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Subversive Subjectivity in *Battlestar Galactica*

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Let's begin with a quote by Tom Engelhardt from his scholarly work, *The End of Victory Culture*. He writes, "The atomic bomb that leveled Hiroshima also blasted openings into a netherworld of consciousness where victory and defeat, enemy and self, threatened to merge" (Engelhardt 6). This results in a crisis for the American consciousness, because, "with the end of the Cold War and the 'loss of the enemy,' American culture has entered a period of crisis that raises profound questions about national purpose and identity" (10). He constructs his argument around examples including war narratives and popular culture including Science Fiction (SF). Engelhardt's cycle of sneak attack, triumphalism, and identity crisis is repeating itself today. The 9/11 sneak attacks heralded the beginning of a new wave of fourth generation warfare brought to bear by Al-Qaeda on the secular Western democracies. The era of the Global War on Terrorism is even more problematic both ideologically and strategically than the Cold War, because of the following issues: Who is the enemy? Where is the enemy engaged? Is the enemy amongst us? How do we identify the enemy from ourselves? Metaphorical and explicit engagement of these issues is integral to the development of Post-Cold War SF including the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica*.

*Battlestar Galactica* is uniquely situated to connect the Cold War and Post-Cold War eras. Also, its transformative engagement of subjectivity and the enemy other makes it well suited to exploring the shifts resulting from the crisis that Engelhardt describes. The original 1978 *Battlestar Galactica* and the 2003 re-imagined series are very different in scope, narrative, and confrontation with the paradigm crisis resulting from the shift from the Cold War to the Post-Cold War era. Their relationship provides points of reference embedded historically and culturally within these two eras. Additionally, Martin McGrath's description

of the original series is telling about its Cold War connections. He writes, “Comparisons between Glen A. Larson’s *Battlestar Galactica* from the 1970s and this modern incarnation are revealing. Larson, a conservative and Mormon, also filled the show with religious and political allegory, but it was one-dimensional. The original *Battlestar Galactica* transposed the writings of Mormon faith to a futuristic setting but the politics remained firmly rooted in the Cold War. His Cylons were militaristic communists in shiny armor and the battle was simply good versus evil. His human community was wholesome and, apart from a pantomime villain, united” (16). It’s the one-dimensionality, or more accurately two-dimensionality, of the original series that labels it as a Cold War narrative based on conflicting political ideologies mapped over an “us versus them” narrative. This kind of story is what Engelhardt calls “the American war story,” in which, “you had no choice. Either you pulled the trigger or you died, for war was invariably portrayed as a series of reactive incidents rather than organized and invasive campaigns” (4-5). The original *Battlestar Galactica* series is by-and-large such an “American war story.” However, the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* goes beyond mere reflection and directly challenges Susan Sontag’s claim that, “there is absolutely no social criticism, of even the most implicit kind, in science fiction films” (223). Social commentary and confrontation of real world issues are built into the story rather than as mere metaphor or tangent.

I argue that there is a shift in SF to more directly engage contemporary issues, and I describe how the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* goes further than its 1978 source material in this regard. In this paper, I explore the subversive enemy other Cylon threat and its destabilization of Western democratic subjectivity, which reflects the reboot of Engelhardt’s cycle.

Glen A. Larson’s 1978 *Battlestar Galactica* is a two-dimensional retelling of Engelhardt’s cycle by incorporating mythology, technological renaissance, and Cold War

ideology. It's set in another part of the galaxy, possibly in another time, where humans are nearly eradicated by a powerful race of robots known as Cylons. The human survivors form a convoy of spaceships, protected by the battlestar *Galactica*, and set off in search of the mythical planet Earth. At its core, it's a biblically inspired exodus story about fathers and sons, but the explicit visual threat arrives via the communistic Cylon robots.

The first episode, "Saga of a Star World" was originally interrupted for the televised signing of the Camp David Peace Accords between Egypt and Israel on September 17, 1978, which was in the middle of the optimistic and arguably idealistic Carter presidency.

