversy surrounding the Amazon Prime production called *The Rings of Power* (RoP), a *Lord of the Rings* prequel series, presents us with an indicative example which can be described as the **race-time continuum**. This continuum works as a cinematic constant, since racial entanglements are operational from the birth of cinema.

The most infamous example from the history of cinema remains *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a foundational cinematic work directed by D. W. Griffith, denounced today for its negative contents, even labeled as “the most racist movie ever made” (Scott 2014). Scott, who overviewed the long history of racism in Hollywood cinema, from the KKK scenes in *The Birth of a Nation* to the blackface Al Jolson or the musical drama *Song of the South* (1946), is showing many troublesome Hollywood representations of African Americans.

Movies, like any other cultural products are caught in the temporal paradox of human artifacts. Since they carry their past within their present content and then transfer it to the future, audiences from another temporal framework often coexist with their counterparts from the past and the future. The source of bigotry and racism in Griffith’s production, which was an adaptation of a popular theatrical version, is not simply a bi-product of another controversial work, the novel written by Thomas Dixon Jr., entitled “The Clansman”. Dixon, who believed he was only preserving a “remarkable period”, was obviously impervious to the temporal erosion of his reality. Dixon Jr. was the son of Thomas Dixon, a Baptist minister, and then himself a minister of a congregation in New York. His particular vision of the world was in turn influenced by an ideology of the past, the infamous passage from Genesis 9: 25-27 about the servitude of Ham and his son Canaan Shem and Japheth.

The past sometimes collides with the **present**, thus a manipulation of the **past** is considered necessary, often the alteration being done in order to arrange the **future**. Another controversy created about another movie taking place in the South during the Civil War is the labeling of *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Owned by WB and streamed by HBO Max, this is one of the greatest movies in American history, awarded with 10 Academy Awards. The melodramatic story of a Georgian plantation owner was temporarily removed from the streaming platform only to be later added with a classification denouncing its “racial and ethnic prejudices”, as HBO “advised” the viewers that *Gone With the Wind* was “a product of its time” and that the racist depictions “were wrong then and are wrong today”. Thus, in order to create “a more just, equitable, and inclusive future” the movie was “chaperoned” by an explanatory article, written by Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, a film professor promoting African-American filmmaking and a supporter of the “New Black cinema”. A similar trend was followed by Disney+, now advising its viewers about the “outdated cultural depictions” in *Dumbo*, or the “racist stereotypes” in *The Aristocats*. Denouncing these stereotypes and the negative depictions “of peoples and cultures”, as the Disney message reads, is intended to create “a more inclusive future together”.

When the RoP showrunners announced their plans to introduce BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) characters in the roles of elves, dwarves, harfoots and humans, with a more inclusive cast and even new fictional characters played by BIPOC actors, before they even finished shooting, many Tolkien fans were appalled. The Amazon marketing specialists knew what was coming, since Disney’s *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, which

premiered several weeks before RoR, on May 27, 2022, was given a similar treatment. Actress Moses Ingram, playing the character Reva Sevander, the inquisitor named the Third Sister, received death threats and direct racist messages on her Instagram account. The official page of the Star Wars replied with “We resist”, as the racist and misogynist bullying of a Black woman was considered to be politically motivated. Some Star Wars fans claimed that the new female character was altering the Star Wars storytelling, with the non-white performers and roles purposefully created to downgrade the already “canonized” male and white heroes.

Thus, when some Tolkien fans attacked the online trailers of the new series, the producers of RoP happily entered the cultural battleground, denouncing the influencers as racist. However, by the time Amazon Prime released the first episodes of RoR, on September 2, 2022, the production was already caught in a media frenzy. The social media driven scandal, in which some were expressing their outrage after viewing the footage and photos with the first elves and gnomes played by black actors, was transformed into a review-bombing campaign. Each aired episode was negatively commented, and Amazon Prime even disabled its “comments” option on site, considering that these negative reactions were affecting the reception of the television episodes. With radicals describing RoP as “woke social justice garbage”, Tolkien “purists” took apart each element of the narrative and pointed out the world building inconsistencies, accusing the writers of the television series of destroying Middle-earth canons. Some changes to the “*Legendarium*”, composed of the entire body works created by J. R. R. Tolkien and his son, Christopher Tolkien, were denounced as Leftist identity politics propaganda.

Even the main character, Galadriel, previously present in Peter Jackson’s movies, the main heroic figure of the Amazon series, was denounced as incompatible with the original. Described as a “Mary Sue” or a “Karen”, this younger version of Galadriel was considered by some an attempt to impose a woke ideology and to promote female characters as part of a progressive political agenda. Galadriel was mocked as “Guyladriel”, while some fans of the main character brought onto the screen by Morfydd Clark, a Welsh actress whose androgynous figure and strange compulsion matched the strong and powerful female character already made popular by Cate Blanchet, decried her inconsistencies.

The purchase of Tolkien’s fantasy world must have seemed to be a financially justified decision. The last episode of the LotR cinematic trilogy directed by Peter Jackson had fabulous revenues, *The Return of the King* (2003), with the final installment of the story taking place in Middle Earth during the fictitious “Third Age” reaching more than 1.1 billion USD in global sales. The Amazon purchase of the screen rights for Tolkien’s books, with the exception of “The Unfinished Tales of Númenor” and “The Silmarillion”, was a sound financial decision on paper. The projected financial future looked bright since, in addition to these rights, Amazon owned MGM Studios, bought for the fabulous sum of 8.5 billion USD, thus also owning the rights also to *The Hobbit* trilogy, and implicitly to the



characters developed in the movies. More than five years after the company owned by Jeff Bezos bought the screening rights for the prequel stories of this fantasy world for 250 million USD, the producers and showrunners were fighting disenchanted viewers. And, although we have no access to Amazon data, Nielsen reports quoted by *Variety* (Aquilina 2022) indicate that the viewership for RoP declined with each new episode.

Part of the Tolkien fandom perceived the new series as an attempt made by Amazon to forcibly “diversify” the story and the characters and the showrunners accused the criticizing fans of being hateful bigots. Before even seeing the films social media influencers launched accusations of extreme “political correctness”, denouncing the integration of black characters into the narrative. Angry fans bombarded various social media with noxious comments, outraged by the anticipated presence of a brown elf or a black female dwarf. Even though the character Arondir, played by Puerto Rican actor Ismael Cruz Córdova, is among the most believable in the new series, and Princess Disa, played by Sophia Nomvete, who was the first black female dwarf in the history of the Tolkien adaptations, offers a new dimension to the kingdom beneath the Misty Mountains, reactions were negative. When Queen Regent Miriel of Numenor, played by Cynthia Addai-Robinson, also with mixed ancestry, her mother being from Ghana, appeared, her role was considered to be incompatible with the biography of the character. The newly introduced community of harfoots, wandering proto-Hobbits

with hairy feet, composed of mixed race families and was led by Sadoc Burrows, credibly portrayed by British actor Lenny Henry, who had proud Jamaican origins. Fans considered this worldbuilding to lack accuracy, only destroying Tolkien's vision. The company issued a public statement affirming that "BIPOC belong in Middle-earth", and continued to fight the critics labeled as "toxic fans". The fans, coalesced in virtual packs, continue to proclaim their "loyalty" to the Tolkien legacy and denounce Amazon's alleged "leftist" propaganda and the transformation of the series into a tool of contemporary "wokeism". Amazon's attempts to diversify the Legendarium with black elves, hobbits and gnomes, or to bring in strong and asexual women, are hampering the reception of the new television shows, which technically are remarkable works.

Some of the problems facing Amazon start with the fact that the company does not own a large part of the fictitious past created by Tolkien. "Silmarillion", the novel that precedes the events depicted in the movies, representing an unfinished body of manuscripts published only posthumously by Christopher Tolkien in 1977 accounts both for the "First age" in Tolkien's fantasy world and partially for the "Second age". This is where the tensions between Tolkien's fans, the supporters of the "canon" and the writers of the television series arise. The adapted source material itself had a convoluted history, since Tolkien wrote a first draft of the novel entitled "The Silmarillion" in 1914 and later submitted this draft of the Middle-earth mythologies to British publisher Allen & Unwin. The publishers asked the author to develop another epic thread, a continuation of "The Hobbit", thus "Silmarillion" remained unpublished and was a later creation made by Christopher Tolkien, who co-wrote large parts with his Canadian assistant, Guy Gavriel Kay a few years after the death of the great linguist.

Fascist past and obtuse future

The transformation of "The Lord of the Rings" into a Fascist fantasy provides us with an exemplary case study to identify the mechanisms of **cultural reclamation** and, more importantly, for the **obverse restoration** of meanings. As Germaine Greer deplored in 2003, when BBC did a cultural survey to identify the most influential books of all times in Britain (The Big Read 2014), the fact that "The Lord of the Rings" novel came on the first place was a "nightmare". The famous author of feminist manifesto "The Female Eunuch", noted that the pages of "Lord of the Rings" were populated by supermen with Nordic features, an aspect made even more explicit by the recently released film versions. The movies not only contributed to the success of the books, identified by British readers as the most influential fiction of the century, they also confirmed many defects exposed by the fears expressed by Greer.

