

Battlestar Galactica: When Being and Appearance Collide

Introduction

That war exists, has always existed, is perhaps **the** fact that has caused humanity the most despair. From the Bible to Trajan's column, from *War and Peace* to *Guernica*, war has been painted, recounted, sculpted, dramatized. The arts have historically served as the polished shield of Perseus, allowing us enough remove that we might look into the horrifying face of the gorgon of war. When war is too terrible to take in, we turn to the expressive arts. When we can't find a way to handle the horrific-ness of the Holocaust, we might be able to take in something like cinematically compelling "Shindler's List" or Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, where the perpetrators are cats and pigs, the victims of that horror, mice.

From *Princess Mononoke* to *Persepolis*, from Kubrik's *Full Metal Jacket* to Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, the litany of representations of war in art is too extensive to catalog here. This conference, populated with diverse approaches to the subject, a mere drop in the bucket. We are aware that art can mitigate, can help to make it tolerable to look upon the havoc war wreaks. Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing is beyond the scope of this paper, but I think there is no argument that the arts can and do make war visible.

But what if we flip the question around, and ask not what do the arts reveal about war, but instead "what can looking at war show us?" What does the container of war help us to see? For example, *Waltz With Bashir*—a recent animated film about the massacre of

Palestinians at Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon – also has as one of its themes, our individual, psychological, resistance to looking at and therefore really seeing war.

The tragic, hopeless, endless war of “Battlestar Galactica” exposes the raw nature of humanity. The series begins with the nuclear destruction of the planet Caprica at the hands of the Cylons, a “race,” if you will, of sentient robots created by the human inhabitants of the planet. Forty years earlier, the robotic Cylons rebelled against their human creators and left the planet, only to return, more evolved, and determined to wipe out humanity, and, as the scripted narration reminds us at the opening of each episode, “They had a plan.” The only humans to survive this nuclear holocaust, were those already aboard spacecraft. Led by the aged, ailing, about to be decommissioned Battlestar Galactica, under 50,000 humans set off to find Earth, a mythical, lost colony on which they will find a new home, the Cylons in hot pursuit.

One of the central ways that the Cylons evolved during their forty year absence, is that they developed a dozen new models which are virtually identical to humans. The original Cylons, who the crew of Galactica has affectionately dubbed Toasters, appear machine-like. These Centurians are metallic, shiny silver with robotic, digitated, fingers and one, eerie, oscillating infrared eye. The newer, more evolved Cylons appear human, in every respect. So much so, that they have infiltrated the crew of Galactica and no one is aware of their presence. Including, in some cases, the Cylons themselves. These, Skin-jobs, as they are called, have been programmed to think, act, feel, and believe that they, are in fact, human. The juxtaposition of Cylons who look like machines and Cylons

who appear as human as can be—bleed, feel pain, make love, give birth—begs the question of what inheres in humanity.

This question surfaces when human crew of Galactica torture Cylon prisoners, when human president of the colonies steal a mixed human/Cylon baby away from her parents, telling them that she is dead, or when the Cylon model Sharon/Athena, risks her life for her human fleet members time and time again. Robert Arp and Tracie Mahaffey have explored this issue in depth in their essay, ““And They Have A Plan””: Cylons As Persons.” The person is one who is entitled to the rights and privileges of the society in which she dwells. While there is no question that women, children, slaves are all human, historically they have not always been granted the rights accorded to the person.¹ Comparing the historical lack of personhood afforded to women and slaves, they make the case that just humanness is not sufficient for personhood. But is the converse true? Could personhood status be afforded to a non-human? Ultimately, in the face of all other attributes, it is death, that becomes the defining human experience. The Cylon, who are resurrected with all their memories intact into a new version of their body when they “die,” don’t have a relationship with their mortality until their resurrection ship is destroyed and they confront that final finitude.

