

Gender Performance, Transgression and the Cyborg in *Battlestar Galactica*

Kati McGinnis

Department of Women's Studies

Feminist scholarship has had a contentious relationship with science fiction. As a genre sometimes marked by the hyper-sexualized scantily clad female other, or sometimes the site of female erasure and censure, science fiction seemingly has little positive portrayals of women. Operating within a larger context of popular culture, the genre of SF undoubtedly plays out oppression; it, however, can provide spaces for resistance. In this paper, I will argue that science fiction as a genre has seemingly limitless possibilities for social commentary and gender re-identification. By using Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" as well as feminist visual scholarship as a lens, I set out to demonstrate how *Battlestar Galactica* is able to navigate between gender transgression and technology's impact on gender, highlighting the possibility for a new female spectator.

Gender, Science Fiction and the Spectator

Battlestar Galactica as a work of science fiction (SF), a site of what I term as super-fiction, has the potential to liberate its subject material. Whereas all other fiction places its narrative in realistic contexts making its characters subject to the rules of the hegemonic patriarchy, science fiction teeters on the edge of the unknown and hyper-reality, potentially liberating its characters from the weight of patriarchal representation. The genre of science fiction even has the possibility of occupying a space beyond fiction, with unrealistic settings like outer space and fantastic characters like cyborgs who are constructed and must therefore perform traditional notions of gender and/or transgress them. It is in this space beyond fiction that the female character can "imaginatively [and metaphorically] step outside the father's house and look around" (Roberts 3), engaging the female spectator into similar resistance.

The gender performance of the female characters and cyborgs presented in *Battlestar Galactica* resists traditional gendered scripts. Judith Butler theorizes that all of gender is performed and "is instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (392). Traditional SF female characters in television would not deviate from this framework, often playing constructed roles of femininity and providing a site for a male gaze and fetishistic pleasure (Mulvey 46-49). Female characters in *Battlestar Galactica*, however, are able to constitute an oppositional performance of gender roles because they can deny their origin, making the once repetitive into generative and imaginative instead. This element of agency, allows these characters and their viewers the ability to challenge and critique socially constructed gender.

Battlestar Galactica may also fulfill a desire for an oppositional gaze, imagining an empowered female spectator. In her essay on female spectatorship, Mary Ann Doane speculates that "the supportive binary opposition at work is not only... an opposition between passivity and activity, but perhaps more importantly, an opposition between proximity and distance in relation to the image" (63). The

About the Author

Kati McGinnis is a senior in the Women's Studies Department at the Ohio State University. As a women's studies major, Kati intently studies narrative, culture and representations of gender, race and class within popular culture. Upon graduation in the Spring of 2010, Kati hope to continue her scholarship of popular culture and feminism for the duration of her career.

paradigm that Doane creates imagines that the spectator has only these two choices for spectatorship because of her closeness to the image: to identify masochistically with the subject or to masquerade, denying identification and feigning distance between “oneself and one’s image” (66). This possibility of masquerade, affords the female spectator spaces of empowerment in television’s representation of women. The possibility of a liberated subject in SF television, though, provides images/characters that women can simultaneously identify with and be critical of in their representation. Thus, the SF female spectator can possibly indulge in narcissism of identification without the transvestitism of a masqueraded masculine gaze. This liberated, super-fiction space of BSG can aid in re-imagining the female spectator as one who can challenge or even transcend the binary opposition of active/passive and of proximity to/distance from the image.

Cyborg Theory, Feminism, Technology and Science Fiction

In Donna Haraway’s work entitled “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” the author theorizes the possibility of a future interpretation of gender in the form of a cyborg. She describes this cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 149). Haraway believes humans are already cyborgs, who have blurred the boundary between “animal and machine” with our use of reproductive technology, prosthesis, etc. (149). Technology, then, not only impacts the body physically, it also becomes the medium through which the female body and gender are socially constructed, articulated and represented. Haraway argues against an “essentialist” view of femininity, urging cyborg theory as a means of destroying male/female dichotomies. Summarily, the Manifesto envisions a new conceptualization of femininity, encompassed in the metaphor of the cyborg, that opens the possibility to define gender in new and liberating ways.

