# CYLONS IN AMERICA

Edited by
Tiffany Potter
and C.W. Marshall

Cylons in America

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# Cylons in America

## Critical Studies in *Battlestar Galactica*

edited by
**Tiffany Potter**
and
**C. W. Marshall**

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For Sloane Madden
and Jonah Marshall
who patiently endured three seasons
of Sunday dinners in the basement

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# Contents

A Note on Names ........ ix

"I See the Patterns": *Battlestar Galactica* and the Things That Matter
*C. W. Marshall and Tiffany Potter* ........ 1

**I. Life in the Fleet, American Life** ........ 11

1. (Re)Framing Fear: Equipment for Living in a Post-9/11 World
*Brian L. Ott* ........ 13
2. Torture, Terrorism, and Other Aspects of Human Nature
*Erika Johnson-Lewis* ........ 27
3. Alienation and the Limits of the Utopian Impulse
*Carl Silvio and Elizabeth Johnston* ........ 40
4. The Cain Mutiny: Reflecting the Faces of Military Leadership in a Time of Fear
*Rikk Mulligan* ........ 52
5. Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know? Negotiating Stereotypes of Science
*Lorna Jowett* ........ 64
6. Pyramid, Boxing, and Sex
*Kevin J. Wetmore Jr* ........ 76

**II. Cylon/Human Interface** ........ 89

7. The Cylons, the Singularity, and God
*C. W. Marshall and Matthew Wheeland* ........ 91
8. "To Be a Person": Sharon Agathon and the Social Expression of Individuality
*Robert W. Moore* ........ 105
9. Uncanny Cylons: Resurrection and Bodies of Horror
*Alison Peirse* ........ 118

10. "Humanity's Children": Constructing and Confronting the Cylons
*Tama Leaver* ........ 131
11. Hybridity's End
*Matthew Gumpert* ........ 143
12. Erasing Difference: The Cylons as Racial Other
*Christopher Deis* ........ 156

**III. Form and Context in Twenty-First-Century Television** ........ 169
13. When Balance Goes Bad: How *Battlestar Galactica* Says Everything and Nothing
*Chris Dzialo* ........ 171
14. "This Might Be Hard for You to Watch": Salvage Humanity in "Final Cut"
*Kevin McNeilly* ........ 185
15. "Long Live Stardoe!": Can a Female Starbuck Survive?
*Carla Kungl* ........ 198
16. Authorized Resistance: Is Fan Production Frakked?
*Suzanne Scott* ........ 210
17. Of Duduks and Dylan: Negotiating Music and the Aural Space
*Eftychia Papanikolaou* ........ 224
18. "All This Has Happened Before": Repetition, Reimagination, and Eternal Return
*Jim Casey* ........ 237

**Bibliography** ........ 251

**Episode List (2003–2007)** ........ 263

**Notes on Contributors** ........ 267

**Index** ........ 269

# A Note on Names

There are many problems with names and references in a series that involves android clones as covert agents who resurrect into different bodies. The following are the conventions adopted for *Cylons in America*. Though we recognize that at times a particular description might seem imprecise, we hope that it will at least possess the virtues of being clear and consistent across the volume.

1. Colonial pilots are typically referred to using their call signs (e.g., Starbuck, Apollo, Helo, Racetrack, and Flattop).
2. Cylons whose number has not yet been revealed are called by their most commonly used name: Leoben, Cavil, Doral, Simon.
3. The first Cylon Three that was met was the journalist who went by the name D'Anna Biers. Other Threes have not used this name, and each is referred to simply as a Three.
4. The Six who is involved with Baltar on Caprica before the Cylon attacks (who following resurrection allies with Boomer) is Caprica Six. The Six who is held prisoner on the *Pegasus* is unnamed in the series, but called Gina by the producers, a convention we follow here. The Six that Baltar alone can see is referred to as Baltar's virtual Six, even

though there is a direct connection between her and the Six he knew on Caprica.

5. The Cylon model Eight has two individuated characters. Boomer is the Eight who was a sleeper agent on *Galactica* during Season One, shoots Adama, is shot by Cally, and then resurrects, becoming an ally of Caprica Six in Cylon councils. The Eight on Caprica in Season One, who subsequently marries Helo, bears the hybrid child Hera, and is eventually given the call sign Athena is called Sharon throughout this volume.

All episodes in the current series have been identified by the number given on the episode list at the end of this volume. Episodes from the original *Battlestar Galactica* and *Galactica 1980* have been identified by title alone.

# "I See the Patterns": *Battlestar Galactica* and the Things That Matter

C. W. Marshall and Tiffany Potter

"I see the patterns. . . . It's all there, I see it and you don't."