The series is visually gritty, with a riveting sound track, dynamic dialog, characters that elicit our concern, and a slow, thoughtful approach to editing that flies in the face of contemporary split-second splicing we have grown used to. Producer Ronald Moore, charged with remaking the earlier TV series of the same name, consciously used the

¹ {{190 Arp, Robert 2008; }}

framework of the new Galactica to address pressing post 9-11 issues like racial profiling, the torture at Abu Ghraib, religious fanaticism, the struggles in the Middle East, to name a few. Presented in a new and different context, Galactica gets us thinking about these issues in new ways and that, Moore believes, is the artist's task.²

Moore's Battlestar Galactica uses the premise of its war as a petri dish in which both the mundane issues that confront us as well as some deeply profound philosophical issues are nourished and abound. We watch the men and women of Galatica struggle with substance abuse, despair, suicidal tendencies, jealousy, shifting allegiances, romantic strife, PTSD, --just what you would expect of characters trapped in an endless war, with no reinforcements expected, and none ever coming. But emerging from this metaphoric battlefield are the deeper questions which war, by its close proximity to death, also underscores: questions of meaning, of morality, of home, of the soul, of what, ultimately makes us human.

This war between the Cylons and their human creators--ostensibly a war that if lost would end human existence--raises the specter of what it means to be distinctly human, a question which in the longer version of this paper, I more thoroughly address. Series creator Ronald Moore claims that he seized the opportunity to use Galactica to turn viewer assumptions on their heads. Showing us machines with sometimes more capacity for love and compassion than their human counterparts, is one way that he

² <http://blog.speakingoffaith.org/post/141568847/hollywood-in-the-classroom>

achieves this. He also shows us a monotheistic Cylon race and humans who embrace a polytheistic religion reminiscent of ancient Greek and Roman mythologies. Moore's *Galactica* turns us around and provides the ground out of which the ontological figures of appearance and reality emerge in a new, and perhaps startling way.

A Ball of Wax

In order to appreciate the complexity of the issue, we need to return to its Cartesian origins. The notion of a "metaphysics of presence" rests on the idea that what is standing before us is complete, visible, finite and unchanging. But this unchanging essence is not available to us through our senses. If we rely on our perception, we will be deceived. A classic example of this kind of thinking is Descartes' treatise on a piece of wax. In his Second Meditation he opens the discussion with a sensuous description of the wax:

It has been taken quite recently from the honeycomb: it has not yet lost all the honey flavor. It retains some of the scent of the flowers from which it was collected. Its color, shape, and size are manifest. It is hard and cold; it is easy to touch. If you rap on it with your knuckle it will emit a sound.³

Descartes brings the piece of wax into relief by engaging all of our senses. But alas! he warns the reader, that now, as he approaches a flame, already the qualities of the wax, which his senses had so accurately detected, are beginning to slip away. It is becoming softer, the hint of perfume is dispersing, its color and texture transform the warmer it

³ Roger Ariew, *René Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence* (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2000), 110.

becomes. He asks then, if none of what his senses had perceived initially is intrinsic to the wax – which is, he assures and perhaps we would agree, still wax even though it looks, feels, smells and sounds different – then what is this wax? He arrives at several conclusions. The first is that this wax cannot be its smell or feel or color, for these are transient and its “wax-ness” remains. His second conclusion is that since these apparent and impermanent qualities are perceived via the senses, that they cannot inform our understanding of “wax-ness.” He concludes that although he has an understanding of the wax as mutable and flexible, he realizes that his imagination is limited—he can’t possibly imagine all the combinations of shapes, colors and perfumes the wax *might* embody—his imagination is *not* up to the task of perceiving wax.

It remains then for me to concede that I do not grasp what this wax is through the imagination; rather, I perceive it through the mind alone...[T]he perception of the wax is neither a seeing, nor a touching, nor an imagining....[R]ather it is an inspection on the part of the mind alone.⁴

There are at least two problems with this kind of thinking. The first is the misconception that an object has an unchanging, timeless essence or nature. Why is it a problem that the wax is hard now and soft later? Unyielding now, malleable later? Can’t minds such as ours hold onto this concept that manifests gradations? Can our senses not cope with

⁴ Ibid., 111.

a shifting presence? Descartes beats me to an answer to this query by suggesting the very same thing.

Perhaps the wax was what I now think it is: namely that the wax itself never really was the sweetness of the honey, nor the fragrance of the flowers, nor the whiteness, nor the shape, nor the sound, but instead was a body that a short time ago manifested itself to me in these ways, and now does so in other ways.⁵

And I would have to agree that to have this idea of a thing that changes in appearance, odor, texture, is a cognitive function. It requires thought. But where I disagree with Descartes' conclusion is that it is the province of mind *alone*. It is only *because* he has held it, smelled it, rapped it with his knuckle, put it to his lips, that he can now "step back" and think about its aroma, its texture, the sound it makes. It is when the mind and the senses work in concert, slip away hand in hand, like Nietzsche's light and shadow, that we find understanding, that we make a meaning. To think a thing with qualities like color and aroma, we must have had an immediate experience of these things, or as a consequence of another's experience. Where I think Descartes errs is in clinging to the gap between appearance and reality, between thought and sense. He is convinced that the wax's appearance is not "what it is." He believes a thing has an essence which remains unchanging, and which does not appear to us. Since the wax clearly changes in all the ways he has so acutely observed, he suspects its appearance could not be its "reality," but rather a deception.