The connections between the books and Nazi propaganda were not totally unfounded. In a recent interview the new leader of the Italian neo-fascist movement, Giorgia Meloni, stated that her political strategies were always inspired by Tolkien's imagination. During her time as Minister of Youth in the Berlusconi government, Meloni even appeared in the "Style" weekly magazine of the newspaper "Il Corriere della Sera" alongside a statue of Gandalf riding the white stallion, Shadowfax (in Italian Ombromanto). At her ministerial swearing-in she declared that "the ring of power will not corrupt her" and later journalists found that during the 70s she attended the so-called "Hobbit camps" in Italy, basically neo-Nazi youth reunions.

The connections between neo-fascism and Tolkienism are less obvious than in the case of "The Clansman", albeit the same cultural quantum mechanics is at work. How can an author clearly adopting an anti-fascist attitude during his lifetime, writing a book as a reaction against the rise of Nazism in Europe, become a source of inspiration for fascists? Why are the neo-Nazis today so fascinated by the universe and characters developed by J. R. R. Tolkien?

One obvious answer comes from the fact that the novelist himself was a product of his time. Raised at the end of British colonialism, born in Bloemfontein in South Africa, influenced by the catastrophic historical events of the early 20th century and educated in the spirit of Catholicism, Tolkien began writing various pieces of his future novels while convalescing from illness during World War I. The first book in the series was "The Hobbit", written during the 1930s and published in 1937 when fascism was becoming the main political power in Europe. With the general influence of racist and anti-modernist policies growing, Tolkien was not impervious to these ideas, even though he was not a supporter. His statements during the Spanish Civil War, when he overtly defended Franco, are regrettable and disclose a type of proto-fascism shared by the creator of Middle-Earth (Birzer 2002). Coupled with Tolkien's anti-communism, based also in his deep Roman Catholic faith, these are important factors to take into consideration when explaining the deep imaginary threads of his literary works.

More dangerously, any product of fantasy, including Tolkien's works, can be easily seized by ideology. Misunderstanding and misinterpreting Tolkien is an inherent aspect of the complexity of his worldbuilding (Bacelli 2022). Environmentalists can consider him a promoter of the values of Nature, since in his books there is an obvious passion for simple country life and an excessive love for trees and, for their part, fascists can see in Tolkien a supporter of the values of an exclusivist European culture, and of the "Nordic" civilization. Clearly the author himself was concerned with Norse mythology since most of the Oxford professor's stories are inspired by Icelandic sagas and other medieval stories. One of Tolkien's unswerving critics, himself a writer of fantasy fiction (the most famous being the saga of Elric) Michael Moorcock (1978) noted, this type of infantile and infantilizing prose is only a sign of a larger cultural imbecility. Moorcock, who would later even claim that Tolkien

was himself a crypto-fascist (Harrison 2015), explains Tolkien's rise to popularity as a result of their nothingness and depthless "qualities". Following Slavoj Žižek's (2007) insights about Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, today the official anthem of EU but also a song used in Communist China during the Cultural Revolution and admired by Nazi propaganda and the White Supremacist in Rhodesia, all fictions are "emptied signifiers". Žižek (1989) describes all "Sublime objects" as structurally arbitrary, sharing a type of emptiness that predisposes them to any meaning displacements (206).

Although the Nazis tried and failed to claim John Ronald Reuel Tolkien as their own, since Tolkien's great-grandfather had emigrated to England from Germany in 1772, the real recovery of the novelist occurred in post-war Europe, when fascists and Nazis sought various subterfuges, mostly those with ambiguous mythological undertones. For example, a Celtic cross can become a surrogate symbol for the swastika, and any indirect references to "Aryan" culture can be picked up as a subterfuge of racial superiority. No wonder that contemporary post-fascism is filled with Tolkienism. The entire Fascist worldview is also steeped in Germanic mythology and based on a similarly simplistic antagonism between Good and Evil. An integral part of the "Lord of the Rings" universe are the elves and their civilization, which we cannot help but understand that in Middle-earth they function as Aryans. This was in fact emphasized by Peter Jackson's films, where they appear as proto-Nazis, blond, tall, noble, attractive and seductive. Obviously, Tolkien was not a promoter of Nazi ideology in any ways, on the contrary. But as he described a political system based on hierarchies and based on noble blood (Aragorn becomes king because he has the right "blood"), this provides neo-fascists with intellectual fodder. Racism is the foundation of Tolkien's fictional civilization, so is the recurring motif of rebuilding a "new world" where everything which is debased (orcs, trolls) must be eliminated, thus an indirect resource for all anti-immigrationist reactionaries.

When the streaming services and production companies try to denounce the prejudices of the past by correcting and adjusting that very past to conform to the present, they are not only altering the future, they are confronted simultaneously with the past-future continuum. In the following discussion two case studies will be analyzed, Frank Herbert's *Dune* and Isaac Asimov's *Foundation*. Both sagas were subjected to similar *transformations* and *reconversions*, their large-scale narrations and ample fictional universes, which projected a vision about future, were also brought back to screen in some of the most ample *transmutations of meanings*. The processes included the rehabilitation of their complex social and political references, the alteration of their characters and plots and the reversal of identities. Nevertheless, the paths chosen by the new *Foundation* television series and Villeneuve's new *Dune* are different as they provide relevant illustrations for how these transmogrifications affect content and context.

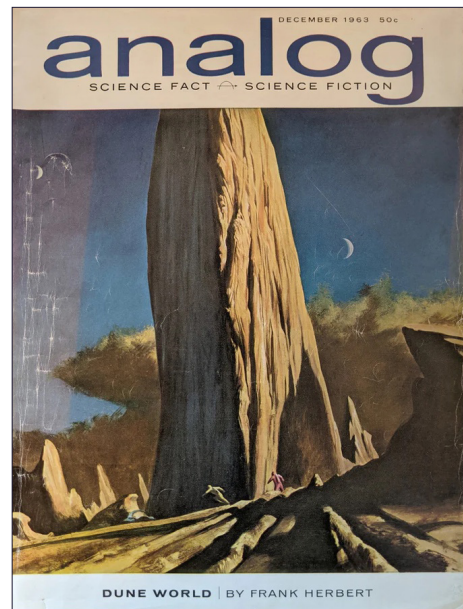
F = PP²:

A formula for cultural appropriation and ideological reappropriation

When, in December 1963, the first version of Frank Herbert's "Dune" saga was published by "Analog" science fiction magazine in two installments, the story was turned down by two dozen publishers. Sterling Lanier, at that time editor at Chilton, who decided to publish the work, was consequently fired due to the financial problems created by Dune. Still, the "Dune World" was followed by a sequel, "The Prophet of Dune" in 1965. Relevantly enough, John W. Campbell, the publisher of "Analog", the same publisher promoting Asimov's "Foundation" novels, was notoriously known as a supporter of racism, defending school segregation and rejecting contributions depicting black characters (Delany 1998).

Ultimately, Herbert's work reached a cult-like status after the publishing of the first book in 1965, today the entire saga is accumulating more than 20 million copies sold globally. The "Duniverse" is appreciated for its proto-environmentalism, for the grandiose tropes (loyalty, betrayal) and for the galactic worldbuilding abilities of the author. The influence of "Dune" cannot be understated, as dozens of other sci-fi productions are placed in Dune-like environments, from the sands of Tatooine in *Star Wars*, to the deserts of the Australian outback in *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

The first attempts to adapt "Dune" were surrounded by what was soon to be called "the curse of Dune" which struck the Chilean director Alejandro Jodorowsky, who never managed to get his production going. As detailed in the documentary "Jodorowsky's Dune" (2013), directed by Frank Pavich, his efforts ended up with "the greatest movie never made" in the history of cinema. Although the creative team put together by Jodorowsky included Salvador Dali, Moebius, Giger and O'Bannon, many of their ideas developed during this project were later borrowed by movies like *Star Wars* (1977), *Alien* (1979) or *The Matrix* (1999), the grandiose vision of a 10 to 14 hours movie raised issues that proved to be unsurmountable. The tribulations of Jodorowsky's "Dune", which deserve a study in and of themselves, also disclose important elements of the **transmutation process** discussed



here. For example Jodorowsky wanted to distribute Mick Jagger in the role of the evil Feyd Harkonnen, which was switched to Sting, in the first successful adaptation of *Dune*, directed by David Lynch and screened in theaters in 1984. After producer Dino De Laurentiis bought the rights lost by the Chilean movie maker, the development of the “new” *Dune* followed a similar surrealist aesthetic, with lavish costumes and settings. Nevertheless the 1984 *Dune* was a huge financial flop, according to boxofficemojo.com the movie started with a budget of almost 40 million USD and managed to reach only 30.9 million USD in sales. Critics disliked the production and Jodorowsky famously described it as “a shitty picture”. Even David Lynch wanted to distance himself from the project, the prestigious American director demanded to have his name removed from certain versions of the film, and the director was credited on some DVDs as “Alan Smithee”, a generic pseudonym for absent directors. Another attempt to bring to life Herbert’s vision was a television miniseries directed by John Harrison and produced by the Sci Fi Channel in 2000. New *Dune*, called “Frank Herbert’s *Dune*” was presented as a “faithful” adaptation, one in which Herbert’s vision was kept intact as much as possible. In 2008 director Peter Berg announced his intention to make an “action-thriller” remake of *Dune*, in the style of his already popular adventure driven, superhero movie, yet he was turned down by author and screenwriter John Hodgman, who considered that the novels were “unfilmable”, since the 3.000 pages of text, with the thousands of characters intermingling were impossible to distill into 90 minutes of action film. (Horowitz 2007). In the last decades several videogames were also created, either based on the 1984 version, the 2000 miniseries and the 2022 movie, including card games and board-games. Multiple comic books and graphic novels accompanied the films, starting with comic book adaptations published by Marvel Comics, to the prequels created by Brian Herbert, the son of the novelist, who supervised a series of graphic novels taking the readers to the origins of the Duniverse.

