The Colonial Metropolis in the Work of Asimov and Clarke

Matthew Candelaria

The exploration of space, encounters with alien beings, and the establishment of interstellar human empires are some of the most recognizable tropes of science-fiction. Since most science fiction using these tropes also draws, explicitly or implicitly, on historical models of exploration, conquest, and empire-building, it must be asked whether this fiction represents a glorification of historical imperialism. Nor is this an idle question, for Edward Said's definition of imperialism clearly encompasses this type of imaginative conquest: “Imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others” (7). While Said does not explicitly include imaginative lands in his formulation, science-fictional territories, whether intra- or extra-solar, must be included in the “distant” lands category. If “we must try to look carefully and integrally at the culture that nurtured the sentiment, rationale, and above all the imagination of empire” (12), then such an analysis must be faulty if it excludes an entire segment of imaginative production. Furthermore, a deeper analysis of Said’s definitions of imperialism implies a crucial role for this type of imaginative conquest. Said stresses that imperialism allowed “decent people [to] think of the imperium as a protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior, or less advanced peoples” (10). Abdul JanMohamed extends this, saying that imperialist discourse seeks to create a practice that “can continue indefinitely” (81). By portraying empires of great spatial and temporal extent, science fiction creates a sequence of futures whose implicit final term is an infinite and eternal empire.

But are all science-fiction texts that utilize these tropes of interstellar exploration and conquest glorifying imperialism? And if not, how can these texts be distinguished? Looking at another definition of imperialism by Said gives us a vital clue: “Imperialism means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory” (9). Since imperialism resides in the attitudes and practices of the imperial center, the imperial metropolis,

1 gauging the attitudes of a text toward that imperial metropolis it portrays should be an effective shorthand method for determining the text’s attitudes toward imperialism. This article will provide a brief definition of “imperial metropolis,” then apply that definition to texts by two SF Grandmasters, Isaac Asimov and Sir Arthur C. Clarke, to demonstrate how the imperial metropolis unlocks the attitudes toward imperialism of these two authors. Then two contemporary popular SF series, Star Wars and Star Trek are analyzed to demonstrate how they follow the patterns established by the Grandmasters.

During the heyday of European imperialism, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European influence, both in the form of military strength and exported capital, extended to the far reaches of the globe. In return, goods, services, and people from these far reaches came to Europe to trade in, be educated in, or simply to gawk at the grandeur of the great imperial centers, chiefly London, Paris, and, later, New York. With the great advances in science and technology during the Industrial Era, these cities became not merely administrative centers, but also icons of advancement and sophistication. These cities ostentatiously embraced their iconic identities with industrial landmarks such as the Crystal Palace and the Eiffel Tower. The creation of these imperial centers, these imperial metropolises, also created, by implication, the imperial margin or periphery. Over the imperial period, the ideas associated with the center and the margin were ossified into almost mythic status by the theorists and practitioners of imperialism. The center became not only a temple of science itself. It became not merely a civilized city, but the embodiment of civilization itself. It became not merely a commercial hub, but a commercial star, holding the world in orbit with its mass of capital. Thus, the imperial metropolis came to represent—in its own eyes—all civilization, all
science, all commerce, while the periphery became the embodiment of savagery, primitivism, and lawlessness.

When science fiction authors were creating and refining the genre, they built their conceptions of the future on what they knew of the past. Empires of the future were almost uniformly reflections of imperial pasts, but not all authors promote the imperial metropolis' traditional view of itself. Some invert this view with an aim at completely undermining imperialist ideologies.

In *The Foundation Trilogy*, Isaac Asimov introduces many imperial metropolises, but they are characterized in remarkably similar fashion, in keeping with his general distrust of imperialism. Asimov uses three primary strategies to call the imperial metropolis into question: (1) a continual shifting of perspective and action away from the imperial metropolis, (2) description of the political instability and corruption of the imperial metropolis, and (3) ultimate uncertainty about the location/significance of the imperial metropolis.