⁵ Ibid.

A second problem is with Descartes' conclusion that since he couldn't imagine, in advance, all the myriad ways a ball of wax might "extend" itself, he therefore dismisses his imagination as inadequate to the task. He may not, in fact, be able to predict its every behavior or how it might change in the bright light of the sun or after it has been molded to serve as a candle or cast into the shape of full lips and dyed red for a Halloween treat or trick. He certainly could never have envisioned the candle I have sitting on the back of my toilet, pictured **here**. He does not appear to want to take the time to look at the wax, to experience the shifting of its shape, the dispersal of its aroma, the heating up of its surface, the way it pools and then hardens in his hand as it cools. He wants to know, instead, that its wax-ness is something that he can rely on in heat or cold without ever having to bother to engage with it on the sensory level. He wants to be able to strip this substance down to its essence, which he believes is constant and unchanging and which, he can only perceive with his mind. He wants to separate, as if this were possible, this essence from its external qualities.



Figure 1 Wax, 2007

But indeed when I distinguish the wax from its external forms, as if stripping it of its clothing, and look at the wax in its nakedness, then, even though there can be still an error in my judgment, nevertheless I cannot perceive it thus without a human mind.⁶

Descartes wants to extract the wax's appearance, aroma, and texture from its essence as if they comprised an overcoat that hides the true, naked wax. He wants then, to look at the wax's nakedness without seeing the wax!

⁶ Ibid., 112.

Descartes is just the tip of a long philosophical iceberg that has separated “mere” appearance from “true” being,⁷ a tradition in which the very fact of an appearance suggests that there is something that is not appearance, something beyond, beneath, behind, or over and above appearance: the *metaphysical*.

Hannah Arendt, however, takes a different approach from Descartes: she does not assume an unchanging presence, a single essential truth that defines and delimits the wax, for once and for all.

...[W]hen the philosopher takes leave of the world given to our senses and does a turnabout (Plato’s *periagōgē*) to the life of the mind, he takes his clue from the former, looking for something to be revealed to him that would explain its underlying truth. This truth—a *lētheia*, that which is disclosed (Heidegger)—can be conceived only as another “appearance,” another phenomenon originally hidden but of a supposedly higher order, thus signifying the lasting predominance of appearance. Our mental apparatus, though it can withdraw from present appearance, remains geared to Appearance.⁸

Here Arendt is making the notion of “appearing” visible. In place of Descartes’ solidified essence, we find instead movement; one that subsumes Plato’s *periagōgē* that on its surface resembles Descartes’ search: a turning away from the senses toward the mind.

⁷ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

But instead here, we keep on turning. We keep turning toward what appears, toward our senses *and* toward our mind. “Appear-ing,” an on-going process of disclosing, doesn’t come to an end at the discovery of a discreet nugget of being. It has no limit, no ultimate frame, no stopping point. Instead of a “turning away,” a simple shift of focus, from the senses which can’t be trusted, Plato’s *periagōgē* becomes more like a pendulum, elliptically swinging from mind to senses and back again, brushing up against all those points in between.

Descartes hoped to avoid being deceived by his senses. He wanted to know what would always be present for him, with certain edges, in black and white. Holding fast to this kind of essential truth impedes our engagement with the world and renders us blind to experience.

Applying Hannah Arendt’s framework, however, which she developed an opening chapter entitled “Appearance” in her book *The Life of the Mind*, the spectator of “Battlestar Galactica,” becomes the ultimate “recipient of appearances,⁹” and as such, rethinks and revises the intersection of being and appearance.