The Manifesto presents two ideas I would like to explore in relation to science fiction generally and to *Battlestar Galactica* specifically. First, in regard to science fiction, Haraway writes, “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (149). On the surface, this assertion seemingly contradicts the super-fiction quality of SF that I present; however, upon further scrutiny it serves as confirmation. Considering social marginalization of the cyborg as the “other” (i.e. our mistreatment of persons with prosthesis or persistent narratives where Artificial Intelligence is the downfall of humankind, etc.), juxtaposed

with Haraway’s vision of the cyborg, the cyborg then becomes an identity that a spectator can both accept and reject. The SF female spectator, then, can employ both of Doane’s modes of looking. Furthermore, Haraway’s statement suggests that SF represents social reality, affirming the earlier assertion that SF has the ability to provide distinct social commentary. Secondly, in regard to science fiction’s use of the cyborg, Haraway writes, “Contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs—creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously crafted and natural” (149). This assertion is true of *Battlestar Galactica* in that cyborgs, called cylons in the show, are dominant characters. These cylons are characters that the female spectator can both accept and reject. Within a larger framework of SF, a space contextually real and imagined, cylons can be seen as characters that both perform traditional gender and transgress, sometimes simultaneously.

The cyborg often represents the marginalized “other” in science fiction. In his work on science fiction and the cyborg, Surkan writes the cyborg as a passing figure, one that can on the surface appear human, that is marginalized and exiled by society. This exile is termed as the inner exile “in which one’s own interior sense of identity is fundamentally disavowed by a society incapable of transcending a binary view of embodiment” (114). The character of the cyborg, then, is a character that masks its true identity and plays out gender stereotypes in order to assimilate into society. Cyborgs in science fiction television, and in *Battlestar Galactica*, can be portrayed as characters that embody actual and constructed identity. Once again, they are characters that can simultaneously transgress and perform the gender normative. The omnipresent viewer sees both parts of the cyborg identity, further highlighting spectatorship that oscillates between identifying and rejecting the narrative.

Surkan’s “other” status of the cyborg exposes the racialized and ethnic identity of the cyborg body. This body, as the site of hybridism of human and machine, lends itself into racialized discourses. In her essay on cyborg feminism, Sandoval discusses the hybrid cyborg within this racialized or subaltern discourse. In her reading of Haraway’s Manifesto, Sandoval creates an alliance between cyborg feminism and US Third World Feminism by positioning Haraway’s feminist modes along side the methodologies of the oppressed, or skills utilized in the margins by women of color. Sandoval interprets cyborg feminism, as a re-envisioning of hegemonic representations of “love” that generates “grounds for coalition, making possible community across difference...through the enactment of the methodologies of the oppressed” (377). These methodologies are listed as “semiotic reading, deconstruction of signs, meta-ideologizing, and moral commitment-to-equality” (384).

Aligning the cyborg body to these methodologies provides fascinating space in the visual for cyborg representation as not only the “other,” but also as a space for new feminist representation and spectatorship. In fact, the cyborg body within the SF visual is a site for the motion/enactment of these methodologies. Placing Sandoval’s vision of “affinity-through-difference” (380), into a science fiction visual context is palpable in *Battlestar Galactica*. The cylon/cyborg characters on the series, most definitely represent Sandoval’s subaltern, as they are initially presented as the racialized “other” to the human characters. This binary initially presented is systematically broken apart as the series progresses as the cylon characters identify and deconstruct gendered and racial binaries, and ultimately forge an egalitarian, integrated future with the remaining humans.

Although super-fiction creates an alluring space for representation, actual appearance of Haraway’s cyborg in a visual text is difficult to find. Devoss’ work with cyberbodies and cyborg representation on the world wide web reveals the co-opting of the cyborg to reaffirm the gender normative and misogyny of the patriarchy (838). This co-opting of the cyborg, prompts Devoss to re-define these images as “cyber” bodies and not cyborgs, noting the importance of this distinction (845). Devoss does, however, provide a few examples of transgression and actual cyborg representation. The transgressions are artist’s depictions of real women within a cyborg context. Devoss’ revelation about the actual visual representation of the cyborg points to the need for cyborg representation in the visual to be read against the grain, with particular attention to spectatorship and transgression from the gender normative.