*The Foundation Trilogy* begins with the arrival of a “country boy” (*Foundation* 3) at the ultimate city, Trantor. The planet Trantor has been completely transformed into a single city, since its oceans and all its greenery have been paved over, with the notable exception of the Imperial Gardens. This city is given over entirely to the administration of the Galactic Empire, and it is vulnerable. Therefore, the first goal of Hari Seldon’s thousand-year plan is the removal of his Encyclopedia Foundation from Trantor to Terminus, a world without resources at the edge of the galaxy. Action continues on Terminus as long as this planet is a “helpless” (*Foundation* 68, 75) backwater. However, once the Foundation annexes the Four Kingdoms immediately adjacent to Terminus, the focal point of action shifts outward again. In the section, “The Merchant Princes,” for example, Hober Mallow spends most of his time in the barbarian kingdom of Korell, rather than on Terminus. Then, in *Foundation and Empire*, the key action in the section “The General” takes place on the mutual border between the Foundation and the Empire, with action at both centers leading to no significant consequences. Finally, when Trantor becomes a key world again, late in *Foundation and Empire* and *Second Foundation*, it is no longer the imperial center it once was, but an agricultural world of no political significance.

Asimov repeatedly describes political instability and corruption at the imperial center. The first source of instability is the vulnerability of the imperial metropolis to siege or attack. Although Asimov’s first POV character, Gaal, is impressed by the all-city world of Trantor, Asimov cautions his reader against naively admiring the world in the same way he does:

[Gaal] sighed noisily, and realized finally that he was on Trantor at last; on the planet which was the center of all the Galaxy and the kernel of the human race. He saw none of its weaknesses. He saw no ships of food landing. He was not aware of a jugular vein delicately connecting the forty billion of Trantor with the rest of the Galaxy (*Foundation 12*).

Asimov emphasizes here not only that Trantor was the center of the Galaxy, but also its vulnerability, a vulnerability that he earlier connects with its growing political impotence through an entry in the *Encyclopedia Galactica*: “In the last millennium of the Empire, the monotonously numerous revolts made emperor after emperor conscious of [Trantor’s vulnerability], and Imperial policy became little more than the protection of Trantor’s delicate jugular vein” (*Foundation* 9). As Terminus becomes the focal point of the growing second Empire, it too becomes vulnerable to attack. First, it falls easily to The Mule, then, when under attack by The Mule’s successor, it is described as having a “hopeless strategic position” (*Second Foundation* 177), because it can be cut off from its fleet, and is vulnerable to civil uprisings, as was Trantor before it.

Simultaneous with the movement of action away from the imperial centers is the rise of corruption at the centers themselves. For example, at the beginning of the trilogy, Gaal finds himself, along with all of Seldon’s Foundationers, persecuted by an investigative committee. When he demands his right of appeal to the Emperor, he is told, “There are no hearings before the Emperor…. Legalistically, you may appeal to the Emperor, but you would get no hearing” (*Foundation* 20). As long as Terminus is a helpless backwater, it is under the rule of Salvor Hardin, whose name is indicative of his near-saintliness. However, as Terminus becomes a new imperial metropolis, it becomes rife with corruption, as is described by a citizen of the Foundation, “Despotism! [The rulers of the Foundation] know one rule; force. Maldistribution! They know one desire; to hold what is theirs” and a citizen of the peripheral states agrees: “While others starve!..... The fat guts on their moneybags ruin the Foundation while the brave Traders hide their poverty on dregs of worlds like Haven. It’s a disgrace to Seldon, a casting of dirt in his face, a spewing in his beard” (*Foundation and Empire* 88). Corruption undermines the Foundation as it had the Galactic Empire before.
This leads us to a fundamental objection that might be brought against the argument here. After all, the Seldon Plan is supposed to provide for the establishment of the second Galactic Empire. Why would Asimov write about the rise of a second Empire if he did not believe in the ideals of imperialism? The answer is that the Seldon Plan is not really about the establishment of the second Galactic Empire. Instead, we learn that “It is the intention of the Plan to establish a human civilization based on an orientation entirely different from anything that ever before existed” (Second Foundation 100). This new human civilization is one in which the imperial metropolis is of both ambiguous location and ambiguous significance, and is Asimov’s third and most important device for undermining the concept of the imperial center.

