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Negotiating Utopia and Dystopia: Space and Architecture in <u>Battlestar Galactica</u> (2004-2009)

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The architecture and design of the new <u>Battlestar Galactica</u>'s (SciFi, 2004-2009) narrative world mirrors the complex political, ethical, and moral questions posed by the narrative arc of the entire series. The "graying" of heroes and villains that scholar Lynette Porter unpacks in her analysis of <u>Battlestar Galactica</u> (<u>BSG</u>) and other contemporary sci-fi serials is central to the series' core philosophical inquiry "what makes us human?"–a question that is addressed as much through the development of Cylon characters as through human ones.[1] While initially there is a seemingly a clear division between human and machine, right and wrong, good and evil, these divisions quickly become nuanced, blurred, and even reversed as the narrative progresses. In the end, both poles are destabilized and are able to come out on the other side of conflict, charting a new territory of co-existence–both for characters and for architecture.

A close visual analysis of the diegetic architecture of <u>Battlestar Galactica</u> foregrounds how the conceptualization of space and built environment within the series works with—and in some ways is inseparable from—viewer reading strategies and narrative progression.[2] Jan Johnson-Smith sees recent sci-fi television as particularly invested in a <u>mise-en-scène</u> that "articulates crucial aspects of the narrative and renders excess verbosity [a staple of literary sci-fi] redundant. . . . <u>mise-en-scène</u> has its own narrative too, and in [sci-fi] it enjoys a particularly powerful function"[3] <u>BSG</u> uses <u>mise-en-scène</u> to negotiate between poles of "dystopia" and "utopia" with regard to the spaces of human and Cylon races in an effort to comment upon and critique U.S. policies and attitudes post-9/11. The following column will present a sample of a larger analysis of diegetic architecture in <u>Battlestar Galactica</u> through a comparison of Cylon and human spaces relevant to notions of home and the body—concepts intimately linked to any definition of "human."

Much of the design of Galactica, humanity's last defense against the Cylons, can be read as analog and dystopian: relating to a future where humanity regresses in technology, is perpetually on the run, and has become more militaristic. The doors are squeaky and hinged (unlike the sliding doors of <u>Star Trek</u> (NBC, 1966-69)), communications resemble World War II-era combat phones, and the pilot mini-series even opens with the decommissioning of Galactica as a seemingly out-moded "dinosaur." Notably, the ship's lack of networked computer systems is—initially at least—what saves Galactica and her passengers, setting up a dichotomy early in the series between old (analog) and new (networked) technologies. Furthermore, the "retro-future bricolage" created though the mixture of futuristic design elements with contemporary or even outdated details creates both a parallel reality the viewer can enter into and a noticeable dissonance that pulls the viewer out of his/her expectations of the technologically advanced diegetic space.[4]

One of the most direct responses to earlier sci-fi adventure programming is the Command Information Center (CIC). The removal of the *Star Trek*'scaptain's chair and central viewing screen allows for dynamic tracking

shots such as those that encircle the panic-stricken crew in the episode following the pilot miniseries, and reinforces the dystopian, paranoid interiority of human mobile architecture after the fall.[5] Rather than directing gazes outward into the cinematic spectacle of space, as most sci-fi space operas do,[6] Galactica's CIC forces sightlines to intersect either upwards toward the DRADIS screens descending from the ceiling or downwards toward tactical plans on the light table in the center.

Galactica's CIC with central "periscope" and "operating table." (Promotional shot)

This shift away from the central viewing screen was a deliberate decision on the part of the show's creators and designers: producers Ronald D. Moore and David Eick envisioned Galactica's design as "Das Boot in space. . . ."[7] Set designer Richard Hudolin remarked, "I started thinking about making the control room a bit like a hospital operating theater . . . allowing us to work in multiple directions and in multiple angles."[8] The spacecraft's relationship to its surroundings is no longer one of curiosity or exploration (gazing out), but of fear and uncertainty (gazing in). The lack of outward visibility also creates a relationship to the outside that is technological, non-visceral, mediated, and largely second-hand—not unlike many Americans' conception of contemporary warfare in present-day conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

By contrast, the clean and integrated spaces of the Cylon Basestars seem (on the surface) to be "utopian": sleek, efficient, and completely integrated. "I was influenced by electron microscope images of plant and animal life, I really wanted to give the idea that the Basestar was cold and mechanical close up, but from a distance looked organic," remarked illustrator Eric Chu.[9]

Interior networked space of the Cylon basestar. (Screen grab)