Reading of *Battlestar Galactica*

The television series *Battlestar Galactica*, a remake of an older series, is an example of super-fiction that challenges gender construction, and plays with the cyborg identity. The show is set in outer space, with the bulk of the scenes occurring on the space war ship, the *Battlestar Galactica*. The catalytic moment for the series’ action occurs when 12 human colonies are destroyed by the cylon enemy, a race of machines created by humans. This old and common narrative, artificial intelligence as the downfall of human kind, sets the stage for fear of the cylon “other.” The remainder of the series focuses on the attempt for the surviving humans to find a habitable planet, at the same time trying to understand and even reconcile their relationship to the cylons. Later derogatorily called “skin-jobs,” a racialized term, these cylons are exposed as characters that have evolved to resemble humans, in essence becoming Surkan’s passing cyborg. The series’ super-fiction setting allows the show to

take on gender stereotypes and to develop female characters, both human and cylon, which both play out and transgress from the gender normative.

Battlestar Galactica portrays two human female characters as women who transgress patriarchal constructed gender: Lieutenant Kara “Starbuck” Thrace and President Laura Roslin. Both characters disrupt traditional notions of femininity in their actions, functions, representations, and agency. These characters’ portrayal in the SF setting, liberates the subjects from stereotypes and allows the characters to be imbued with formerly “masculine” identity traits.

In many ways, the character of Kara Thrace overtly disrupts many traditional stereotypes and gendered dichotomies. Starbuck is a warrior who is the best fighter pilot on the Battlestar. She is a loud, obnoxious, cigar-smoking, card-playing, drunk, hostile, ambitious, sexual (not-sexualized/objectified), butt-kicking woman. She wears a gender-neutral uniform and is rarely pictured out of androgynous attire. She is not a character without fault and she makes mistakes, but without losing her agency or her hero status. In short, Starbuck has the qualities traditionally only given to television’s leading men. In fact, in the original series Starbuck was a man. By making the new Starbuck a woman, the creators of the remade series flip the construction of gender in new and exciting ways.

Upon further investigation of Starbuck, it is apparent that her character questions technology’s impact on gender. In the episode “The Farm,” Starbuck is captured by the cylon enemy and held captive to a hospital bed. Between moments of drug-induced consciousness, the doctor (a cylon imposter) gives Starbuck a pelvic exam and expresses concern for an ovarian cyst. He then tells Starbuck that her most valuable commodity is her reproductive capability. Later, Starbuck wakes up to discover a scar on her abdomen. We later find that one of her ovaries was surgically removed. Starbuck, of course, escapes. In her efforts to get out of the facility, she enters a horror-filled room where she finds women attached by their wombs to “harvesting” machines. She recognizes one of the women, who wakes and begs Starbuck to end her life, as she can’t live as a “baby machine.” After Starbuck complies, she destroys the entire facility and escapes with a huge explosion behind her framing her heroic escape. This episode addresses feminist concerns about gender and technology. The women victims of the farm are victims of disembodiment, as their bodies are reduced to reproductive functions. This fear of reduction is neutralized when Starbuck destroys the facility. The episode also serves as a metaphor for reproductive technology, a process sometimes argued as the co-optation of female agency. For the female spectator, it is empowering to watch Starbuck reject the construction and fight back.

Another empowering human female in the series is President Laura Roslin. The most rational and possibly most powerful figure in the series, Roslin becomes President when the colonies are destroyed. She makes tough and sometimes unpopular decisions that require her character to act rationally, instead of emotionally. Roslin is transgressive because she is intelligent, powerful, rational and feminine. This portrayal is most definitely not typical of female leaders on television, who traditionally are disempowered and emotional, or “masculine” and therefore marginalized. Roslin’s character, on the surface, transgresses the gender normative.