Asimov builds the basic uncertainty about the imperial metropolis into The Foundation Trilogy from the very beginning through the Seldon Plan. Hari Seldon establishes not one Foundation, but two, and while the first Foundation was established openly, the second was established in utmost secrecy. This radical move violates the imperial power structure in two ways. First, it is an essential characteristic of the imperial metropolis that it be a visible symbol of imperial power and control. A foundation established in secret cannot therefore function as an effective imperial metropolis. Second, the existence of two Foundations creates an inherent decentralization of power, a tension that prevents the ultimate consolidation of power under the imperial metropolis. Of course, this is at the beginning of the trilogy, and it might therefore be expected that through the trilogy we would witness a synthesis of the two Foundations into a single entity that would then become the Second Empire. However, what actually occurs is the reinscription of both salient characteristics of the Seldon plan, creating not a monolithic, but bifurcated power structure. The uncertainty created by the creation of two Foundations is at the center of the trilogy’s third novel, Second Foundation, as the people of the First Foundation wonder whether the Second Foundation will be their ally or enemy. They, like The Mule before them, quest for the Second Foundation, and like him they believe they have found it. They wage war on and destroy the Second Foundation, or so they think. Instead, the Second Foundation continues on another world, undiscovered and unsought-for, its secrecy now assured by the belief in its destruction. Thus, although the First Foundationers believe themselves the natural heirs to the imperial crown, they continue unknowing that they are being secretly manipulated by the people of the Second Foundation. Although it might be argued that Asimov has created here a disguised imperial metropolis, since the Second Foundation, ironically located on Trantor, is the de facto center of power in the galaxy. However, this argument neglects the limited nature of the Second Foundation’s power. The Second Foundation can utilize its military, political, and commercial strength only indirectly, through manipulation of the First Foundation. This manipulation is, by the laws of psychohistory, always imprecise and far-reaching, rather than sharp and immediate. This necessarily attenuates the power of their government and, combined with their necessary secrecy, prevents them from assuming the full mantle of the imperial metropolis. Presumably, it is this attenuated power that has kept the Second Foundation incorruptible, for, at the close of the trilogy, almost one thousand years after the commencement of the Seldon Plan, the Second Foundation remains true to Seldon’s original design.2 It seems that the entire goal of the Seldon Plan, and therefore the core idea at the heart of The Foundation Trilogy is the subversion of the imperial metropolis.

In direct opposition to Asimov’s goals, procedures, and ideals is Sir Arthur C. Clarke, who builds his novels not around a movement away from and subversion of, but, rather around a journey toward and the ultimate reification of the imperial metropolis. Richard D. Erlich notes in contrasting Clarke with Ursula Le Guin: “[Clarke] has presented worlds in which transcendence is possible and can lead to true superiority: a universe in which masters may justify their status as part of the Order of Things” (122). Clarke builds this superiority into an imperial structure, with centers of sophistication and peripheries of barbarity. In The Empire Writes Back, Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin stress the symbolic ties between standardized language and lawfulness: “the center, the metropolitan source of standard language, stands as the focus of order, while the periphery, which utilizes the variants….remains a tissue of disorder” (88). Clarke repeats this pattern, although he emphasizes science rather than language, and stresses that beings with high technology have an equally high sense of peace and order. While this pattern is evident in most of Clarke’s work, I will use as examples only three of Clarke’s most influential and well-known works: Childhood’s End, 2001: A Space Odyssey, and Rendezvous with Rama.3 In all these works, Clarke emphasizes the disparity between the colonial center and the colonial margin through a journey from the margin to the center. In the imperial
metropolis, people from the periphery experience uncomprehending awe, which leaves the reader with a deeply-imbedded sense of the superiority of the imperial power.