—Leoben Conoy, "Flesh and Bone" (1.08)

An insurgency struggles against an occupying power who is their technological superior; refugees flee persecution with ever-diminishing resources; a society fractured along ideological lines fosters political corruption and Machiavellian opportunism; those we thought we knew turn out to be enemies; sexy female androids wield guns.[1] As it enters its fourth season, the award-winning *Battlestar Galactica* (*BSG*) continues its great popularity for non-network television, combining the familiar features of science fiction with direct commentary on life in mainstream America. The central narrative depicts the remnants of the human race fleeing across space from the Cylons. The fleet is protected by a warship, the *Galactica*, and is searching for a lost colony that settled on the legendary planet Earth. *BSG* took its original form as a television series in the 1970s created by Glen A. Larson; the current reimagined *BSG* maintains the mythic sense established in the earlier quest narrative, but adds elements of hard science and an aggressive engagement with post-9/11 American politics. Since 1978, the crimson pulse of the robotic Cylon eye

has been an iconic symbol that serves as a pop-cultural shorthand for menace. More terrifying yet, the Cylons can now appear human as well.

In the prehistory to *BSG*, the Cylons were robots, mechanical beings created by humans. This differs from the story presented in the original *Battlestar Galactica*, which, true to its Cold War context, imagined the enemy coming from outside: an alien reptilian race (the Cylons) created the robots, and were in turn destroyed by their creation, which embarked on a soulless expansionistic program that led to "The Thousand Yahren [Year] War" with the Twelve Colonies ("Saga of a Star World," "War of the Gods, Part II"). The new *BSG*, post-Cold War, post-9/11, removed the presence of aliens (there has been no nonhuman, natural sentience) and makes the Cylons a human creation and a human responsibility. In addition, *BSG* presents Cylons who have, as the opening credits assert, "evolved." Human-appearing androids are part of the *Battlestar Galactica* tradition: Andromus, who appeared in "The Night the Cylons Landed," (a two-part episode in the spinoff series *Galactica 1980*), is sometimes thought to be the first Cylon to appear human, though "Amazons of Space," a comic in the "authorized" Grandreams annual *Battlestar Galactica* (1978), presents a planet of female "Cylon-built robots" ("Weird! They even *kiss* like real women!" Starbuck gasps). These may even be seen as the missing link in Cylon evolution.

In previous science fiction, the closest parallel is provided by the replicants in *Blade Runner*,[2] artificially created synthetic beings with living tissue and cells. As with replicants, there are ways in which the Cylons are different from humans. Cylons have programming; they interface with technology intravenously, or through the gel on the controls of a Cylon basestar; when they are killed, their knowledge and memories are downloaded into another identical body—"death then becomes a learning experience" ("Scar" 2.15). These new models of Cylons are near-human, but somehow not—an imaginative transgression that is explored in different ways by both Matthew Gumpert and Alison Peirse in this volume.

The reïmagined series exhibits a curious relationship with its predecessor. The original series ran for one season in 1978–79, and was followed by a half-season spinoff, *Galactica 1980* (1980). There is a tension in the current revisioning, as it is obviously emulating many aspects of the original's imagined universe in terms of narrative elements (including the names of the ships and certain characters, ship design, and curses), the general plotline (the ragtag fugitive fleet, fleeing the

Cylons, the quest for Earth), and casting. The writers play with these parallels. In "Bastille Day" (1.03), for example, Apollo points a gun at Tom Zarek, played by Richard Hatch, who originated the role of Apollo in 1978. Zarek, thus always implicitly connected with Apollo, is also established as having written a manifesto that influenced the present Apollo when he was at college before the Cylon attack. But Zarek's resonances echo beyond this. While the association is never explicit, the contrasting journeys of Zarek, from tract-writing political prisoner to vice president of the Colonies, and Gaius Baltar, from vice president of the Colonies (through the presidency) to tract-writing political prisoner, colors the audience's impression of both men. In Baltar's case, there is an additional dynamic in that his covert adherents—every tract-writing political prisoner deserves covert adherents—also ascribe to him religious authority, with several asking him to bless their children, as we see in "Crossroads, Part 1" (3.19).[3] Elements that provided opportunities for moments of innocence and comic relief, on the other hand, have been consistently removed (the child Boxey, for example, and the robotic dog Daggit).[4]

The original series has entered the North American science-fiction lexicon to a sufficient degree that the name of the series necessarily evokes associations for a significant number of viewers. But there is also something resembling shame in the connection. Commentators include references to the original show as "terminally cheesy" (*National Review*, January 20, 2006) or "campy" (*Boston Globe*, October 5, 2006). They then gesture with surprise at "how timely and resonant the [new] show is, bringing into play religion and religious fanaticism, global politics, terrorism, and questions about what it means to be human" (*The New Yorker*, January 23, 2006).[5]