Under the surface, Roslin’s body is the site of disability and later becomes a metaphor for the positive effect of technology on the female body. At the onset of the series, Roslin is diagnosed with breast cancer. This aspect of her body is something that she initially conceals, in order to circumvent any negative stereotyping of weakness or marginalization because of her disabling disease. Not unlike Surkan’s cyborgian inner exile, Roslin hides part of herself in order to retain her agency. Later in the series, it is discovered that if she is injected with the blood of a human/cylon hybrid fetus that her cancer would go into remission. This act endears Roslin to the product of a human male and a female cylon, later born as the female hybrid-child Hera. Roslin often refers to Hera as the “future.” The whole scene plays with many theories about gender: the disabled female other, the possibilities of technological advance on the female body, and especially the future possibility of gender expression in the biological offspring of human and machine.

Other female characters that literally represent Haraway’s cyborg, are the female cylons. These characters are machines that are made with biological components that enable them to pass as human, concealing their racial “otherness.” Like the humans on this series, these cylons are complex and unresolved. The cylon females grapple with identity, often performing patriarchal gender norms and often transgressing them. In a sense they are blank slates or possible sites of gender performance and transgressions. The oscillating identities of the female cylons on the show operate as symbols of how bodies and gender are constructed. Two such cylons are No.6 known as “Caprica Six” and Sharon Agathon known as “Athena.”

No. 6 both plays out and deconstructs the identity of the femme fatale. No. 6 is the picture perfect Hollywood knockout: tall, tan, blonde, and blue-eyed. She is an oversexualized walking Barbie doll. On one of the original colonies, she seduces a scientist named Gaius Baltar, coercing government defense secrets from him with sex and ego-service. These are precisely the government secrets that leave humanity vulnerable to a cylon nuclear attack. No. 6

is the reason for the fall of humanity. This stereotypical female representation of the femme fatale in other portrayals is potentially a dangerous construction; however, when the femme fatale is a cylon the result can be read oppositionally. Since the cylon body is constructed, there is no doubt that the cylon must perform gender at this point in the narrative. No. 6 has little to no agency, and is programmed the femme fatale. This femme fatale is entirely unnatural.

Interestingly, No. 6 develops agency as the series progresses. Although agency is something a machine should not possess, it is precisely what a cyborg must. During the nuclear attack, No. 6 dies and her consciousness is downloaded into another identical body. After this transition, No. 6 is given the name “Caprica Six” as heroic homage to her seduction of Baltar. It is during this time, that the audience realizes that something has changed in Caprica Six. Caprica Six makes a choice, has independent thought, displays a consciousness, and has agency. Caprica Six’s reason for the change is her new ability to experience the human emotion of love. The character begins to become incredibly complex. She is a contradictory mish-mash of dichotomies: masculine/feminine, human/machine, active/passive, biological/mechanical, rational/emotional, and so on. She is no longer the sexualized “other”, but now a recognizable cyborg.

Sharon “Athena” Agathon is the mother and spouse figure in the series. These traditional gender roles, performed by Athena, take on new meanings when represented in *Battlestar Galactica*. Sharon is a cylon who falls in love with Karl “Helo” Agathon, giving birth soon after to their cylon/human daughter, Hera. Sharon performs the gendered duties of wife and mother, betraying cylon society in order to commit fully to these roles. Athena’s identity, however, does not end as the mother figure. She becomes an ally to the humans, gains the trust of her toughest critic (General Adama), and becomes a pilot and warrior on the Battlestar. Like Caprica Six, Athena in essence becomes a cyborg. Her character represents the destruction of many binaries that have historically constructed gender on television.

Conclusion

Despite a tumultuous past with gender portrayal and erasure, science fiction can be a genre that represents the female body in liberated ways. The potential for liberated subjects in a super-fiction context allows a space for female characters to both perform and transgress. At the same time, because the line between science fiction and social reality is sometimes blurred (or as Haraway imagines, non-existent) and the worlds created are both real and constructed, gender re-identification is possible. This space beyond fiction

gives the female spectator the freedom to both identify with female characters and to critique the ways in which they are constructed.

In the case of *Battlestar Galactica*, the science fiction space provides great opportunity to view powerful, transgressing females. The show also gives the viewer representations of the complexity of the cyborg, imagining the ways

in which both bodies and gender are performed and constructed. The series even portrays the intersection of gender, race, and disability on the cyborg body. Perhaps most exciting of all, are the ways in which the female characters of the series challenge and even deconstruct long-standing gendered binaries. This science fiction makes it all possible.

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