This universe, beginning with the novels created by Herbert, constantly renewed and amplified by comic books, video games, films and television series, presents us with a troublesome reality. All the adaptations and all the versions, from those representing the Galaxy of the future as racially homogenous, to the newest where some characters are racially diverse, are constructing a supremacy of the white people. Not only stars like Patrick Stewart or Max von Sydow are driving the racial homogeneity, but even the local peoples of Arrakis, who are supposed to live under the conditions of a desert planet, are predominantly Caucasian. We must appreciate the diverse distribution selected by Denis Villeneuve in his version. Villeneuve courageously introduced in *Dune* a more ethnic sensitive perspective, one closest to the original materials. For example the “Suk doctor”, named Wellington Yueh, who was described in the books as having “almond-shaped eyes”, but also a ridiculously stereotypical “drooping mustache”, is now played by Taiwanese actor Chang Chen, while previously it was depicted by actors such as Dean Cain, who created a caricatural Yueh. The Fremmen

love interest of Paul Atreides, Chani, is played by a credible African-American actress and singer, Zendaya, while his tribal adversary, Jamis, is now played by Nigerian actor Babs Olusanmokin. The Mentat Duncan Idaho, is no longer blonde and blue eyed like in the 1984 version, instead is portrayed appropriately by Jason Momoa, who has a Native Hawaiian ancestry. Even Stilgar, the chief of the tribe, is now personified by Spanish actor Javier Bardem, instead of the more European featured Everett McGill in the 1984 version.

While the majority of film critics appraised this new cinematographic wonder of a movie and the public appreciated its aesthetic and narrative qualities, the global revenues of Villeneuve's production reaching 401.8 million USD, out of an estimated budget of 165 million, it was also reinforcing

the same "value of whiteness" (Pérez 21). The Canadian filmmaker distributed boy-wonder Timothée Chalamet as Paul Atreides in the middle of an Arabic looking culture, with Islamic and Muslim overtones, as the "White Savior". The stereotype of the "offworlder", typical White-Messiah, perpetuated by all the actors playing Paul, from Kyle MacLachlan, to Alec Newman, and now Timothée Chalamet, is only amplified as ultimately the entire Galaxy is going to be ruled by a descendant of the Atreides family. Leto II, who will follow the Golden Path (in "God Emperor of Dune") is going to rule the Universe for 3,500 years as a giant worm-like God.

These issues come from the narrative modality practiced by Frank Herbert and his explicit technique of **appropriating various cultural materials of the past**, to then transform them into **projections of the future**, to such an extent that they might appear to be **new representations to be consumed in the present**. This mechanics is quintessential to our understanding of the **quantum paradox** of all cultural artifacts. In my interpretation this can be contained by a formula mimicking the famous Einsteinian equation – $F = PP^2$. Translated as "F equals PP squared", it accounts for the way in which the Future is always constructed by the multiplication of the Present with Past, in an amplified manner, thus being squared.

When looking at the mechanics of **cultural appropriation** in "Dune", one of the most important devices in the worldbuilding of the novels, is the borrowing ideas, concepts, words



and names from the Muslim world. His inspiration from the Islamic culture was observed by many critics (Jackson 2011), yet when overviewing Herbert's technique it became obvious that he was loosely playing with past and present. On one hand, this preoccupation can be explained by the fact that at the time when the novels were conceived, the Western world was confronted with the coalition of Middle Eastern countries. After OPEC was created in 1960, by 1965 these countries produced more oil than the United States. When the Western economies were hit hard by a series of "oil shocks", it generated a wave of social uncertainties. This traumatic context is clearly acknowledged by Herbert, who published in 1980 his own version about how he developed the novels (Herbert 1980). The author publicly disclosed the connection between the oil crises and his vision, as oil scarcity was allegorically connected with the galactic need for spice, which was driving the cosmic travels. "CHOAM is OPEC", recognized Herbert, confirming the transformative powers of the concerns of the present into the fantasies of the future. On the other hand the overall storytelling is a mishmash of elements, from Greek mythology (Duke Leto, House of Atreides), to Catholic institutions (the Reverend Mothers of the Bene Gesserit), or feudal structures (the Landsraad, the Padishah Emperor), infused with a fascination for the Orient, perpetuated by Western popular imagination for millenia.

"Dune" appropriates Islamic elements in an explicit and direct manner. The future imagined by Herbert is taking place more that 20 millenia in the future, yet it is the result of a "Butlerian Jihad", a religious war against all intelligent machines. The "Dune Messiah" is called Muad'Dib, wich in the Sunni hadith traditions is the anticipated Second Mesiah, also known as "the Mahdi" or "the Guider" who is supposed to lead all Muslism in their final push to control the world. Also, when Paul Atreides is given a "secret" and tribal name, called Usul, the real Usul al-Fiqh is another Islamic concept describing "the Path" of the religious man. The female priestesses of the Fremen are called "sayyadina", with "sayyid" in Arabic meaning "master", also used as a proper noun for several towns in the Middle East. The Emperor of the Galaxy is named Shaddam IV, which is closely linked to the common name Saddam (the Confronter), while the title of the supreme leader is Padishah, which is the actual title of the Turkish Sultans. The elite military force of the Galaxy are called "The Sardaukar", a terrible army sharing numerous traits of the janissaries, their name sounding like a Persian word, "sardar" or "sirdar" describing Sikh generals and nobility. Clearly the "Spice Planet" where the main story takes place, named on Arrakis, sound very much like Irak, and its vast oil resources are obviously transformed into the spice called "Melange", which the Fremen, a nomadic tribe living in this world without water, gather and cultivate. The control over the spice ("He who controls the spice, controls the universe"), just like the control over the oil, provides universal power. Here we cannot ignore the link between the Fremen and the Bedouins, nor the transparent connection between Paul Atreides operating like a futuristic Lawrence of Arabia.

Just like the spice “melange” that turns the eyes of the local people into a deep blue color, Herbert practices a form of **cultural melange**, leading to a profound reinterpretation of the past. While the Fremen are speaking a distorted form of Arabic, the Messiah in “Dune” is also called Kwisatz Haderach by the Bene Gesserit, which in turn is clearly appropriated from a Jewish mystical concept. The “kefitzat ha-derekh”, also known as “The Shortening of the Way”, is considered by some mystical rabbis and practitioners of the Kabbalah to allow space jumping. The enemies of the Atrides, the Harkonnen House, is lead by a “Baron” called Vladimir, a totalitarian and barbarous creature metaphorically referring to the Soviet Union leadership. Even more problematic than these appropriations are the references to a cosmic “Breeding Program”, coordinated by the Bene Gesserit, which has profound racist undertones. More relevant for our discussion is the fact that the entire Galaxy is ultimately controlled by a human-sandworm hybrid, an eternal God-Emperor, and this imperialist determinism, which will be addressed later in this discussion, is central to the “Duniverse”.

No film director was able to take the real cinematic Golden Path and to bring to the fictional desert planet a true autochthonous hero, an idea which would have been close to Herbert’s original idea. The main characters should have been Liet Kynes, the ecologist who was integrated into the local culture and who could have been the true “Muad’dib”, one representing the people of color and, even more resolutely, a black woman like Sharon Duncan-Brewster.