Such conflicted response is not limited to reviews. Viewers have noted that "homage after homage to the original series was hurled at us as if to appease some unsatisfied want that the writers perceived would be there" (Morris 116–17). Similarly, executive producer David Eick, speaking in June 2003, confirmed, "We have also been inspired by certain episodes of the original *Battlestar Galactica* series" (quoted in Bell 240). Still, even within the show's production, there is denial about the new *BSG*'s relationship with its predecessor. Three times the official companions to the series distance episodes from similar episodes in the original. Perhaps most startlingly, Carla Robinson, writer of "You Can't Go Home Again" (1.05) denies echoes of her episode with "The Return of Starbuck"

in *Galactica 1980*, claiming, "I was neither aware of the episode nor that series" (Bassom, *Official Companion* 60). In a similar denial, Moore claims that the Season One episode "The Hand of God" was not an homage to the original series, which concluded with a finale entitled "The Hand of God," but rather that it was all just "a very odd coincidence" (Bassom, *Official Companion* 82). Finally, Michelle Forbes, who plays Admiral Cain, claimed that "until about four days into shooting [the episode "Pegasus" 2.10] . . . I had no idea the episodes were based on a story from the original series and that I was playing Lloyd Bridges!" (Bassom, *Two* 66). Readers of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* should have a field day. The persistence of the denials is suspicious, but even if all are true, the associations remain for viewers with knowledge of the 1970s *Battlestar Galactica* and *Galactica 1980*. Our familiarity with the earlier work informs how we interpret a given episode, and our analyses are the richer for it. In different ways, various contributors to this volume explore this tension between the two iterations of the series (see Rikk Mulligan in particular).

Such tensions and evolutions are the result of both artistic and economic pressures. Art, taste, and politics change constantly, of course, but there has also been a significant development recently in the economics of producing television. It is an old truism of the medium that television is designed to sell audiences to advertisers. The increasingly mainstream availability of developments such as TiVo, downloadable episodes, and the direct marketing of complete seasons of television series by means of DVD have changed the fundamental nature of this model. Technology is providing the viewer with the means to remove commercials from broadcasts seamlessly, and shows are being marketed as products to be bought directly by consumers. And this changes the nature of the product presented to the viewer: the episode-based narrative is now supplemented with longer story arcs; increased budgets yield cinematic production values; and more mature themes and intellectually stimulating topics are addressed in a sophisticated manner, because audiences are being targeted directly, rather than being sold to advertisers hoping to capture an ever-elusive demographic. All this is good for the viewer, who rewards good programming with direct engagement, and DVD purchases.[6]

The revisioning of *Battlestar Galactica* exemplifies this new model (in this volume Kevin McNeilly examines how the series acknowledges the televisual frame). Aggressive science fiction is being offered, blending traditions and subgenres. A plot can hinge on physical constants such as

the speed of light ("Lay Down Your Burdens, Part 2" 2.20), even when faster-than-light (FTL) travel is an established premise of the series.[7] In an essay reportedly appended to copies of the script for the 2003 miniseries, executive producer and creator Ronald D. Moore articulates his view on the question of genre by coining the term "naturalistic science fiction": "Our goal is nothing less than the reinvention of the science fiction television series . . . a new approach is required. That approach is to introduce realism into what has heretofore been an aggressively unrealistic genre. Call it 'Naturalistic Science Fiction.' This idea, the presentation of a fantastical situation in naturalistic terms, will permeate every aspect of our series" ("Naturalistic"). Moore goes on to promise conventions of "hard science fiction"—"The speed of light is a law and there will be no moving violations"—which are not strictly observed, but he is right to coin a new term for the social dimension of the show. Hard science intersects with aspects of the fantasy of "space opera," and both are further informed by familiar images of dystopic future fiction (in this volume Lorna Jowett explores the liminal place that science and scientists inhabit in *BSG*). This refusal to limit the show to a single generic framework is consistent with *BSG*'s fragmentary cohesion (oxymoronic though it is): it is the disruption of known modes, the fragmentation of extant systems, that enforces the unity within the fictional *BSG* universe, and it is this generic fracturing that demands absolute intratextual consistency. Though everyone in the Colonial Fleet is obliged to end prayer with the gesture of enforced agreement, "So say we all," the series itself rejects the constraints of generic univocality in a way that facilitates deeply cogent and highly politicized cultural engagement.

