

Thoughts on the Show (so far)



[Opening theme music.]

Joel McKinnon

Welcome back, Seldon Crisis fans. This will be another midway mini episode while I continue to work on refining The Mule, part II, and I thank you for your patience. Today I want to do something I haven't done much of yet, which is to share some thoughts on the new Apple TV Plus adaptation of Foundation. The rest of this episode was originally posted on my Patreon page. We're three episodes into the series and I have to tell you, I love it. Not absolutely everything about it, and I do have some concerns, both for the integrity of the storyline going forward and for the chances that it will ultimately fail to build a sustained viewership.

Joel

It turns out that those are competing concerns, and I think they are threading the needle about as well as can be expected so far. It's a hugely challenging proposition to pull this off. One of my collaborators on Seldon Crisis, the podcast, my sound and video designer Jeremy McKinnon, who also happens to be my son, phrased it something like this. When a beloved work of literature is adapted for a new audience in a new medium, changes need to be made to fit the medium and the societal context in which it will be received. The question becomes what elements of the original story can safely be removed or altered without undermining what made it beloved in the first place?

Eliminating the basic premise of psychohistory would be an obvious mistake, as would changing the essential character of the central players such as Hari Seldon, Salvor Hardin and Hober Mallow, later on *The Mule*, and the later heroines, Bayta and Arkady Darrel. Much has been made of the gender swapping of Gaal Dornick and Salvor Hardin, and the choice of a more diverse caste is seen as woke by some who are troubled by the tonal change from a mid 20th century, post World War II white male perspective to something a lot more resembling the emerging demographics of 2021 America. It seems obvious to me that these are not the facets of the story that made it beloved. Asimov wrote in a largely white, male dominated society, and by default, that's who he populated the books with in the early going in the 1940s, and would have been strange to place women, let alone minority women, in the positions of power described in the novel.

When he did introduce his first notable female character, she just happened to be the wife of a guy who was a good candidate to become a central figure in the political power structure. It's to Asimov's credit that she emerged as the heroine of this story when there were very few such examples in the genre at the time. As for ethnicity, this just wasn't a factor. None of the original characters were described as Caucasian. In fact, they were hardly described at all. The essential aspects of Asimovian characters were always revealed in their manner of thinking, as expressed in their dialogue. Seldon the elegant mathematical genius with a deep concern for the future of humanity. Hardin, the pragmatic and brusque politician Louis Pirenne, the narrowly focused and impatient academic, etc.

Showrunner David Goyer identified one minor character in the first chapter, a young male PhD from an off world planet named Gaal Dornick, who serves as witness to the central events of the initial chapter and thereafter disappears completely from the story and changed a him to her and elevated her to a central figure in the drama. I see no problems with this at all. The other big flip is Salvor Hardin, and this one causes more

concern for some, because it's hard for many, even today to imagine a woman holding her own in the power dynamics of a society like that of early Terminus. I think the show does a great service in encouraging us to update such thinking.

There's a third gender swap in a way, that of the character Eto Demerzel, one who is introduced as a male prime minister but eventually proves to not actually have a gender, as the character turns out to be an artificially constructed entity, a robot. This can only really be considered a half a gender swap at best. It becomes helpful at this point to think about the essential themes of the story that can't be changed for it to retain its beloved character. The first is obviously psychohistory and the principles that underlie it. This is where the show could still go off the rails.

The basic principles to which I refer is how psychohistory is supposed to work. It's described as analogous to the way that the behavior of individual molecules of a gas contained in a vessel cannot be predicted when heat and pressure is applied, but the aggregate qualities can be predicted with high probability. In psychohistory, the actions of any one individual cannot be expected to have a significant effect on the outcome of the overall sweep of a society composed of quadrillions of individuals. This gets back to the great man theory of history I talked about a few episodes back versus the socially driven behavior of the larger aggregate.

Psychohistory in theory doesn't depend on the individual actions of particular men or women. Here is where I see potential trouble in the Apple TV plus approach. Audiences typically enjoy and are attracted to particular heroes or heroines in their dramas, particularly in the age of comic book superheroes made into blockbuster movies that pack the theaters for a presumably endless franchise of improbable heroics against nefarious dark forces. Goyer's team can be expected to be highly tempted to find such heroes in the cast that the audience can latch onto. Could they be setting up Salvor Hardin to be much more than the highly capable

leader he is in the books, but to instead be a special individual, some kind of superhero?

From the very beginning, we are told that Salvor is the only person who can approach the Vault unharmed. I really want there to be a rational explanation for this and not to find out that Hardin is somehow supernatural, as that would go against the core premise of psychohistory. There's one scene in episode three that gives me hope. Hardin is presented with the Prime Radiant, the glowing cloud of numbers and equations that reveal the plan, and for a moment appears to be able to see something essential in it. Perhaps she will see the solution to the coming crisis and act to save the fledgling colony instead?

She admits it means nothing to her, she knows nothing about psychohistory and has no special powers to suddenly become capable of higher order mathematics. Goyer's team passed a big test there. Bravo. Likewise, I have some concern about Gaal's apparent mentalic capabilities, as revealed by her sensing the explosion of the starbridge before it happened and a couple of other super hunches she seems to have. This could be setting her up to be a founder of the Second Foundation, and it could be she is taking on the role of Wanda Seldon from the prequels. I'm sure we will see much more of Gaal at some point, which is likely a result of her surviving being jettisoned into an asteroid field in episode two, presumably in some kind of suspended animation, which will allow her to effectively time jump.