The imperialist subtext of Childhood’s End is quite evident. When the Overlords come to administer Earth, it is quite clear which is the superior race. The Overlords’ superiority is strongly reinforced by Jan Rodricks’ visit to the Overlords’ world, where he is taken to their massive capital city. He spends most of his time imprisoned, unable to see the city, but when he goes out, the emotions that come to him again and again are awe, fear, and wonder. The works of the Overlords are beyond the comprehension of humanity. The works of humanity, on the other hand, are mere curiosities. The only place that Jan recognizes of the Overlords’ world is a museum. Jan marvels, “Here was the loot of planets, the achievements of more civilizations than Jan could guess” (Childhood’s End 196), all uprooted and brought here, to the colonial center of the Overlords’ vast administration. Sometimes, the Overlords even take fragmentary relics, such as the “single giant eye” (Childhood’s End 198) almost one hundred meters across. This disembodied, staring eye, is reminiscent of the contents of many European museums, whose collectors have assembled various bits and fragments of statues—disembodied hands, limbless decapitated torsos, half-busts—which are almost meaningless, but are revered for their iconic value. And like these bits and fragments in an Earthly museum, all of human culture is thrown together into a single display: “[Jan and his guide] walked for a few meters past a beautiful model of Paris, past art treasures from a dozen centuries grouped incongruously together, past modern calculating machines and paleolithic axes, past television receivers and Hero of Alexandra’s steam turbine” (Childhood’s End 197). The reduction of human culture to an assemblage of random objects in a museum reduces it to a peripheral status, that of one among many, while it elevates the Overlords’ world to a central position of importance, the position of an imperial metropolis. In contrast to Asimov, Clarke lets the awesome grandeur of the Overlords’ world stand uncontested, and furthermore demonstrates the greater wisdom of the Overlords, who bring peace and prosperity to a lawless Earth.

Clarke’s work 2001: A Space Odyssey provides the most famous example of the journey to an imperial center. The differences between the film, a collaborative effort of Clarke and Kubrick, and the novel, produced by Clarke alone, are indicative of Clarke’s imperial prejudice, for the novel clearly ends with an enlightening voyage to and from an imperial metropolis. In the film, when Bowman enters the monolith there is a “tunnel of lights” with the impression of movement, but no explicit traveling taking place. Bowman then suddenly finds himself in the hotel suite. In the novel, Clarke identifies the monolith as a “star gate,” and devotes considerable attention to Bowman’s travel. Clarke even goes so far as to divide Bowman’s journey into two parts: he goes first to a place Clarke calls “a Grand Central Station of the galaxy” (2001 199)—a metaphor that Carl Sagan would later borrow for Contact—where he is rerouted to his final destination. Then Bowman finds himself in space once more near “[t]he glorious apparition … of a globular cluster” (2001 201). As Bowman travels, he passes a massive artifact: “A dully gleaming cobweb or latticework of metal, hundreds of miles in extent, grew out of nowhere until it filled the sky. Scattered across its continent-wide surface were structures that must have been as large as cities, but appeared to be machines” (2001 203). This artifact turns out to be derelict, abandoned by beings who have moved beyond building in mere metal to manipulating stars themselves. The presence of this artifact, a recognizable product of super-science, indicates that technology increases with proximity to the imperial metropolis, almost simply as a function of distance. Also important here is the “cities” that “appeared to be machines.” Clarke has here literalized a metonymy of the industrial imperial metropolis. In reality, they contain machines, but in Clarke’s fiction, they are machines. As Bowman approaches the red giant around which this artifact orbits, he notices more strange phenomena, upon which the narrator comments, “He was moving through a new order of creation, of which few men had ever dreamed. Beyond the realms of sea and land and air and space lay the realms of fire, which he alone had been privileged to glimpse” (2001 207). The location of the imperial center on the surface of a star is symbolic: not only is the star the center about which the periphery orbits, but culture, like energy, radiates outward. These passages describing the alien technology make Bowman’s journey very much like that of Jan Rodricks: a trip to the center of the vast empire, a center characterized by technology and sophistication beyond the imagining of the peoples of the periphery. And, as in Childhood’s End, Clarke stresses the relative wisdom of the center, since an educated Bowman returns to Earth and stops a nuclear war.