The Basestar thus has the inverse inside/outside relationship to the Cylon raiders, sentient fighter planes with biological interiors. The fusion of body and machine in the Cylon world counters the constant struggle for livable conditions aboard the colonial fleet—providing a utopian synthesis of biology and technology that negates humanity's need for a permanent home. Following the binary created through the vilification of networked computer systems in the pilot mini-series, however, these "utopian" sites also imply a certain threat through their interconnectedness.
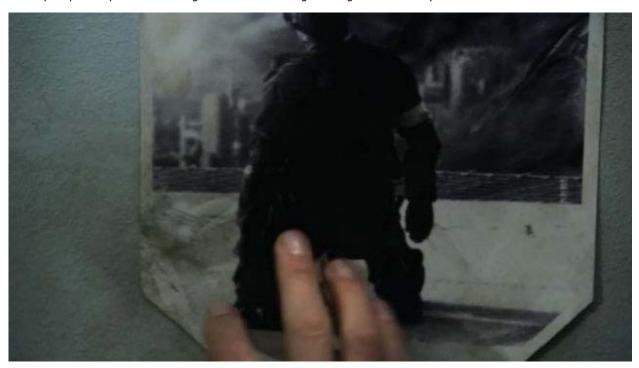
The threat of the utopian community of sameness could be read as technophobic, a tendency Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner articulated in reference to conservative futuristic sci-fi and fantasy films of the 1970s, such as THX 1138 (George Lucas, 1971) and Logan's Run (Michael Anderson, 1976). For Ryan and Kellner, these narratives marked a separation between the threatening notion of equality through technology and socialism and a conservative notion of individual liberty and autonomy. However, the flip of the false utopias of Logan's Run and THX 1138 is not a dystopian military spacecraft, but rather the natural world. Kellner and Ryan also discuss how the dystopian films of the late 1970s and 80s marked a progressive force in popular culture, as "vehicles for populist and radical critiques of the capitalist ethic and capitalist institutions."[10] Constance Penley saw a similar "critical dystopia" in The Terminator (James Cameron, 1984), where once again machines created by mankind become self-aware and wreak havoc on their makers.[11] For BSG, this progressive or critical dystopia can be seen in the details of Galactica's design as well as the narrative's projection of contemporary anxieties over the moral and ethical issues of terrorism, insurgency, torture, election fraud, and procreative rights onto the far-off diegetic world of humanity in a long distant past. As BSG progresses as a series, the utopia/dystopia and progressive/conservative binaries unwind, and what saves the ailing Galactica in the end is integration with Cylon biotechnology–a moment of negotiation and compromise between the poles of utopia and dystopia in architecture that mirrors the genetic integration of Cylon and human bodies through the redemptive figure of Hera.[12]

The relationship of built space to individual agency (arguably a stand-in for "humanness") complicates the distinctions between utopia and dystopia implied earlier by the design: crew members decorate and personalize their bunks and lockers with photographs and mementos, and one hallway of Galactica becomes a space for a makeshift immediate memorial of photographs, notes, and candles evocative of similar public outpourings of grief after 9/11.

Memorial corridor aboard Galactica. (Screen grab)

In the episode "33" Viper pilots gesture towards a photograph of a man witnessing the Cylon genocide that was directly inspired by an iconic image of firemen raising the flag at the destroyed World Trade Center site.[13]

Pilots touch 9/11-inspired photograph of a fallen Caprica. (Screen grab)

These interstitial spaces can be read as efforts to "humanize" the bland, utilitarian interiors of Galactica, relating to our natural drive to nest, to create a home. The Basestar, on the other hand, is an actual biomechanical extension of Cylon bodies, expressed both in the figure of the "hybrid" who drives the ship and the ship's exterior sculptural shape, which resembles a neuron. Furthermore, through "projecting," the Cylons have the ability to feel as if they are navigating an environment of their choosing at anytime, providing an effortless escape from the endlessly similar and monotonous corridors of a massive Basestar to a parallel, subjective reality. Compared to the nesting and coping mechanisms of humans aboard Galactica, projection seems unhinged from real physical space or political action, and thus it is coded as unhuman. The distinction, however, like most Cylon/human dichotomies within the series' diegetic architecture, is not so cut and dry.

Cylon projections are not merely an escape from drab surroundings, rather they can convey a similar relationship to the notion of "home" as the nesting impulses in human spaces, such as Boomer's projected home where she lives happily with Galen Tyrol and their imaginary child.[14] In this instance, Cylon hallucinatory and virtual architectural space has an almost "human" relationship to individual subjectivity. In another example of Cylons humanizing their integrated bodies and architectures, Athena helps the humans defend Galactica from a Cylon logic bomb by cutting her arm open to connect to Galactica's main computer.[15] Through her own agency, she subverts the design and intention of her Cylon form and causes physical harm to both her body and its connected architecture. Once more, the presumed sameness implied by the integration of bodies and spaces within the Cylon world is broken and human/Cylon binaries of body/machine are unwound.