This divided sense of genre enables the show's political and social engagement. It is the presence of fantastic elements such as malevolent robots that makes possible a level of social commentary that cannot be achieved anywhere else on modern television. Even the frame provided by animation cannot protect against the religious outrage that has resulted in local affiliates refusing to air certain episodes of the Peabody Award–winning cartoon *South Park*, and dramas from *Beverly Hills 90210* to *Grey's Anatomy* have had to skirt questions about sexuality and abortion, for example, with conveniently apolitical miscarriages.[8] Even ostensibly overt political drama like *The West Wing* cannot offer *BSG*'s social criticism, but only a *Star Trek* utopian imagining of power well held. In contrast, *BSG*'s narrative can at times create associations that

offer more honest commentary on contemporary events than is to be found on twenty-four-hour news stations. The series moves well beyond the simple reflection of Western culture's religious, economic, and gendered organizations, toward a dialogic relationship, informed by questions, debate, and analysis, representing the world not merely as it is, or as it should be. *BSG* comments on contemporary culture by imagining dystopic alternatives, and by doing so it invites the viewer to interrogate notions of self, nation, and belief that are often taken to be nonnegotiable both on television and in our living rooms.

The resonances between *BSG* and the American experience at home and abroad in the early twenty-first century operate on a number of levels, and are evident in almost every episode. Indeed, one can almost make a checklist of contemporary issues that the series explores. Plots turn on abortion and reproductive rights (discussed by Tama Leaver and others in this volume), torture and prisoner rights (see Erika Johnson-Lewis), unions and worker rights (see Carl Silvio and Elizabeth Johnston), racial division (see Christopher Deis), suicide bombing and terrorism, prostitution, drugs, election fraud, the separation of church and state, the underground economy, police violence, and genocide. With all of these issues, *BSG* works to avoid the predictable polarizations of a series lecturing its audience. On the contrary, the setting allows for an exploration of many subjects that are often removed from the realm of critical engagement altogether. Polite discourse forms no barrier here. In "A Measure of Salvation" (3.07), for example, when it emerges that there may exist an easily usable biological weapon capable of eliminating the Cylons, a debate ensues concerning the ethics of genocide. Sympathetic characters argue for both sides, and the special circumstances of the narrative—the Cylons have tried to wipe out humanity, and they are expressly not human—are clearly presented, but none of that changes the fact that the audience is offered a debate of the ethics of genocide. One finds oneself nodding in agreement with the possible benefits of such an act, and then shuddering at the effect the fictional narrative has had on compromising what, in our lifetimes, at least, is a subject with only one acceptable position. Television isn't supposed to make us think like this.

All sorts of rigid categories are questioned in this way. Within the fleet, characters articulate divisive positions that are familiar to middle America.[9] The media since the 2000 presidential election have articulated this division in terms of "red states" and "blue states," as if that were a

meaningful way of describing anything other than specific electoral college results. Nevertheless, to vote for one party these days (and the same is true to a lesser extent in Canada where we write this) immediately associates the individual with a wide range of stances on issues that, logically, are not interdependent. There is no necessary association, for example, between being pro-choice and antiwar, or that urban, secular, and educated should sound like the terms somehow belong to each other. *BSG* shows us the artificiality of the polarizations within Western democracies generally by creating such a plausible world, where the default political/cultural associations of a particular view are made problematic. Roslin, the schoolteacher president, for example, is pro-life, antimilitary, religious, educated, and willing to suspend individual rights for her convenience. In making this a cohesive and coherent set of values, *BSG* deconstructs the compulsory correlatives that divide contemporary thinking about American culture and identity.[10]

Though *BSG* explicitly engages current American culture (as Brian Ott discusses in detail in this volume), it does so using devices that draw upon a wide range of mythic tropes and religious traditions, and shows itself to be fully engaged in creating an ongoing literary engagement with a variety of seminal works. Within the imagined *BSG* universe, we find that several elements of the Western cultural heritage coalesce into a collage that encompasses great cultural histories, a confluence perhaps possible only in a world where "all this has happened before, and all of it will all happen again" ("Flesh and Bone" 1.08).

*BSG* presents a tale that is explicitly mythic in scale. But it does so with a freedom of overdetermined intertextuality that leaves every viewer with a different sense of which paradigm constitutes the dominant referent (a tension explored by Chris Dzialo in this volume). Virgil's *Aeneid* has the hero leading his comrades from the ruins of Troy on a great quest overseas for a new home that has been promised to them by the gods. We cannot fail to recognize Virgil's account of the Trojan War as an analogue for the Cylon attack on the Twelve Colonies. There is a similar use of *The Book of Mormon*, which describes how the prophet Lehi took part of the tribe of Joseph to precontact America; this is rewritten as *BSG*'s Thirteenth Tribe, lost to the others in its search for Earth.[11] Both of these precedents existed in the original series too, but *BSG* has reinforced the associations and added to them.[12] The Exodus of the Old Testament documents a quest for the Promised Land, led by Moses, who is destined never to enter it. Certainly this informs the

prophecy in the Sacred Scrolls that "the new leader suffered a wasting disease and would not live to enter the new land" ("The Hand of God" 1.10). At times, the associations with the mythic past can seem superficial, or as mere window dressing of intellectual heft: the name Hera for the human/Cylon hybrid child seems to have been selected almost at random from a translation of Homer that was lying around (Bassom, *Two* 92);[13] Zeus and Jupiter are apparently used interchangeably. But that doesn't minimize the desire for some in the audience to see some primeval conflict between Dionysian and Apollonian forces (following a Nietzschean nature-versus-culture polarization) in the tension that exists between the rough-edged and earthy Starbuck, who likes to drink, and Apollo, who is expected to represent civil order through Colonial values, hierarchies, and regulations.[14]