Rendezvous with Rama is a novel built entirely around the voyage of people from the savage periphery to the center of civilization and technology.
To treat this highly enigmatic novel in detail requires more space than is available here, but it is worthwhile to note a few specifics. When Commander Norton and his crew catalog the features of Rama, they identify clusters of boxlike structures as being “cities” and dub them with the names of Western colonial centers: “London,” “Paris,” and “New York.” However, when Norton’s crew examines these locales, they determine they are not cities. Of New York, Norton concludes in a mere “ten minutes”: “It was not a city; it was a machine” (Rama 136). Further, when they break into the “Temple of Glass” in London (not in New York as Miller claims [341]), they view a marvelous catalog of Raman artifacts far beyond their comprehension, which Nicholas Rud-dick calls “the most important clue as to how to go about decoding Rama” (43). The Temple of Glass reveals the genuine nature of the clusters of box-like structures in Rama. Commander Norton’s conclusion aside, these structures are cities, not in the way cities are commonly defined as places where people reside in great density, but cities distilled to their most rarefied form in Clarke’s colonial paradigm: as depositories and manifestations of technology and civilization. And this is what the imperial metropolis is to Clarke: the museums of the Overlords and the fiery machinery of the wormhole aliens. And Rama itself is the embodiment of order. Every one of its structures is shown to be purposeful, and it all works together as a single, harmonious machine. There exist no threats on Rama, and by contrast the humans, who launch a nuclear missile at it, seem lawless and belligerent in the extreme.

While Asimov journeys continually outward from the imperial metropolis, Clarke draws us in, and while Asimov shows us corruption, vulnerability, and decay at the center, Clarke shows us awesome power and almost magical technology. Science fiction, especially space opera, continues to reiterate these two approaches to imperial metropolises, as a quick consideration of the two series, Star Wars, which is Asimovian, and Star Trek, which is Clarkian, will quickly demonstrate. The irony is that these texts use opposite movements from their predecessors to convey the same message. In Star Wars, we are continually journeying toward the imperial metropolis to view the corruption there, while in Star Trek, we are continually journeying from the imperial metropolis to manifest its greatness.

In Star Wars Episodes IV and VI, the imperial metropolis is represented by a planetwide city, of sorts, the Death Star. This black embodiment of Imperial corruption is a source of military, and therefore political, power. It is in the Death Star that we hear of the dissolution of the Republic, which is demonstrative of the Empire’s political corruption. We also learn that the Death Star has a manifest weakness, a jugular vein, if you will, in the form of an exhaust vent. We can add to the Death Star, Bespin (Episode V) and Coruscant (Episode I). While neither of these are technically imperial metropolises, they are both urban sites of corruption and vulnerability. Coruscant is, of course, modeled on Trantor, and it suffers many of the same weaknesses, namely a failing government and prevalent corruption. Coruscant’s vulnerability to siege is not mentioned, but the Chancellor’s vulnerability to internal dissent is made highly visible, and the corrupt manipulations by the Sith are also evident. Bespin’s corruption becomes evident when the Imperial presence is revealed, and its vulnerability is responsible for the continual worsen-ing of the deal that allowed that presence.

In contrast, we almost never see the imperial metropolis in Star Trek. However, we are continually shown the ultimate morality and justice of the Federation and its policies. Captains Kirk, etc., are continually allowed to take the moral high ground in almost every situation. Corruption lies elsewhere, and if ever any imputation is made about Federation officials, then they turn out to be alien invaders in disguise. Quests to the imperial metropolis are almost always made to save the metropolis from outside threat, and the rescuing of this metropolis, is, again, an unequivocal good. Although we are not left to marvel at the super-science of the imperial metropolis, yet we are always left with the knowledge that truth, justice, and the Federation way radiate outward from the brilliant world at its center.

Because imperialism is not just a single idea, but a cluster of related ideas including attitudes toward science, morality, race, military power, and ultimate truth, determining a text’s relationship to imperialism is an important step toward decoding that text. Identifying and understanding the imperial metropolis within the text is a shorthand method for deciphering imperialist attitudes and is therefore a concept that warrants closer scrutiny and development.

Notes

1 Although some may balk at my switch from Said’s wording “metropolitan centre” to my own “imperial metropolis.” I believe that historical imperialism and science-fiction portrayals provide sufficient justification for the change.
Greg Bear proposed that this situation would create “a brave-new-world aristocracy, a permanent, superior class” (21). In more expansive terms, Freedman claimed, “The artificial separation between knowing subject and known object [under the Second Foundation] leads...towards the investing of all meaningful agency in an elite and aloof clerisy” (135). However, Bear points out that Asimov attempted to correct this in the second Foundation trilogy (Miller 20), which implies that this was an accidental, rather than intentional consequence of the situation Asimov created and that his intention was to undermine centrist authority.

Two other obvious examples are The City and the Stars and Imperial Earth.

Works Cited