We've already been prepared for this with Hugo, Hardin's Thespian boyfriend's youthful appearance at an age of 70 resulting from his frequent time jumps as a spacefaring trader. I really hope they don't overuse this technique for time jumping, but at a minimum it will likely result in a relatively youthful Gaal reappearing several decades after last seen. Another item of concern is a highly modified character in the story in the form of the time vault. In the books, it was just an ordinary room with a

high tech central glass cubicle in which a holographic recording of Hari Seldon would periodically provide updates to the Foundation at moments of greatest crisis.

When I read this in my youth, I reveled in the excitement of these appearances. It didn't require a huge amount of unexplained technology to provide this excitement. It was all about the mystery of what Seldon would reveal to the colonists. Often this precipitated high drama in the series, just from the ordinary words that would emanate from his recorded figure. This was great writing and made me fall in love with Foundation as much as anything else in the book. This made the epic truly beloved to me. I am troubled by the magical aspects of the vault as shown in the series.

It hovers above ground with no apparent means of propulsion. It preceded the colonists arrival, and no one knows why. It produces a null field that keeps any living being from approaching, except for Hardin. As noted, I don't expect all of this to be explained rationally at some point, but I would love for it to avoid supernatural aspects as much as possible. I rather expect some disappointment on this account. Lastly, let's talk about those Cleons. The showrunners had a stroke of pure genius here. Asimov hardly describes the Empire at all, let alone the Emperors. David Goyer's team jumped on the opportunity to create not one, but three central characters in the story, with the idea of the cloned dynasty of Cleon I, in which three generations of Cleons would always be alive.

And due to the fact that they were clones, they could be played by the same actors. The casting of Terence Mann and especially Lee Pace were inspired choices. Pace's brother, Day, the most powerful figure in all of the galaxy, is a wonderful characterization, and one entirely omitted by Asimov. As a result of this conceptual masterstroke, we will get to witness the decline and fall of the Empire in vivid detail. This should go a long way toward building and retaining a large audience, hopefully enough to keep

the series running for many years. Another inspired choice was to make Demerzel a central figure.

And the casting of Laura Birn in this role may be even more inspired than that of Pace, as the supernanny of the emperors, particularly charged with the education of Brother Dawn, but also in the role of a highly capable Prime Minister, without whom the emperors would have no possibility of managing their sprawling empire. Demerzel excels in her position. Anyone who has read Asimov's robot novels and the sequels and prequels to the core Foundation trilogy knows even more about this character's canonical backstory, and I don't want to spoil it here. Suffice to say, there is a lot more to Demerzel than appears thus far in the series, and how they might make use of that backstory is one of my major reasons to continue watching the show.

The Apple TV Plus series is obviously treading on some dangerous ground, and how they move forward will make a big difference in how this series is perceived by true fans of the books. So far, I found it to be visually and sonically spectacular, and that alone is a sufficient reason to pull me in. Asimov wrote a wonderful story, but he certainly didn't excel in describing the worlds in which that story played out. In some ways, that was good in my youth. It provided a great exercise for my imagination to fill in the details. Now I get to see it come to life on screen, and it has so far exceeded any imagined splendor I might have manufactured in my head.

Goyer and his team have done a great job of this huge prerequisite to a great show. They've made the worlds in which it plays out real. I want to make one more point about the show before wrapping up in the context of the podcast I host. Seldon Crisis is about much more than telling the story of Foundation. It's about calling out the relevance of its central themes in the current societal context in which we find ourselves. Listen to many of the ecological activists like Greta Thunberg and climate scientists like Michael Mann and others who model the coming catastrophe of climate

change and you can hear echoes of Hari Seldon foretelling the fall of empire and the generations of anarchy and decay to follow.

The decisions made by Seldon and his followers, led crisis by crisis to a much better reality than would have occurred without their intervention. Likewise, we find ourselves in a situation in which those in power would prefer to ignore the possible futures their policies will inevitably produce, and we need to educate them of the horrors to come if they don't radically change the current direction of our society. We all have to be Harry Seldon and push our governmental representatives to set a new course forward, and we all have to be Salvor Hardin and cut through the bullshit to do the right things to solve each crisis that comes our way.

David Goyer gets a lot of grief for small things about the show, gender swaps and so forth that are fully inconsequential and the hand wringing criticism of which is absurd. He and the writers of forthcoming episodes will make mistakes, some of which are likely to be significant and heart rending to those of us who truly love the source material. On the other hand, interviews I've heard and his comments on the official podcast, which I heartily recommend, reveal to me that his heart is in the right place. I do think he loves the story told in the books, but I also think he knows the reality of what it takes to make a successful, long running TV show these days.

Even more heartening to me is that he also understands the social relevance of the central themes of the story. It may be that a compelling TV show that contains a powerful message that our current society needs to hear might have significant impact on public policy and become a great ally to the struggling activists out there feeling like they are trying to stand alone against an onrushing tide of sorrow and catastrophe. Let us hope so, and let's also hope the show keeps us entertained and inspired and evades those pitfalls I've mentioned. So far, so good. That's all for this week.

I look forward to joining you again in a couple of weeks for The Mule part two on Seldon Crisis.

[Closing theme music]