*BSG*'s engagement with religion is separated quite clearly from straightforward alignment with classical tradition. The role religion plays in the fleet is mediated through a polytheism that does mimic Greco-Roman religion in certain ways. But it is prominent, and subjected to scrutiny. When the Sagittarons let religion dictate medical decisions ("The Woman King" 3.14), viewers are invited to map the narrative onto Jehovah's Witnesses' refusal of medical treatment. Our prejudices are invoked, and the series entices the viewer by presenting current issues in a context that allows for more objective distance. For the Cylons, their monotheism raises specifically theological issues about the relationship between human and God, between creator and creation[15] (explored by Wheeland and Marshall in this volume). Viewers see the fundamentalist monotheism of the Cylons mapped onto real world experiences of fundamentalist Islam and American evangelical Christianity, with a constant shifting back and forth that destabilizes the assurances many in the audience instinctually feel toward one or the other of these groups. In the end, by disallowing simplistic equation and division while nevertheless engaging audience sympathies, *BSG* forces us to rethink what we thought we knew.

The papers in this volume have been divided into three groups, which represent diverse ways in which the series resonates with America today. The first section, "Life in the Fleet, American Life," examines this directly. Life in the fleet is a coded microcosm of the concerns and infatuations of modern America, and its influence, both domestic and abroad. The second section, "Cylon/Human Interface," extends these questions to the series' fictional universe as a whole, and shows how considering the

Cylons helps us understand what is essential about being human. The third section, "Form and Content in Twenty-First-Century Television," broadens the perspective again, and shows how *BSG* raises central questions about genre, episodic television, and the role of media in popular culture. By no means do these papers exhaust the questions raised by the series. We hope, however, that this collection can enrich the discussions that the show fosters. Science fiction is meant to be provocative; it is meant to make us question aspects of the world in which we live. The producers of *BSG* know this—they even tell us so in "Torn" (3.06), when the Cylon Hybrid, in a rare moment of lucidity, reaches metatextually beyond the screen to reflect on the series as a whole: "Throughout history, the nexus between man and machine has spawned some of the most dramatic, compelling, and entertaining fiction." So say we all.

## Notes

1. Thanks are due to Hallie Marshall and Ken Madden for their many insights, to SSHRC for funding assistance, and to Krishna Kutty for her work on the index.

2. See Jim Casey in this volume for a discussion of the vast extent of the series' intertextual reach.

3. Resonances continue: at one point in the scriptwriting for "Kobol's Last Gleaming, Part 2" (1.13), Baltar was to be confronted by God, smoking a cigar, a role that was to have been played by Dirk Benedict, who played Starbuck in the original series. However, the idea was scrapped for going too far (<http://www.tvrage.com/Battlestar_Galactica/episodes/18389/01x13>). For more on Benedict's relationship to *BSG*, see Carla Kungl in this volume.

4. Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. discusses the loss of innocent play in this volume.

5. Through an examination of the character of Sharon, Robert W. Moore in this volume explores the philosophical limits of human identity and self.

6. The excitement generated by *BSG* spills beyond the context of the television screen: web content and other avenues for fan fiction abound (though the unique situation of *BSG*'s fan production is emphasized by Suzanne Scott in this volume).

7. The Cylon Six (Gina) uses a nuclear warhead to destroy several ships in an explosion, providing the beacon that leads the Cylons to find the settlement on New Caprica. It is worth dwelling on the science of this: all things considered, at a one light-year distance, the Cylons are actually very close. The nearest system to Earth, Alpha Centauri, is over four light-years away (the nearest forty-five systems are within fifteen light-years); nevertheless, the Cylons are unable to detect the humans at this range until the detonation. It is a delicious metatextual irony that, as Jacob Clifton observes, following initial attacks that were separated by thirty-three minutes precisely ("33" 1.01), it takes precisely

thirty-three episodes (thirteen in Season One, twenty in Season Two) for the Cylons to locate and imprison almost all of the remaining humans (145–46). The viewer is left with the impression that lack of knowledge is all that has kept the Cylons away: one light-year and thirty-three minutes later, there are Cylons at New Caprica.