Furthermore, *Battlestar Galactica* builds on space opera successes such as George Lucas' 1977 film *Star Wars* and the even earlier "wagon train" to the stars television series, Gene Roddenberry's 1966-1969 *Star Trek*. Its connection with *Star Wars* is further embedded in the Cold War power/political structure thanks to the media aping the phrase for Ronald Reagan's proposed next generation military hardware and weaponry designed to lie in wait over the Earth in the vacuum of space. Reagan revealed the United States' new plans in a March 23, 1983 speech that outlined the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI)--what was often called "Star Wars" in the news. Reagan set out to use lasers and missiles to defend America from a preemptive attack by what he later termed the "Evil Empire." Michael Rogin has pointed to two likely sources for Reagan's SDI inspiration: *Murder in the Air* (1940) and *Torn Curtain* (1966). Reagan starred in *Murder in the Air* as the protector of a super weapon "capable of paralyzing electrical currents and destroying all enemy planes in the air" (Fitzgerald par. 14). *Torn Curtain*, a film by Alfred Hitchcock and starring Paul Newman, is about a defensive anti-missile system. As Rogin shows, Reagan used stories and lines from these and other films without attribution, so it's likely that the line between fiction and reality blurred in Reagan's ideas about protecting the American homeland from the "Evil Empire" (Fitzgerald par. 13). Additionally, these films as well as Reagan's own ideas about the

dichotomy between what is simplistically delineated as the Western democracies and Eastern communist bloc is an oversimplification of a much more complex power and political matrix within which the United States and the USSR were situated. The 1978 *Battlestar Galactica*, as a precursor to the Reagan administration and existing within the Cold War ideology reasserted by Reagan on his bully pulpit, is a reflection on culturally held beliefs in the United States at that time as well as an indicator of the shift from an idealistic Carter to the fear mongering Reagan.

Both versions or visions of *Battlestar Galactica* begin with what Larson calls, “That big sneak attack,” which he describes as a “sort of Pearl Harbor in space,” and those persons who survive, “figured they had to get away and fight another day” (“Created”). What Engelhardt says about films following the Pearl Harbor attack, “defeat was only a spring board for victory,” may also be applied to the two *Battlestar Galactica* series (3). The Cylon sneak attack in both series establishes their identity as the enemy other along with aligning them with treachery and deception. Additionally, the new Cylon threat is significantly different than the one in which humanity fought forty years prior to the events taking place in the 2003 series. The past involved strategic military engagements between Cylon warriors and the human military. Cylon war making changes in both series--a Japanese inspired sneak attack in the original series and an infiltrative disabling of humanity’s defenses prior to an armistice ending near-annihilation. Furthermore, Engelhardt describes the rise of triumphalism and the call for absolute victory following the beginning of World War II. However, the American triumphal identity falters in the Cold War due to stalemates and losses in Korea and Vietnam. This is reflected in both series when they cut and run in the original, and President Roslin convincing Commander Adama the war was over from the beginning in the latter. However, identity crisis isn’t explored among the “wholesome” community of humans in the 1978 series, but it is a very important and dramatic issue in the

2003 series. Underlying the threat to humanity in both series are the Cylon invaders. In both cases, Cylons provide an enemy other from which human subjectivity is defined, but its in the 2003 series that human subjectivity is challenged and destabilized by a new and unexpected Cylon threat.

In the original *Battlestar Galactica*, Cylons were created by a then extinct reptilian race for labor. Humans and Cylons are at odds with one another after humanity fights alongside another galactic race threatened by the marauding Cylons. Viewing humanity as a threat to their galactic expansion, the Cylons decide to obliterate humanity by any means necessary.