On gender-flipping, character cloning and ideology-swapping

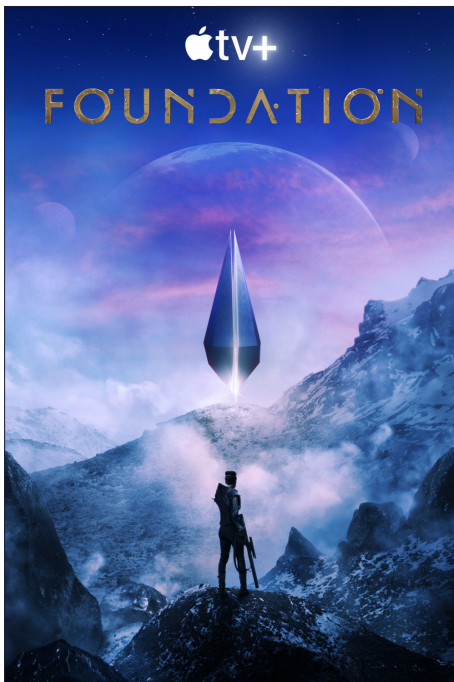
The most important and valorous transformation operated by Villeneuve in the “Duniverse”, both provocative and creative, remains the distribution of Sharon Duncan-Brewster as the character of Liet Kynes, the imperial ecologist of Arrakis, who was also the secret teacher of the Fremen communities living in the desert. The director of the 2021 film decided to put in place a discreet and audacious “gender swap”, by recasting for a role usually played by a White man, a Black woman. This idea, apparently promoted by screenwriter Jon Spaihts, one of the co-writers of this adaptation, allowed a gender change which was profoundly tied to the true nature of the character, one that brought more significations to the original than expected. The public and the fans accepted this transformation without any resistance, no relevant backlash followed this obvious intervention in the original narration. British actress Sharon Duncan Brewster embodied Dr. Kynes with a subtle and profound understanding of the character. Keynes, who in the books is also the father of Chani, the love interest of Paul Atrides, is not disconcerting or confusing in the new version. If anything, it gives more clarity to this peace seeking character, as Kynes was imagined by Frank Herbert as protector and a nurturer of life on Arrakis, not only a technician intervening in this habitat.

Brewster's ability to also project an ambiguity of identity adds even more to the intensity of a the character that shares many traits of the biblical John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, as he prepared the path for the coming of the "Dune Messiah".

A similar gender-flipping happens in the first adaptation of Isaac Asimov's "Foundation", premiered on AppleTV+ in September 2021, just a few weeks after *Dune* was received with standing ovation at the 78th Venice International Film Festival, where it had its world premiere. This time showrunners David S. Goyer and Josh Friedman decided to make not one, not two, but three major gender somersaults, juggling simultaneously three of the main characters of the book in a gender and racial transformation. Asimov's first novel begins with the description of Gaal Dornick, a mathematician who becomes the first leader of the Foundation created by Hari Seldon, also the biographer of the creator of psychohistory. As the first character mentioned in the books, Gaal was described as "a young man" who met Seldon "two years before the great mathematician's death", just a "country boy who never saw Trantor" before. Goyer and Friedman courageously transmuted this premise, deciding to make Gaal a young woman with a special gift for mathematics, even though she is born on planet Synnax, where science is prohibited for religious reasons. In order to adjust this deviation, the screenwriters decided also to introduce a new link with the male character Raych Seldon (played by British actor Alfred Enoch, who has a Barbadian Brazilian ancestry). Raych, is a character in Isaac Asimov's "Forward the Foundation", which appears much

later than Gaal, thus in order to coerce the racial and gender flipping, the showrunners are compelled to bend time.

The same is true with the next transformation, which is done when the viewers encounter Eto Demerzel, played by Finnish actress Laura Birn. Asimov's fans know that this is an important structural cohesion element in all the work of the science-fiction master, the name was used by the positronic robot R. Daneel Olivaw. This brings about another quantum leap into the rewriting of the past in order to make it palatable for the present. Since Daneel is a key character uniting several works written by Asimov, introduced in 1953 in "The Caves of Steel" as a robotic sidekick for detective "Lije" Baley, any changes to Daneel generate transformations of the entire universe. Demerzel/Daneel was obviously



intended by the writer as a male figure, since he was created to resemble Dr. Sarton, the fictional Auroran inventor of the “Three Laws of Robotics”. Daneel, as a binding character, overviewed the creation of the Galactic Empire, the invention of psychohistory, protected the two Foundations and continued to exist as a god-like figure guiding humanity to the ultimate purpose of creating Galaxia, a possible future in which all life and non-living organic matter is incorporated in a single organism. The fact that Demerzel becomes in the TV series a machine with female traits makes sense, as he/she was designed to protect the Cleonic Dynastic, but does not need fixed gender features. With Laura Birn offering the character a mechanical dimension that makes her believable as a multifaceted machine, one that can freely change identity, the reconversion is visually and narratively appropriate.

The biggest switch happens when we meet Salvor Hardin, the first mayor of Terminus, a key figure of the First Foundation. While Gaal Dornick played by Llou Lobel, a female actress of color, is a stable version, which goes by relatively unnoticed in the overall storytelling, the fact that Hardin was played by Leah Harvey, a black British actress who is self-describing her identity as “gay, non-binary, biologically female, mixed race, Black-presenting, millennial” (Harvey 2021). This identity of the actress as non-binary human using they/them pronouns ultimately has no effect on character development. Just as in *House of the Dragon* where actress Emma D’Arcy plays the role of adult Princess Rhaenyra Targaryen, gender identity has no impact on acting or on the narrative.

The real issues are made explicit not by gender swapping, but by the narrative and structural changes. In *Foundation* the TV series opens a deep rift between Asimov’s intentions and the new significations imposed by the showrunners, as they not only alter worldbuilding, but have clear ideological meanings. In the novels Hardin, who is the first to open the Time Vault created by Seldon, transforms the First Foundation from a group of encyclopedists into a hegemonic and commercial superpower. By controlling the Periphery and acting as an explorer-conqueror, Hardin was an allegorical figure of American expansionism. The “real” Hardin from the novels was faced with the consequences of the Anacreon kingdom, uses his negotiating skills to confront the local rulers and manages to take control of the technologies of the old Empire, thus creating a new political system which will be the basis for a Second Galactic Empire. None of this transpires into the new *Foundation* tv series, instead the “new Hardin” is reinvented as an action-adventure heroine. This character alteration is a form of **ideology swapping**, one in which the storytelling does not help the progressive or LGBTQ agenda, “gender swapping” has only the purpose of reshaping ideology.

A similar treatment is given by the developers of the series to the Entun dynasty, the last rulers of the Galactic Empire. The creative team rewriting the saga decided to add cloning to this mix. This new trope seems to provide depth to the story, as Empire becomes the name of a group of three clones of Emperor Cleon the First, who are ruling the Galaxy as a secular trinity: Day, Dawn and Dusk. The parallels with the Holy Trinity, transformed into The Father, The Son and the Brother, are explicit, even the gestures of “Brother Day” (the

adult version of the clones), who are actively ruling the Empire, are mimicking Christian iconography. The function of these cloned emperors is not simply narrative, it has altering effects throughout the fictional world building and on our understanding of our own worlds. These presumed genetic clones of the first Emperor, Cleon I, are not only a radical novelty, they alter the timeline of the original. In Asimov's story Cleon I was only the last inept ruler during the time of Hari Seldon, while in the movie we are already in the time of Cleon XIII. More importantly this tripartite structure of the imperial succession, inspired obviously from the Roman empire Tetrarchy, is subverting the "Foundation" history and the History Asimov criticizes. Cleon XIII is confronted with the religious rebellion of the "Luminists", who believe in a gender based faith, a mirror of the Cleons with a tripartite Goddess (the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone) which does not exist in the original. The ideological repurposing of the story allows the opposition between a patriarchal figure (the Brothers) fighting against a female resistance lead by Proxima, the head of Luminism. The forces confronting The Empire and its institutions resistant to change are no longer political and social, they are mythological and gender based. Seldon becomes the voice of diversity politics, as he asks the Three Emperors (three white men) to give up cloning because they are not "diverse" and "different" enough and because their repetitive nature prevents the future to be fulfilled, always reproducing the past.

More observations about racial cinematic capitalism

A new discipline was created in the traditional field of film studies, suggestively called "critical race film theory". Intended as a method to describe and study the ways in which cinema "communicates racist values to individual spectators and society at large" and to explain "how the medium carries racist ideology" (Sim 2), it promises to expand critical race theory into film studies. Using a race-centered interpretation of films and elaborating on key concepts from the already relevant critical race theory, by examining ideology and power discourses which were already a part of the "traditional" critical theory approaches, a critical race film theory is able to provide several answers when confronting the issues of **race-time continuum**. With critical race theory now well integrated into the curriculum of many academic institutions, its expansion from the initial conceptualizations elaborated by professor Derrick Bell at the Harvard Law School, to many other disciplines, including political science and cinema studies, is only natural. To simply put it, following the definition provided by Delgado and Stefancic (2001), critical race theory is a conceptual lens, allowing us to understand the relationship between race and power (3).