There is also a third architectural space in BSG that navigates between these two poles of real and virtual, analog and networked – the ancient opera house on Kobol. This building is both a real site (overgrown ruins on Kobol) and a hallucinatory dream space ("projection") shared by both human and Cylon. Gaius Baltar and his Head Six are the first to enter both the actual ruin and visionary space at the end of season one, where the Six informs him that the future lies with a half-human, half-Cylon child.[16] The building's interior resembles the many Beaux-Arts style imitations of the Paris Opéra (1875) by Charles Garnier, but was shot in Vancouver's Orpheum Theater (built in the 1930s). I find it rather telling that the BSG writers chose to call this space an opera house rather than a concert hall or theater, as "opera house" connotes not only a by-gone era of sophistication in entertainment that is somewhat absent in the Brutalist, modern world of Caprica and the other colonies, but also conjures up associations of social mixing and visibility.

Finished in 1875, Garnier's opera house inspired urban Realist and Impressionist painters such as Edgar Degas and Mary Cassatt to investigate the modern matrices of the gaze and the emerging leisure culture of the mobile flâneur. The crossing sightlines of Roslin and Athena across the opera house's hallways as they frantically search for Hera in the concluding episodes of the series mimic the complex interplay of gazes at work in Mary Cassatt's In the Loge (1879), where a young woman peers through her opera glasses at the spectacle on stage while a man in the background uses the same apparatus to better view the woman. Cylons and humans foresee their interconnected fate neither in the rationalist, military, modernist spaces of humanity nor in the neural, interconnected Cylon world, but rather in the romanticized, historicist, and non-technological space of pre-cinematic spectacle.

The visions and character interactions in the opera house have their counterpart in real action aboard Galactica in the series' climax, preparing Gaius and Caprica Six to enter the opera(ting) theater together with Hera to witness the conclusion of the Cylon-human conflict and the beginning of a new age (on the second Earth). BSG posits a political and cultural climate filled with conflict, self-contradictions, and impossible dilemmas that is both entirely separate from, and entirely about, the American milieu post-9/11 and boldly calls for a radical form of peaceful coexistence. Architecture and design mirror and underscore contemporary sci-fi television's moral and ethical tensions and ambiguities, suggesting the creative labor and visual and material detail of design elements within a series are as integral as writing and performance to our narrative comprehension as viewers and a program's capacity for critique.

NOTES

1. Porter, Lynnette. Tarnished Heroes, Charming Villains and Modern Monsters: Science Fiction in Shades of Gray on 21st Century Television. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010. 189.
2. Serafina Bathrick discusses how limited sets and locations in situation comedies heighten character expectations through an analysis of The Mary Tyler Moore Show, where the title character effectively   breaks down the dichotomy between work and home. Bathrick, Serafina. "The Mary Tyler Moore Show: Women at Home and at Work." MTM—"Quality Television." Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi, eds. London: British Film Institute, 1984. 99-131. Spectator engagement with a text like MTM clearly has a very different valence than with sci-fi, but mise-en-scèneis still important in programs without the proscenium set-up of situation comedy.
3. Johnson-Smith, Jan. American Science Fiction TV: Star Trek, Stargate and Beyond. London: I.B.Tauris,   2005. 3.
4. Pank, Dylan and John Caro. "'Haven't You Heard? They Look Like Us Now!': Realism and Metaphor in the New Battlestar Galactica." Channeling the Future: Essays on Science Fiction and Fantasy Television. Ed. Lincoln Geraghty. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 2009. 207.
5. "33," Battlestar Galactica, "33," S1.E3.
6. Kramer, Peter. "'Want to Take a Ride?': Reflections on the Blockbuster Experience in Contact (1997).   Movie Blockbusters, ed. Julian Stringer. New York: Routledge, 2003. 128-140.
7. Bassom, David. Battlestar Galactica: Downloaded: Inside the Universe of the Critically Acclaimed TV Series. London: Titan Books, 2009. 144.
8. Hudolin, Richard cited in David Bassom, Battlestar Galactica: The Official Companion. London: Titan Books,

2005. 137.

9. Ibid. 147.

10. Ryan, Michael and Douglas Kellner. "Technophobia/Dystopia." Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader, ed. Sean Redmond. London: Wallflower Press, 2004. 54.

11. Penley, Constance. "Time Travel, Primal Scene and the Critical Dystopia." Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader, ed. Sean Redmond. London: Wallflower Press, 2004. 127. There are even stronger connections between the dystopian future of Cameron's film and the barely habitable planet New Caprica, where humanity is forced to result to terrorism and insurgency following Cylon occupation. (Various episodes, S2-S3).

12. Although she does not discuss BSG at all in her analysis of sci-fi television's reliance on mise-en-scène, Jan Johnson-Smith concludes to her book-length study with a quote relevant to BSG: "Modern American SF television is neither utopian or dystopic; it enforces a critique of the Western mythos, whilst renegotiating its finer aspects. It is a place where there is much to do and where there are many faults, but also a place where there is much hope for humanity." Johnson-Smith, American Science Fiction TV, 253.

13. Bassom. Battlestar Galactica, 46.

14. "Someone to Watch Over Me," Battlestar Galactica, S4.E17.

15. "Flight of the Phoenix," Battlestar Galactica, S2.E9.

16. "Kobol's Last Gleaming, Part II," Battlestar Galactica, S1.E13.

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