The Cylon Centurion or warrior that is most often seen in the original series appears like a person wearing a suit of armor, and they serve as good targets for the *Galactica* crew. Along with their armor, they don a laser blaster as well as a sword. Their armor features an immaculate shine like polished chrome and their helmets are reminiscent of Darth Vader's mask--wide trapezoidal shape covering the nose and mouth areas and their "eye" is a wide bar extending from one side of the face to the other with a red pulse intently and steadily gliding from one side to the other. The red eye, being the window to the soul, implies a communist threat. Other implications of the glowing red "eye" include warning, danger, and even blood. Alternatively, the sliding red light acts as a mask to hide their eyes, which has its own sinister connotations. Red is a popular color in films of the Cold War era and one imminently well-known example is the 1953 George Pal production of *The War of the Worlds*. The film and its original movie poster bleed red. Red film references include the Martian heat-ray, the color of the Martians' skin, and even the red planet, Mars. Red serves as a warning to the viewer, and it serves a double meaning as a reflection of the Cold War threat and enemy to democracy--communism.

Another connection between the 1978 Cylons and communism has to do with their command structure and social organization. They blindly follow top-down orders from their supreme ruler with the acknowledgement, “By your command.” Orders are handed down by special IL, or Imperious Leader, models. One such IL model is called Lucifer, and it’s assigned to observe and work with the villainous human, Lord Baltar, whose name is tellingly an anagram for “lab rat.” Lucifer’s head has a generally human shape, and a basaltic-blue color with two red eye slits. Its robotic body is covered by a long red robe, and the character was voiced by Jonathan Harris who is most recognized as the comedic villain, Dr. Zachary Smith from *Lost in Space*.

Consider the etymological significance to the name, Cylon. Larson more than likely appropriated the name from Cylon (or Kylon) of Athens. Cylon of Athens was an Olympic games winner, who attempted to take control of the city of Athens and establish a tyranny in 632 BC. He and his followers failed, but his attempt revealed that those persons who had recently acquired wealth wanted greater political recognition and power. This in itself is interesting considering that the Cylons of *Battlestar Galactica* are essentially a working class that gained (political) consciousness following the extinction of their reptilian overlords and creators. Unfettered by their former masters, the Cylons acquired new resources by force. Additionally, their expansionist nature belies their voracious capacity and need for resources to continue their existence as well as empire.

Fast-forward twenty-five years to Ronald D. Moore’s re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica*, which was introduced in 2003. Unlike Larson prior to the original series, Moore has an established record in SF through his prior screenwriting and producing credits on several *Star Trek* series. On the re-imagined series Larson is credited as a “creative consultant,” but Gary Westfahl writes that, “although new producer Ronald D. Moore, who

demonstrated his skills in science fiction with work for the *Star Trek* franchise, has thankfully displayed no inclination to consult with Larson about anything” (par. 7).

The re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* first aired on December 8, 2003 two years in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the United States and subsequent war with Afghanistan, and nine months after the United States’ invasion of Iraq. The US occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the Guantanamo Bay detainment camp of “enemy combatants” in the Global War on Terrorism feature into the new series, particularly the second and third seasons. The earlier first and second seasons follow Cold War lines of political friction between the Executive Branch of the US government and the military as laid out by President Dwight Eisenhower’s farewell speech to the nation that warned the American public of the “military-industrial complex” (17 January 1961) and Bailey and Knebel’s Cold War political thriller from 1962, *Seven Days in May*.

Interestingly (and coincidentally) for the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica*, there were several key events that took place in 1978, the same year that the original *Battlestar Galactica* series was released, that were prescient for the new series. David Rorvik published his fraudulent yet poignant book, *In His Image: The Cloning of a Man*, the first in vitro fertilization birth took place, and President Jimmy Carter ended development on the neutron bomb.