In film studies the critical race theory approach is especially relevant, as it is explicit by taking a closer look to Peter Jackson's Tolkien hexalogy, starting with *Lord of the Rings*:

The Fellowship of the Ring (2001) and ending with *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies* (2014). Jackson created a multi-billion dollar cinematic powerhouse, the six movies cumulated staggering revenues of over 5.9 billion USD globally. Yet it also indicated the racial hegemony and the non-diversity casting practices in Hollywood. More disturbing is the fact that several white supremacist and racist websites embraced this racialized vision (Stuart 22). As noted before, racism is not only a superficial trait in Tolkien's imagination, it is structurally embedded into the vision of Middle-Earth universe, where the racial distribution (Elves, Men, Dwarves, Hobbits and Orcs) indicates a hierarchy similar to the racial segregation of the past. This might be explained by Tolkien's anglo-centric views determined by the fact that he grew up in apartheid South Africa, yet his "anti-orcism" indicates a racist slant, as the author described orcs as "Mongol-type" humans, while the Elves were the fairest creatures of his fictional world, tall, light-coloured with golden hair, almost a Nazi dream come true.

Douglas Kellner (2006) appropriately connects the films with the "political unconscious" of the time, projecting and cultivating militarism and celebrating patriarchal masculinity, in a narrow and conservative perspective about our world (19). The movies were overlapping with America's longest war, as the conflict in Afghanistan (1999–2021) and the conflict in Iraq, which kept traumatizing the Western imagination. Visibly the film hexalogy is populated by fair-skinned humans, blond and blue-eyed creatures, who are fighting dark skinned Orcs and the monstrous Uruk-hai. While Tolkien always denied any allegorical dimension of his works, the fight between darkness and evil and whiteness and solidarity was clearly linked to the conflict between the Western democracies and Nazism. When transposed from the written text to the cinematic, these oppositions became strongly racialized. In the films the conflict between good and evil accentuated Whiteness as a manifestation of absolute right, with black connected to villainy. The ultimate result was the transformation of Whiteness into an "extravagant visual apotheosis", a triumphal and "epic paeon" contained by a fantastic cinematic spectacle (Kellner 34).

We must understand racism and capitalism as fused together, joined in what I described as the **race-time continuum**. Several transdisciplinary studies (Jenkins and Leroy 2021) follow Cedric Robinson's articulation of this connection, by criticising the racially blind Marxist theory and proposing a vision of capitalism as driven by slavery and imperialistic genocide. While Beller (2022) properly described how the resources of slavery, colonialism and imperialism are embedded in the "white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism" (10), proposing a new concept, the "computational racial capitalism", I consider that we need to continue with the thorough investigation of the "cinematic racial capitalism". Cinema was and will always be a capitalist machine, easily coupling racialization with profit making. Racial capitalism uses cinema in order to convey its imaginary structures into money and, relevantly enough, even in its digital environments it continues to be driven by profit.

There are many studies focusing on the relationship between race and cinema, discussing the "cinematic racial order" (Denzin 2002), critically evaluating the history of racist repre-

sentations in movies. Yet an analysis of recent **racial cinematic capitalism** shows the ability of the exploitation system to integrate racial discourses into its profit making machines. One recent example is the provided, once more, by a miniseries created by Disney+. After the success of *The Mandalorian*, the producers at Disney decided to continue with their “old” Star Wars commodities, recuperating “Old Ben” Kenobi from the sands of Tatooine and creating his own show, creatively entitled “Obi-Wan Kenobi”. Directed by Deborah Chow, appreciated by the fans of *The Mandalorian*, the six part series introduced a new character, the Inquisitor Reva Sevander, also named the Third Sister. Convincingly played by actress Moses Ingram, her new role was surrounded by the same social media turmoil as it was in the case with the first BAME actress in the Star Wars Universe, Kelly Marie Tran. Tran also received negative comments as the American actress with Vietnamese origins was traumatized by online trolls with racist and misogynistic comments. The diversification of the “Star Wars” franchise, which started when Disney introduced Lando Calrissian in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), was now a source of contention for some fans. This female inquisitor in the new Disney+ series, working closely with Darth Vader, the great and dark villain of Star Wars who now tries to capture his former master Kenobi, was strong and determined. Some fans resisted the obvious efforts made by Disney+ to transform Star Wars into a diversity paradise, accusing the “House of the Mouse” for transforming their imaginary and fantasy world into a “woke for profit” franchise. Denouncing Kathleen Kennedy, president of Lucasfilm, for her statements that the “Force is Female”, the fans noticed how their childhood hero Obi-Wan Kenobi, played once again by Ewan McGregor, was a downgraded version of himself, a male character confronted with a powerful black female heroin who ends up being “emasculated” (Ippolito 2022). The aesthetic and narrative disenchantment became offensive when Ingram’s Instagram account was bombarded by hundreds of racist comments, insults and even death threats, which in turn compelled the company to accuse the “toxic fandom” and the unacceptable online hate culture. Actor Ewan McGregor denounced the racist trolls, while on the official Twitter page, Disney supported Moses Ingram and suggested that there were “more than 20 million sentient species in the Star Wars galaxy”, encouraging fans to choose not to be a racist, finishing with the powerful political message: “We resist”.

As racial cinematic capitalism fully embraced the progressive discourse, following the economic interests of expanding viewership, **racial identity** was weaponized **profit making**. Even when criticized, Disney capitalized on the race wars, as its audience grew after the negative publicity, reviving an otherwise dull and uncreative story.

The recently released Hollywood Diversity Report, produced by produced the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE) at UCLA provides us with the data explaining how **cinematic racial capitalism**. In the United States the demographic transformations are accelerated, the minorities share of the total U.S. population has

reached 42.7 percent in 2021, and in the next decade the people of color will become the majority. The newly discovered “diversity” of movies and television programs is not so much politically and ideologically motivated, in fact it is an economic necessity. The 2022 Diversity Report, which examined 407 scripted television shows, broadcasted or streamed during the 2020–21 season, indicates that the racial and ethnic structure of broadcast scripted productions is dominated by White leads, with 72.6%, as people of color accounted for only 27.4 percent. However, in the case of cable scripted leads in the 2020–21 television season Black leads represented 39.6 percent which is the highest level to this day. The number of people of color in TV programs is growing, reaching 3.8 out of 10 lead actors in digital scripted shows, while women remain underrepresented among the top roles in broadcast and cable. Another discrepancy is that multiracial persons are overrepresented (14 percent in broadcast), Latinx (5.3 percent) persons remained severely underrepresented.

Also, while the number of White leads is constantly declining, we cannot yet discuss a proportionate representation between minorities, and, more importantly, people belonging to the majority still have a disproportionate control over financial resources. Both in cable and in broadcast productions White female creators and creators of color had smaller budgets than their White male counterparts.

Wokeism and chameleonic capitalism

Capitalism is a chameleonic system, its adaptation abilities were historically tested, providing innumerable facets and chimerical manifestations in the last 500 years of its existence. Carl Rhodes (2022), professor at the University of Technology in Sydney Australia, observed one of the most recent shifts in the way capitalism presents itself. Made public at the 2020 World Economic Forum in Davos, this rejuvenated form of capitalism can be labeled as **woke capitalism**. Made explicit by the statement of the financial and economic elites of the world reunited for the jubilee of this organization, which now has more than 50 years of public activity, the “manifesto” announces a need for a “new type of capitalism”. Called “New Capitalism” this is a form of “sustainable capitalism”, based on a transfer from the “shareholder capitalism” to a “capitalism of partners” (stakeholder capitalism).

Providing a new face to the old monster, the “responsible” version of capitalism cares about ecology and environmental issues, is ethical and amenable, and is involved in the progress of society. All these new facets, outlined by the Davos 2020 agenda, are not only hypocritical, as Rhodes argued, they are also dangerous for democracy. Even capitalism has understood that the issues related to “racial and ethnic justice”, by now are integrated in business practices, together with the development of an “ecological consciousness”, which has become mandatory, and the creation of a “minority and disability inclusive” working

environment, are necessities. More and more managers leading large multinational companies are morphed into environmental activists, becoming staunch supporters of LGBTQ rights and promoters of the global fight against discrimination. In the same way in which contemporary capitalism tries to save the whales, decimated in droves by capitalist industrial practices, or by promising to cure all humanity's ills, which it has created, the fact that the managerial elites of multinational corporations are searching for solutions to all social and environmental problems is the ultimate form of **capitalist chameleonism**.

This form of woke capitalism follows the path already taken by the “enlightened capitalism”, the “philanthropic” version of capitalism invented in the early 20th century under the pressure induced by the rise of communism. Exploiters like Rockefeller, who created in 1913 an eponymous foundation designed to provide him with a good name and a positive image after the infamous Ludlow Massacre when machine guns were used against protesting miners. In fact, as Lori Dagggar (2022) overviewed the convoluted history of imperialism and its links with the missionary activities all over the world, this “philanthropic” capitalism was just another instrument for exploitation and expansion of imperialistic practices. Under the guise of these altruistic and high moral standards, the American empire was expanded.