8. This is in many ways a specifically American phenomenon. Canada's *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, for example, has addressed the questions of teen sexuality and abortion several times; an episode in which a character has an abortion was never aired in the U.S., though an episode in which another character has a "false alarm" was.

9. *BSG* engages with politics intentionally; the political association was also present in the original series, though there its origins were accidental. The broadcast of the pilot in 1978 was interrupted by a news report: "The Camp David Accords were being signed at the White House by Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and witnessed by U.S. President Jimmy Carter. This ceremony oddly connected *Battlestar Galactica* and the Israeli/Arab conflict in the minds of millions of Americans" (Bell 239). One way or the other, *BSG* has always been concerned with America's interest in the Middle East.

10. Amid all of this integration and balance, there are some superficial indications of partisanship. Roslin, for example, had been forty-third in line for the presidency of the Colonies, the position due more to the number of George W. Bush's presidency than a desire to evoke the plot of *King Ralph* (1991), in which a boorish American becomes king of England after a freak photography accident kills all those in line before him.

11. James John Bell helpfully traces many connections between the series, Freemasonry, and Mormonism: "A Masonic/Mormon influence on *BSG*'s cosmology would seem highly speculative if it wasn't for the overabundance of similarities" (237). *BSG*'s assent to prayer, "So say we all," has Masonic origins (though the phrase can be found as early as Malory's *Morte Darthur*—"And so said they all").

12. The introductory narration of the original *BSG* made explicit what the current series references only in passing: "There are those who believe that life here began out there, far across the universe, with tribes of humans who may have been the forefathers of the Egyptians, the Toltecs, or the Mayans. They may have been the architects of the great pyramids, or the lost civilizations of Lemuria or Atlantis. Some believe that there may yet be brothers of man who even now fight to survive somewhere beyond the heavens. . . ."

13. Some might argue that the use of Hera is a specific allusion that regenders Heracles, the hybrid child of Zeus and Semele. This seems to be special pleading, given that Hera is the stepmother who constantly opposes Heracles' labors.

14. More recent cultural allusions are also to be found. Zarek quotes a line from *Patton* (1970) verbatim: "I shaved very close this morning in preparation for getting smacked by you" ("Colonial Day" 1.11). And some Cylons can hum a Bob Dylan tune ("Crossroads, Part 2" 3.20)—see the discussion by Eftychia Papanikolaou in this volume.

15. The origins of Cylon monotheism are (as yet) unexplained. Charlie W. Starr presents some fascinating speculations connecting Milton, the Cylon God, and Count Iblis from the original series.

# I

# Life in the Fleet, American Life

# 1

# (Re)Framing Fear: Equipment for Living in a Post-9/11 World

Brian L. Ott

> I realized if you redo [*Battlestar Galactica*] today, people are going to bring with them memories and feelings about 9/11. And if you chose to embrace it, it was a chance to do an interesting science-fiction show that was also very relevant to our time.
>
> —Ronald D. Moore (quoted in Edwards)

The horrific events of September 11, 2001, are seared into the collective unconscious of the American public. Indeed, it has become almost cliché to say that the 9/11 attacks were a watershed moment in U.S. history—one that forever changed the social lives of Americans and the foreign policy of the U.S. government. The trauma to the American psyche was so profound, so momentous, that politicians and the news media alike began to frame the world in pre- and post-9/11 terms. History itself seemed to pivot on a singular moment in which past and present were replaced by before and after. The message was that we now lived in a new world order,[1] one where civilians were no longer safe or secure even at home. Stricken with fear and panic, Americans began to limit their travel, to distrust others, and to surrender their freedoms willingly (Miller, *Cruel and Unusual*).

Over time, public fear has subsided though not vanished, paranoia has diminished though not disappeared, and a sense of normalcy has returned, though the nation has not forgotten. The hysteria that followed in the wake of 9/11 has been sublimated today by more moderate views, suggesting that the American public is, in its way, adjusting to this new world order. This essay is about how people make such adjustments—about how they find symbolic resources in public discourse to confront and address social anxieties. Toward that end, I undertake an investigation of *Battlestar Galactica*, which, as Ned Martel observed in the *New York Times*, "deliberately evoke[s] Sept. 11 horrors" (E10), and thus "is a symbolic 'working out' of social fears" (Ott, "Cathode Rays").

*BSG* invites viewers to adopt a critical, self-reflective frame toward our post-9/11 world. By dramatizing the moral dangers and pitfalls of unrestrained fear, *BSG* furnishes viewers with a vocabulary and thus with a set of symbolic resources for managing their social anxieties. Although I believe the symbolic resources within *BSG* are vast, my analysis will be limited to two principle topics: torture and political dissent. I have selected these two themes because they broadly concern how we view others and ourselves in times of war. Before analyzing these issues, however, it is necessary to map carefully how discourse, and televisual discourse in particular, functions as symbolic equipment for living as well as how science fiction "stages contemporary social and political concerns in a manner that allows for critical self-reflection better than any other television genre" (Ott, "Cathode Rays"). A discussion of my theoretical framework will be followed by rhetorical analysis of the narrative arcs pertaining to torture and political dissent. A third and final section of the chapter will assess the ongoing implications of *BSG's* rhetoric.