Moore incorporated Larson’s idea of a Cylon sneak attack and the resulting human exodus, which initially galvanized humanity as virtuous and the Cylon threat as insidious. However, he changed the story in several significant ways. These include the important change that the Cylons were created by man as slave labor, they rebel, and fight a protracted war that ends in an armistice forty years prior to the series’ beginning. Most importantly, there is a group of twelve Cylon models that appear and act human for all practical intents and purposes, but were unknown to humanity until after the opening sneak attack. These

human-like Cylons serve as the face and voice for the Cylons instead of the chrome robot killing machines of the earlier series. These twelve human-like Cylon models are the basis for many copies, and each copy has its own experiences and identity that is shared with all of the other Cylons. Initially, it's revealed that there are seven known human-like Cylons as well as the unknown "Final Five." The Cylon network on-board their large basestar ships is represented by falling red colored glyphs in streams of water and biological goo in which Cylons immerse their hands to interface the network. At this interstice, a Cylon communes with what could be considered a hive mind, but a more accurate analogy might be a market of many voices that often shout everything, but may also chose to keep some things to themselves. It's this act, which serves as one aspect of their individuality. The hive mind requires total openness and an unrestricted sharing--a communism of the soul.

The new Cylon models are hybrid creatures masquerading as human and function politically by following an anarchistic model of collectivity. This affords these new Cylons a certain autonomy and individuality with certain bounds that can be crossed as in the case of the Number Three/D'Anna model's deactivation or "boxing." These advanced human-like Cylons withhold some aspects of their life and make choices that may be diametrically opposed to the will of the collective in order to evince change. Thus, the new collective is in opposition to the top-down political system of the original series, but it presents its own dilemma of a Cylon hybrid elite ruling over the older models that still serve their assigned purpose.

One troubling aspect of these new Cylons for humanity is that there are sleeper Cylons, which live amongst humanity not knowing their true identity until the receipt of a special coded signal. This troubling development is reminiscent of replicants' implanted memories in *Blade Runner* and the secret Communist programming of individuals in *The Manchurian Candidate*. This culminates in the season one finale when the number eight



Cylon sleeper agent known as Sharon “Boomer” Valerii attempts to assassinate Commander Adama.

Even more disturbing are the Final Five Cylons, because their identity is unknown to both humanity and the Cylons. The Final Five raise important questions such as: Whose side are they on? When revealed, how will this revelation affect their accepted identity? The Final Five destabilize human as well as Cylon identities. In the season three finale, “Crossroads, Part II,” four of the final five Cylons are revealed as integral characters to the *Galactica*. As the klaxons blast out warning of an imminent Cylon ambush (which is another connection with Engelhardt), one of the four final five takes a personal stand regarding what this revelation means. Colonel Tigh tells the other three newly revealed Cylons, “The ship is under attack. We do our jobs. Report to your stations.” When Tyrol questions the order, Tigh goes on to say, “My name is Saul Tigh. I’m an officer in the Colonial Fleet. Whatever else I am, whatever else that means, that’s the man I want to be. And if I die today, that’s the man I’ll be.” What else does it mean to be someone or something different than what you believe yourself to be? This is the central problem of identity and subjectivity. Tigh identifies himself as human, but he’s outed as a Cylon subject. Threats to one’s identity come from within and without, and this is ever more present in the amorphousness in today’s world of ideological battlefields spanning continents and individuals everywhere.

The Cylon enemy other identity is established at the beginning of the 2003 series. However, humanity’s actions prior to the war and after the sneak attack destabilize the understood “right” and “good” of humanity. These issues of subjectivity and identity connect to the here-and-now in that the Cylons become us, and we, them. Moore and his writers have been cognizant to muddy the waters on both sides of the human-Cylon conflict in order to further break down the barriers of our accepted beliefs about who is presented/represented as good or evil. Furthermore, the lines between us in the Western democracies blur with those

persons challenging us with fourth generational warfare. To better understand our conception of the enemy other and the connection between Cylons and our here-and-now it's important to reflect on the words of Philip K. Dick from his 1973 "The Android and the Human." He said, "rather than learning about ourselves by studying our constructs, perhaps we should make the attempt to comprehend what our constructs are up to by looking into what we ourselves are up to" (5).

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