The understanding of these phenomena is sometimes hindered by the fact that “wokeness” has become a negative banner used by reactionaries and conservatives who denounce as “woke” any and all the policies of the Left. More importantly, the absurdly paradoxical claim is that the global billionaires could have some sort of a secret “socialist agenda”. Some of the most vocal supporters of these illogical claims, like Dinesh D’Souza (2020), political commentator Tucker Carlson, who has declared that 2019 was the year of the “woke billionaires”, or conservative journalist Rod Dreher (2019), denouncing the “diversity, equity, and inclusion” ideology as similar to the totalitarian regimes, are overlapping “woke culture” with Stalinism, wokeism sometimes presented as a form of Leninism. For example D’Souza blames Herbert Marcuse for these transformations, as if this German philosopher, who was a collaborator of the State Department and OSS (Kellner), could somehow control the contemporary institutions. Advancing the grotesque idea that post-industrial financial and economic elites have secretly become the supporters of socialism, accusing Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg to have become “socialist billionaires”, promoting “socialist schemes” allows a schizoid dissociation. By blaming present day cultural institutions of being dominated by socialists thinking, using identity politics as an example for the instrumentalization of social control, dissociates capitalism from its responsibilities.

For many conservatives the definition of “woke capitalism” is synonymous with anti-capitalism. Convinced that the “Leftist elites” are in control of the resources of world capitalism, believed that this new capitalism is a “socialism in disguise”, they actually exonerate capitalism from any guilt. In this logic, only “old capitalism” was good, while the “new capitalists”, who promote the LGBTQ agenda or diversity, are capitalists no more. In

this debate about superficial problems, like the bi-sexual inclinations of a fictional superhero, the real issues of exploitation and accumulation of unearned wealth are muted. While conservatives accuse the “liberal corporatocracy” of being too “woke,” there is no evidence that the multi-billionaires of the planet and the mega-rich have been magically transformed into fervent followers of classical Marxism. The richest man on Earth, Elon Musk, does not sleep at night with Marx under his pillow, in fact his most recent public behavior on Twitter indicates a clear Right wing slant. Contemporary capitalism does not promote “identity socialism” for the sake of some communist ideals. The only driving force behind the capital is capital itself.

For many conservatives the label “woke company” is only a useful rhetorical instrument, a device used by right-wing politicians to attack their opponents. Disney is one of the preferred targets of the conservative assault, some suggesting that the multi-billionaire “House of the Mouse” is secretly promoting a progressive, even a socialist agenda. Opinion leaders who think they are “on the Right side of History” accuse Disney of “woke-ism”. Conservative author and commentator Ben Shapiro published several books on these issues, argues that the real “aggressor” is the Left, claiming that the “Mouse House” is purposefully injecting children’s programs with a “gay agenda” (Shapiro 2022). Using leaked messages from Disney’s management, such as the declarations of animation director Latoya Raveneau, who apparently acknowledged how her “not-at-all-secret gay agenda” was welcomed at Disney, denouncing “woke capitalism” has narrow, political and religious purposes. The fact that these accusations are amplified by the Christian media, as is the case with Deseret News publication, owned by the Utah Mormon Church, who vehemently accused the “woke-ism” of Disney, suggesting that the billionaire mouse promotes a progressive and socialist agenda (Graham 2021), shows that the presumed “cultural war” is only a political battle the conservatives feel they are losing.

Following Rhodes, we must understand “woke” capitalism as a form of contemporary feudalism, a society in which moral and political authority is transferred to non-democratic corporations, with the ultimate end of “de-democratization” democracy. Is capitalism less rapacious when pretending to have become a form of “sensitive” capitalism, attentive to the issues of the LGBTQ community and supporting the environmental crusades of truant schoolgirl Greta Thunberg? In fact, by adopting a presumed “woke” behavior, capitalism justifies its existence in a world where the inequalities produced by this very form of social and economic organization it engendered has endangered the entire planet. As Rhodes indicates, “woke” capitalism is a defensive ploy providing a moral justification for the existence of capitalism and ensures the protection of the capitalists, repositioned as saviors of a society on the brink of destruction due to the problems they have created. When the foundations of Jeff Bezos try to save the planet while the employees of his multi billion dollar companies are coerced to urinate in plastic bottles so that they do not to interrupt the production flow,

“wokeness” is a gratuitous label. When Bill Gates releases a new book about fighting global pandemics, when global hunger kills more children than the coronavirus, woke capitalism turns a blind eye on the real issues.

The persuasive reasoning presented by Rhodes is that this “woke” version of capitalism is fundamentally harmful because it provides the huge global corporations the capability to intervene in larger democratic processes. By being “woke”, capitalists can intervene politically and ideologically to prescribe the directions in which human society must go. “Woke capitalism” is anti-democratic not because any individual cannot hold true the social issues the new capitalism advances, but because in fact the corporation only supports ideas that do not threaten their financial interests in any way. Woke capitalism can easily combat “toxic masculinity”, since it does not affect exploitation of children in third world countries. A “woke” capitalist can easily become supporter of any #metoo cause, since this does not change his deep structures based on economic hegemony and the fact that millions of women all over the world live in poverty.

In fact, capitalism only seeks superficial solutions to compensate for its inability to provide answers to the real problems of the world. The “iron law of woke capitalism”, as Helen Lewis suggestively paraphrased a central thesis in Marxist thinking (Lewis 2020), is that capitalism can be anything as long as the changes do not affect the structures of exploitation. “Woke capitalism” can promote any superficial morality when the economic structures and its foundations remain intact. By becoming “woke”, capitalism ensures its own survival into the future, diverting attention from its structural and substantial economic problems, to unproblematic cultural debates. As long as the mechanisms of profit are not affected, the Capital is always ready to support any cause, no matter how noble or ignoble they might be.

Woke cinematic capitalism

This “woke capitalism” is also affecting cinematic representations. In June 2022 a new animation produced by Disney and Pixar caused a global commotion when *Lightyear*, the sequel to the “Toy Story” series, was banned in several Muslim countries due to the fact that it represented a lesbian kiss. Then, in November 2022, when Disney released another animation, *Strange World* (2022), the producers decided not to distribute it in more than 20 countries, since the movie would have been most likely banned or censored anyway.

Relevantly enough, there was a retrograde coalition between the conservatives in the United States and their fellow fanatics from various religions, all joining the chorus of accusations, once more denouncing Disney for implementing a presumed diabolical plan to pervert the youth of the planet. Trolls were roaming the Internet with anti-woke messages, using *Lightyear* and *Strange World* as showcases for the presumed plans to switch the brains

of our children. When two female characters form a family and have a child, or when a young man with homosexual desires lives in a racially mixed family, these representations do not shake the established institutions, quite the contrary, they reinforce family as a central unit of society.

The biggest problem with *Strange World*, a movie having production costs of about 180 million USD and only grossed 42.4 million worldwide (in December, after the November 2022 release), is not the depiction of clumsy gay love. This movie, with all its high-tech visual spectacle, is just another tedious rehashing of worn-out cinematic tropes. The adventures of the Clade family in Avalonia, is nothing more than the manifestation of the exhausted signifiers. Yet the flying machine, copied from Verne's "Robur the Conqueror", enters another fantasy world populated with the same strange creatures and plants that grew previously in the Pandoran worlds of *Avatar*. The film is narratively unconvincing, before being a story about a biracial and gay teenager encouraged by his parents to follow his sexual inclinations.

These shortcomings did not prevent conservative media networks like CBN (Christian Broadcasting Network), founded by televangelist Pat Robertson, to accuse again Disney of pursuing a "gay agenda", as part of an evil plan to expose children to "wokeist" sexual ideas. The conservatives find many examples in movies showing homosexual relationships. Accusing a background kiss between two female characters lasting a few seconds at the end of the 2019 installment of Star Wars, *The Rise of Skywalker*, is immaterial. This Disney production, which was censored in Singapore and in Russia, grossed over 1,07 billion USD worldwide, making it one of the most profitable movies in the history of cinema, did not threaten the amazing ability of capital to make more capital out of fantasies. When another Disney production, *Eternals* (2021), was banned in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait because there was a gay kiss in which the superhero Phastos (played by Brian Tyree Henry) and his fictional husband Ben (Haaz Sleiman) were depicted in an intimate relationship, this Marvel Universe character being the first gay black superhero, it doubled the investments, reaching more than 402 million USD worldwide.

Conservatives, who believe that movies and other cultural products influence sexual behavior, a conspiracy theory that has no scientific proof, claim that these media contents can condition the behavior of children. As indicated by the law signed in March 2022 by Republican Ron De Santis, the governor of Florida who approved the "Don't Say Gay" bill prohibiting any forms of sex education or discussions about gender orientation in local kindergartens or schools, these unsupported allegations have a political motivation. Yet the fact that Loki, Thor's companion and adoptive brother in the Marvel Universe, has become a bisexual hero in the 2021 series has no real impact on real humans. As early as 2017, Valkyrie, another character from the *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), was declared bisexual. These "revelations" about the sexual fluidity of the Norse gods (and of any ancient gods for

that matter) is not unexpected, if anything they are normal, as many boisterous gods from mythology are sexually depraved.