## Terministic Screens on Televisual Screens

In 1953, Donald C. Bryant argued that rhetoric's chief function was "adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas" (211). While this statement invokes the traditional, Aristotelian understanding of rhetoric as persuasion or as discourse adapted to a specific audience, it also conceives of rhetoric as a type of action, as a way of orienting people toward their world. It is this second view of rhetoric, which Kenneth Burke later elaborated upon, that concerns us here, for it suggests that public discourse operates in the realm of "symbolic action." Since language bears no direct, inherent relation to an external reality, the naming of reality according

to a given terminology is necessarily a selection and therefore also a deflection of reality (Burke, *Language* 45). To describe the world, then, is to screen the world, to filter it unconsciously through a particular point of view.[2] In filtering the world according to a given vocabulary, such "terministic screens" foster particular attitudes and motives for confronting real-life situations (Burke, *Language* 45). Since terministic screens frame our understanding of an event, they also frame (i.e., limit) our potential responses to it.

Our attitudes and subsequently our actions are conditioned (though not determined), then, by the discourses to which we attend. While public discourse comes in many forms, there exists no more influential form of public discourse today than television. As Neil Postman explains:

> There is no audience so young that it is barred from television. There is no poverty so abject that it must forgo television. There is no education so exalted that it is not modified by television. And most important of all, there is no subject of public interest . . . that does not find its way to television. Which means that all public understanding of these subjects is shaped by the biases of television. (78)

In light of Postman's assessment, I maintain that television screens operate today as society's primary terministic screens. As I elaborate in *The Small Screen*:

> Television, it turns out, is neither simply a mirror nor a creator of social reality, and viewers not merely its patrons. TV is also a therapist, and viewers its patients. Just as viewers once adjusted their TV antennas for better reception, TV adjusts us to better receive our ever-changing social world. (171)

Put another way, televisual discourses provide viewers with what Burke calls "equipments for living" (*Philosophy* 304). Equipment for living describes the symbolic resources or "medicines" that discourse provides for negotiating social anxieties or ills. The discourse of a particular TV show—its televisual "screen"—serves as equipment for living to the extent that "it articulates, explicitly or formally, the concerns, fears and hopes of people . . . [and] insofar as the discourse provides explicit or formal resolutions of situations or experiences similar to those which

people confront, thus providing them with motives to address their dilemmas in life" (Brummett, "Electric" 248). As social anxieties change over time, so too do the discourses that address them.[3]

In the original *Battlestar Galactica*, for instance, the Cylons were overtly mechanical and robotic. They symbolized the dual fears of unbridled technology and the loss of humanity to technology at a moment in history marked by rapid (even rampant) technological innovation and adoption. In its more contemporary iteration, *BSG* still chronicles a clash between humans and Cylons. But many of the Cylons in the new series look human—a fact that viewers were reminded of at the beginning of every episode during the first season.[4] Whereas the Cylons in the original series represented our social fears about technology, the Cylons in the new *BSG* represent our social fears about cultural difference—a point that is emphasized by the repeated contrast between the messianic monotheism of the Cylons and the secular polytheism of the human colonists.

This shift in perspective is not simply one of artistic license. Rather, it is a product of science fiction's generic conventions. All fiction takes us out of the world in which we live, but science fiction does so principally through distortion—the mutation and metamorphosis of the world as we know it (Ott and Aoki, "Counter-Imagination" 152). It is the incongruities between our naturalized world and the strange, fantastic, and imaginary worlds of science fiction that produce the space for critical self-reflection. In other words, distortion demystifies; it reveals to us our existing terministic screen by proffering a new one. Science fiction traffics in fabulation—"[the fictionalization of] a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet [one that] returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way" (Scholes 29). For all its imagination—its exotic aliens, its innovative technologies, and its foreign landscapes—science fiction is inevitably about the culture that produced it.[5]

## Confronting Fear: The Rhetoric of *BSG*

> Thus, it becomes the task of the Burkean critic to identify the modes of discourse enjoying currency in society and to link discourse to the real situations for which it is symbolic equipment. (Brummett, "Burke's" 161)