When young viewers are exposed to a character like LeFou, Gaston's friend from *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), who shares obvious homosexual traits, or when Dumbledore in *Fantastic Beasts: Secrets of Dumbledore* (2022) discloses his erotic passion for his friend Grindelwald, there is no evidence that the viewers exposed to such behaviors suddenly change their sexual orientation. The real benefits are, once again, visible at the box-office, where the story about the wizards from a fantasy parallel world generated extremely real 405 million USD worldwide, while the old story about a young girl in love with a monster filled the bank accounts with more than 1.26 billion USD. The same is true with the animated film *Frozen* (2013), accused of having a secret pro-homosexual message, yet the old and derelict fairy tale written by Hans Christian Andersen in 1844, became the best-selling animated film in history, with more than 1,26 billion USD worldwide. Billions of children and adults around the world never changed their sexual preferences, payed hard earned money to rewatch the same recipe again in a long series of stereotypes perpetuating the same derelict plot, the singing princess loving an undeserving prince.

The reality is that there is no secret program to corrupt the minds of humanity, nor those of the unsuspecting youth. The recent data provided by the most important non-governmental organization in the United States monitoring the representation of the LGBTQ+ community in the media, indicates that, relative to the US population and the respective publics these productions were intended for, the percentage of LGBTQ+ characters is not even balanced. GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) has been monitoring American cinema for almost 25 years. The first film discussed was "Midnight Caller", accused in 1988 of "biphobia" (phobia against bisexual people), then in 1994 the organization became involved in the notorious campaign to broadcast the first lesbian kiss in the TV series "Roseanne". Starting with 1996 a first annual report on LGBTQ+ media portrayals, called "Where We Are on TV," was released and in 2022 GLAAD published for the first time a report on LGBTQ characters in recent television series.

A novelty in the data and statistics provided by GLAAD results from the monitoring of the representation of LGBTQ+ (rather LGBTQIA+ for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and Others) characters in programs created by the major companies now streaming online, such as Amazon, Hulu or Netflix. Out of the 775 characters from the list of top-rated shows available between 2021 and 2022, only 11.9% (or 92) were LGBTQ+. While this represents a growth from 9.1% in 2020, when out of 118 films monitored, 22 LGBTQ+ characters were identified, and a remarkable transformation since 2016, when only 12.9% were LGBTQ+ characters, most of them not distributed in leading roles either, structurally these representations are disbalanced. This top, dominated by Netflix, where viewers can watch the highest number of recurring or occasional LGBTQ+

characters, is predominantly composed of gay men (with 33% of the number of characters, and representing 68%, or 15 characters, from fiction films), while lesbians are down to 36% (or 8 characters), bisexual characters represent 14% (or 3 characters), while transgender people are not represented at all. There is a smaller percentage of gay black men (22%), and gay Asian men make up only 4% of the total.

Perhaps some of these percentages may seem strange for viewers in conservative countries such as Russia or Malaysia, where the tolerance for inclusion and the acceptance of the portrayals of LGBTQ+ people in media is extremely low (24%, respectively 27%). As indicated by the Ipsos LGBT+ Pride 2021 Global Survey, there are huge discrepancies between the various countries in the world. In some countries the support of LGBTQ+ communities is very high, such as Sweden (71%) or Spain (70%), while in other countries the views about same-sex marriage and relationships is extremely low, with 52% of the Russians agreeing that same-sex couples should not be allowed to marry or obtain any kind of legal recognition. In a world of intolerance, diversity might look strange, yet in the United States the situation is different. Although in the US the questions about belonging to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) community have only been introduced in the 2020 census, when the estimates were to about 4.5% of the total population, according to the most recent Gallup polls (Jones 2022) people who identify as LGBT in the US are almost 7.1% of the total population. In the case of Generation Z (young Americans born between 1997 and 2002) the level of identification is higher, at 20.8%, while the Millennials (Americans born between 1981 and 1996) identify as LGBT at about 10.5%. The number of transgender people (who do not declare themselves cisgender, not identified by their sex at birth) is also relatively stable, at about 1.33 million, that is, 0.5% of the total population.

The fact that the LGBTQ+ representations reach different cultures, with different values and systems of thought, exposes them with what might appear to be a shocking and manipulative image. However, the percentage of LGBTQ characters is not excessively high, in fact they barely reach the proportionate representation. The only true kiss that companies like Netflix or Disney understand is that of profits, these communities are not represented for ideological purposes, they are present because they contribute to the prosperity of global capitalism.

The Foundation minus Marxism equals melodrama

Taking a closer look at the *Foundation* TV series, the biggest issues with the transformations discussed are not related to their explicit gender and racial diversification. Instead we must observe another form of cleansing, which depletes their profound significations. The works of Isaac Asimov present us with a relevant case study for how ideological appropriation functions.

There are many similarities between Asimov's vision and Marxist thinking, a fact previously observed by several critics even during the lifetime of the author. While James Gunn (1996) tried to defend Asimov against the accusations brought forward by Charles Elkins (1977), who first identified in his novels various forms of "vulgar Marxism", such connections cannot be avoided. Gunn's monography does not insist on the suspicions that loomed over Asimov, who was born in the town of Petrovichi, near Smolensk in Soviet Russia. Asimov's 1994 memoir does not insist on his Russian-Jewish origins, or the fact that the author had several family members living in the USSR, one of his uncles was even a major general in the Red Army. His father's admiration for the Soviet society, which was supposed to create a new order without racism and the fact that he was still communicating with his relatives in the Soviet Union are also minimalized. He never mention that The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HCUA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) were suspecting him as a possible Soviet collaborator, recently published documents show that the FBI considered the writer as a potential sympathizer of the Communist Party USA and possibly the informant codenamed "ROBPROF" (Brown 13–19).

Another important fact is linked to his early career, when young Asimov joined "The Futurians" in 1938. This literary group, initially composed by fans of science fiction, included many New York writers who were close to Marxist ideas, to say the least. An aspect rarely explored by the biographers of the father of the "Foundation" and downplayed by the great author himself. In his autobiographical work (Asimov 1979) he claims that the Futurians were only "antifascists" reuniting during a time when "Marxist rhetoric" was unavoidable. Yet "The Futurians", who are extremely similar with the Encyclopedists in the "Foundation", were not politically innocent. Some of the members of the group were documented comrades in the Communist Party or The Young Communist League, others sympathizers who openly endorsed Marxist views about society (Elkins 103).

Asimov was aware of this association and was trying to reduce the relevance of his belonging to the group, yet his path to professional science fiction writing begins in 1938, with the Futurians who were meeting in the same headquarters with the Communist Party in New York (Knight 1977). Among the members of this group were future science fiction legends, like Frederik Pohl and Donald Wollheim. In fact Wollheim (1971) openly described psychohistory to be a "Marxist science", associating it negatively with a pseudoscience. Elkins (99–100) follows Wollheim's consideration and labels psychohistory as a "caricature" of Marxist ideas, a "simplistic distortion" which was borrowing elements from a "vulgar Marxism", a credulous form of belief in "the laws of historical necessity". Gunn uses this dimension of a "debased Marxism" to justify a presumed anti-communism of the author, while Asimov (1977) claims that he never read anything "written by Marx", nor any "Marxian economics or philosophy", thus he knew nothing about Marx or his vision about history (203).

The reality is that the “Foundation” novels are carrying the significations of an extremely troublesome time in human history. Although they were later gathered in three volumes published starting with 1951, “Foundation”, then “Foundation and Empire” (1952) and “Second Foundation” (1953), Asimov acknowledged in his autobiography that he was writing these stories under the traumatic experiences of WWII. Actually “The Mule” was a character created while the Soviet army was approaching Berlin. When Asimov returned three decades later to his “early Foundation” trilogy (1951–53), the first new story, “Foundation’s Edge” (1982) indicates a change in tone and in the political environment. Followed by “Foundation and the Earth” (1986), “Prelude to Foundation” (1988) and finally the posthumous work entitled “Forward the Foundation” (1993), the storytelling about the Second Foundation moves from the plutocracy of the “Merchant Princes”, to the group of secret elites ruling the Galaxy with their superior mental powers. While Asimov’s remarkable body of work must be understood as product of his time, as he witnessed a global imperialistic war, then living during Cold War and the nuclear scares, then into the 80s with the growing involvement of the CIA in international affairs, the Foundation universe, which was controlled by a predictive science called psychohistory and the corresponding “Seldonian crises” with their deterministic vision about human history, are not simply “caricatures” of Marxist theory, or derivative ideas from Marx, as Elkins claimed.

The connections between the implacable laws of history leading to the triumph of global communism and the psychohistorical vision in the “Foundation” are relevant. Hari Seldon, just like Marx, was a scientist who believed in the universal laws of society and history. These were good old Hegelian ideas, postulating that humanity followed a predictable path leading to the ultimate fulfillment of human freedom. Hegel’s “Philosophy of History” (1821) goes from Dusk to Dawn, a metaphor borrowed by the showrunners of *Foundation* in 2021. This historical determinism is transparent in the storytelling of all the “Foundation” novels, a “historic destiny” of humanity which was also transparent for Marx who observed that non-agricultural peoples were in an antithesis with the agricultural groups, who in turn were creating a feudal form of social organization, then the feudal entered in an antithesis with the industrial forces, thus the bourgeois capitalism was inherently in antithesis with the proletariat. Modeling his vision about the future accordingly, Marx anticipated just like Seldon since ancient societies made way to feudal forms of organization, then to the modern bourgeoisie model, this indicated an implicit and implacable transit towards a new form of society, which he believed to be of communist extraction (Marx 1973/1857). Elkins (102) linked this affiliation with a narrow understanding of Marxism, filtered through the Stalinist lens of the dialectical and historical materialism, which was even more deterministic and based only on natural contradictions, in turn leading to progress and development. As Stalin (1938) summarized the elements of dialectical materialism, “the World and its Laws are knowable” which provides the power of Marxist-Leninism to scientifically study and

understand the laws of society, economy and politics. Following this line of reasoning, Stalin claimed that socialism could be “converted from a dream of a better future for humanity into a science”.

The Seldon Plan, which included several “Crises”, also had transparent Marxist bases. In “Grundrisse” Marx detailed his conviction that all necessity becomes visible in a crisis, with the forces of economy that are naturally leading to the destruction of the capital transformed into its ability to regenerate. However, in the Amazon TV series this link is broken, and the entire vision providing cohesion in Asimov’s novels, where we are clearly told that the individual does not important in the larger mechanisms of history, transmutes gently into a time traveling trope, combined with a spiritual connection between characters. The “Foundation” saga is emptied of its inner power, which allows the real “caricatures” to take shape.

Another Marxist criticism transpiring in Asimov’s work is related to religion and the mind control exercised by the technicians of the Foundation on the people conquered. The colonialist dimension of the novels is again obvious, as a group of expansionist scientists, armed with technologies that seem magical for the populations around them, were able to take control over the Galaxy. These connections with colonialism and imperialism are now reduced in the TV series, recentering the narration around the more palatable issues of gender and race.

Emptied of its critical dimensions, the *Foundation* is refilled with melodramatic elements. A new and gratuitous fantastic creature, called Bishop’s Claw is introduced on Terminus, an ingredient missing in the original novel. The most detrimental twist is the love story between Gaal and Raych Seldon, the adopted son of the psychohistorian. Besides the unnecessary sexualization, this leads to a radical change in the very essence of psychohistory, since Seldon’s theory, clearly described by Asimov as a science in which individuals do not matter in the grand scheme of human history. The melodramatic situations introduced in the film jeopardize the mathematical calculations, as the whole “Seldon Plan” is put into question. While Seldon’s calculations are supposed to predict history mathematically, Gaal now questions the mechanisms of the Prime Radiant, and uses premonition and telepathy. Ultimately the melodrama and the a soap opera solutions, with Raych murdering Hari Seldon, are only distractions.

Galactic imperialism and the empires of imagination

The issues in Asimov’s “Foundation” are related to the problems raised by imperialism. Galactic empires are recurrent in science fiction novels and movies, the trope of imperialistic expansion into outer space worlds is constantly revisited. Asimov (1994) claimed that “Star Wars” was borrowing from his own vision about the future (233), yet Frank Herbert’s *Dune*

(1965) also taps into the imagination. Many forms of **galactic imperialism** pervade the works of some of the most popular sci-fi writers, from Robert Heinlein and Arthur C. Clarke to James Blish. A certain connection between imperialism and the entire genre exists from its infancy, this predisposition for imperialistic (read also colonialist and militaristic) storytelling was explained by three possible answers. As indicated by Patricia Kerslake (2011) one line of thinking considers imperialism as *inherent* and *intrinsic* to science fiction, a cornerstone for all such worldbuilding; from another point of view, imperialism can be discussed as a bi-product of the particular historical context, with the authors simply *incorporating* elements from their own time; finally, they can also be read as anti-imperialistic expressions, forms of *imperialism criticism*, which is sometimes less visible due to the processes of fictionalization.

However, as noted among others by Adam Roberts (vii), the genre itself is today a hegemonic form of expression, a result of the domination exercised by Anglo-American cultural imperialism. While the birth of scientific fantasies can be attributed to French author Jules Verne, today the genre is controlled by English speaking authors. The top 10 best-selling sci-fi books are Anglo-American authors, from Mary Shelley's „Frankenstein“, to Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Left Hand of Darkness", followed by Frank Herbert's *Dune* or Orson Scott Card, with "Ender's Game", the global marketplace belongs to an *imperialism of imagination*. The galactic imperialism which is the "master narrative" both in Asimov's *Foundation* and in Frank Herbert's *Dune*, has obvious links to the real empires of their time, either fighting to control an important resource, as is the "melange" which exists only on Arrakis, or for controlling the minds of the people, as is the case with the Second Foundation. Imperialism is not only a metanarrative device, an universal solution and a structural grand narrative that needs no explanations or justifications, it serves the purpose of naturalizing this as an inevitable phenomenon. Even in the most distant future of humanity and of other extraterrestrial species, a form of imperialism expansionism remains inevitable and the building of an empire is implacable.

In one of the classical novels of the genre, "The War of the Worlds" (1898) by H. G. Wells, the main *implicit imperialism* is made obvious when humanity is confronted with a terrible Martian invasion, which carries the overt political implication that all species in the Universe are naturally imperialistic. Explained contextually, the story is infused with the anxieties of a man living as a citizen of the most powerful empire in history and his anxiety, perpetuated to this day, is basically the fear that a technologically more advanced civilization might do to us what we did with our fellow human beings. Imperial ambitions and the ruthless expanse are, in the case of this British author, not only an imperialistic view about the future of humanity, they are traits of our civilization. When humanity is fighting an invasive Martian militaristic society, their imperialistic agenda for controlling the Solar system discloses the same imperialistic drives as those of the British Empire. The Martians are colonialists in a reverse allegorical transfer where England is occupied by aliens in a time when the British empire was in fact occupying a quarter of the Earth. The real colonists armed with new

technologies destroying the native cultures were the English. Even the solutions are inspired from our imperialistic past. Many local populations died when entering in contact with their European invaders due to their lack of immunity. Thus, when confronted by another, more powerful and more expansionist culture the interstellar imperialistic wars are won with the help of disease. Wells' vision about human future and the Wellsian literary imagination constantly use more **conversions** and **transmutations**. Critics observed (Suvin 25) the many fictional creatures in these books are projections of real beings, one of the most explicit is the Morlocks working as a substitute for the proletariat.

Obviously the human imperialists always fear the outer space empires created by our own enemies on Earth. As in the case with Paul Verhoeven's *Spaceship Troopers* (1997), an adaptation of the homonymous novel by Robert A. Heinlein, where humanity seems justified to kill bug-like cosmic creatures. Even when the Empire is defeated, as is the case with the Star Wars franchise where the rebellion composed of a farm boy, an individualistic entrepreneur and a princess leads to victory, the empire returns from the brink of destruction.

The Foundation saga is the result of a similar transmutation. While Asimov acknowledged in his memoirs that his main source of inspiration was the reading of Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the Galactic Empire cannot be understood as simply projecting the Roman Empire into the future. The universe built by Asimov is closer to Pax Britannica than to Pax Romana, and the Foundation is based on an entrepreneurialism made possible by the monopoly capitalism of the postwar era (Latham 232), with the Foundation substituting the new American empire which was built on the remains of its British predecessor. Salvor Hardin and his fledgling early Foundation of traders is fundamentally an apology for the mercantile form of capitalism emerging when the newly founded United States took over the seas. The Traders and Merchants of the First Foundation were mimicking the capitalist bourgeoisie of the early industrial modernity and the inevitable triumph of the Second Foundation is an optimistic view about the powers of the American "soft power" manifested globally.

Asimov's vision, based on a normalized imperialistic imagination, where the entire Cosmos is modeled on the history of Western civilization, with its belief in science and entrepreneurship, replaced by a more "diverse" universe is deprived of its critical prowess. While David Goyer and Josh Friedman, who was also involved in the rewriting of the "Foundation", described their efforts to adapt this sci-fi classic as a form of contemporization, their creative process addressing the issues generated by the fact that Asimov lived in a different day and age, thus offering the public more inclusive worldview, managed to trivialized the storytelling. Also, when removing any the traces of Western imperialism, represented by Salvor Hardin as the Mayor of Terminus, a power hungry expansionist who uses science in order to take control on the interplanetary kingdoms that have fallen to barbarism by placing them under the domination of the Foundation, these **chimeric transformations** create a new ideological reality which is empty and with no real power to induce change.

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