To understand the unique symbolic equipment that *BSG* affords for living in a post-9/11 world, it is vital first to establish the allegorical nature of the show. *BSG* begins with a surprise Cylon attack on the Twelve Colonies, which catches the Colonial government and fleet flatfooted. Like the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Cylon attack, as Gavin Edwards suggests, is organized by a group of "monotheistic religious zealots" (read: Islamic fundamentalists) and executed with the aid of "sleeper agents inside human society" (read: terrorists inside the U.S.). Moreover, as with 9/11, the Cylon attack functions as the pivotal historical moment within the series by fundamentally altering Colonial life. In the series' first regular episode ("33" 1.01), the action is chaotic, the military and leadership disorganized, and the survivors shocked and fearful. In the course of its first three seasons, *BSG* has consistently raised post-9/11 issues and themes such as terrorism, torture, patriotism, nationalism, war crimes, genocide, political dissent, religious fanaticism, suicide bombings, insurgencies, and military occupation. In short, *BSG* is "TV's most vivid depiction of the post-9/11 world and what happens to a society at war" (Edwards), or as another reviewer put it, "[*BSG*] is not just about other planets; it's about our own" (Miller, "Space Balls").

One of the most emotionally charged issues raised by the "War on Terror" is torture. In the past few years, incidents at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay detainment camp in Cuba have demonstrated that the U.S. government is not above using such tactics in interrogating prisoners. Though rarely acknowledged, the path to torture begins long before even the capture of "enemy combatants." It begins with the naming of the Other,[6] for if one does not see an enemy as human, then one does not feel compelled to treat "it" humanely. Prisoner torture is a common theme on *BSG*, and the Colonial Fleet has tortured at least three different human-looking Cylons, Leoben Conoy ("Flesh and Bone" 1.08), the Six known as Gina, and Sharon ("Pegasus" 2.10). The repeated references to Cylons as "machines," as well as the more derogatory use of the terms "toasters" and "skin jobs" function rhetorically to justify violence against all Cylons. In addition to degrading the Cylons, such language homogenizes them, reinforcing the prevailing perception that they are all the same and can thus be treated as one nameless, faceless enemy. The use of terms such as "extremists," "fundamentalists," "terrorists," and the "Axis of Evil" have all served similar motives in the "War on Terror." But unlike rhetoric of the Bush administration, *BSG* is reflexive about this process, often explicitly highlighting the crucial relationship between language and violence.

When the Leoben model is first discovered in the episode "Flesh and Blood" (1.08), Commander Adama tells President Roslin he will "send over a team to destroy it immediately." Roslin's insistence that, "I want this man interrogated first," prompts Adama to retort, "Now, first of all, it's not a him, it's an it. Second, anything it says cannot be trusted. Best thing to do is to destroy it immediately." Although Roslin prevails, Adama assigns the task of interrogating the prisoner to Starbuck, who tortures him "without a tinge of conscience" (Miller, "Space Balls"). Prior to his torture, however, viewers are reminded of just how humanlike Leoben is; he is starved, apparently suffers pain, and says he sincerely believes in God. These humanizing traits are consistently juxtaposed with Starbuck's dehumanizing language. When Leoben tells Starbuck he is praying, she responds, "I don't think the gods answer the prayers of toasters." Later, when President Roslin interrupts the torture, demanding to know, "What the hell is going on here?" Starbuck counters, "It's a machine, sir. There's no limit to the tactics that I can use." Apologizing for the abuse, the president convinces Leoben to tell her what she wants to know. Leoben then advises Roslin, "Don't be too hard on Kara; she was just doing her job. The military, they teach you to dehumanize people." But having gathered the information she wants, Roslin has Leoben flushed out an airlock into the vacuum of space.

When *Galactica* stumbles upon a second battlestar in "Pegasus" (2.10), Admiral Cain requests that Baltar examine the Cylon in their brig to "see if [he] can glean anything from it." Baltar arrives at the cell to find a badly bruised and crying Gina; she is bound, gagged, and lying on the bare floor of an empty cell. After examining her, Baltar reports to Cain that the prisoner is psychologically traumatized as a result of the abuse she has endured, noting that "the Cylon consciousness is just as susceptible to the same pressures and cleavages as the human psyche."[7] Later in the episode, viewers learn that Gina has repeatedly been raped by Lieutenant Thorne and several other members of the *Pegasus* crew. This news horrifies Tyrol and Helo, as Thorne is now on his way to *Galactica*'s brig to interrogate Sharon (with whom Helo is in love)—a fact that prompts one *Pegasus* crewman to jest crassly, "Your little robot girl is in for quite a ride." Once in her cell, Thorne throttles and beats Sharon before pushing her over the bed and beginning to rape her. As with Leoben, the treatment of Gina and Sharon is tied to their dehumanization. But even as the Cylons are being treated as (sexual) objects, viewers are reminded of their frailty and humanness, first by Baltar and then by Tyrol and Helo, who rush to protect Athena and her unborn baby from Thorne.