This chapter is dense with her thinking, examining, and upending the classical dichotomy, “mere appearance,” versus “true being.” Initially, she establishes that what all things have in common is that they “appear, and hence meant to be seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled, to be perceived...”¹⁰ “if there were no recipients of

⁹ {{4 Arendt,H. 1971; }}

¹⁰ {{3 Arendt,H. 1971/s19;}}

appearance, she goes on, then “the word appearance would have no meaning.”¹¹ She continues, bringing together the two poles of the opposition that so many have taken for granted by declaring, “In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, *Being and Appearing coincide.*”¹²

This is a somewhat different approach than that of Descartes. In his investigation and bifurcation of what we sense and what that gives us to know, we find the seeds of our fear and mistrust of our sense experience. It is my contention that the in the dramatization of the humans relationships with the two varieties of Cylons – the Toasters and Skin-jobs – we see the echoes of Descartes warnings not to trust what we sense.

Battlestar Galactica, however, won’t let us rest in that Cartesian comfort. In episode after episode we are poked and prodded to consider the relationship between being and appearance, between outside and in, and ultimately to ask ourselves what *does* it mean to be human, perceived and perceiving, and is it inside or out? Are the Cylons who appear more like humans than their Toaster Brethren, more human-like?

Drawing on the work of scientist Adolf Portmann, Arendt offers a reversal of the metaphysical hierarchy, and suggests to us the value of surface,

“It follows from Portmann’s findings that our habitual standards of judgment, so firmly rooted in metaphysical assumptions and prejudices –according to which

¹¹ {{4 Arendt,H. 1971/s19;}}

¹² {{4 Arendt,H. 1971/s19;}}

the essential lies beneath the surface, and the surface is “superficial”—are wrong, that our common conviction that what is inside ourselves, our “inner life, “ is more relevant to what we “are” than what appears on the outside is an illusion; ...” (p.30)

Portmann’s idea then, based on his examination of the animal kingdom, is that our internal mechanisms are there to support our appearing in the world, and not the other way around.

“...the predominance of outside appearance implies, in addition to the sheer receptivity of our senses, a spontaneous activity: *whatever can see wants to be seen, whatever can hear calls out to be heard, whatever can touch presents itself to be touched.* It is indeed as though everything that is alive—in addition to the fact that its surface is made for appearance, fit to be seen and meant to appear to others—has *the urge to appear*, to fit itself into the world of appearances by displaying and showing, not its “inner self” but itself as an individual. (P.29)

The Cylons, believing that humanity has gone astray, take it upon themselves to wipe us out. Yet, paradoxically, when they evolve, they choose to inhabit bodies that for all intents and purposes are human. This strange and limiting choice is bemoaned by the Cylon Cavil in a clip from the episode, No Exit:

DEAN STOCKWELL, AS JOHN CAVIL, *BATTLESTAR GALACTICA*: In all your travels have you ever seen a star supernova?

TRICIA HELFER, AS NUMBER SIX, *BATTLESTAR GALACTICA*: No.

JOHN CAVIL: No? Well, I have. I saw a star explode and send out the building blocks of the universe: other stars, other planets, and eventually other life. A supernova. Creation itself. I was there. I wanted to see it and be part of the moment. And you know how I perceived one of the most glorious events in the universe? With these ridiculous gelatinous orbs in my skull. With eyes designed to perceive only a tiny fraction of the EM spectrum. With ears designed only to hear vibrations in the air.

NUMBER SIX: The five of us designed you to be as human as possible.

JOHN CAVIL: I don't want to be human. I want to see gamma rays. I want to hear x-rays. And I want to smell dark matter. Do you see the absurdity of what I am? I can't even express these things properly because I have to conceptualize complex ideas in this stupid limiting spoken language. But I know I want to reach out with something other than these prehensile paws and feel the solar wind of a supernova flowing over me. I'm a machine. And I could know much more. I could experience so much more. But I'm trapped in this absurd body. And why? Because my five creators thought that God wanted it that way.

While the Cylon god may or may not have wanted them that way, there is no getting around the fact that Cylons end up in these limited containers so that they “appear” human, so that they are perceived as human and this particular appearance presumes a spectator, that is also human. (Arendt, p.19) The Cylon's are programmed to feel pain, fear, anger, to bleed, and to experience love and desire. We must assume that they have learned this idea of humanity from observing the appearance of humans and are, for all intents and purposes replicating this appearance.

Cavil's dismay that his vision is limited by the orbs he sees through, overlooks what his human like eyes might provide. There is something distinctly human in the interaction of light receptors on a retina and a visual cortex in a brain that interprets; something other

than what a spectrometer might measure. Here we might juxtapose the human capacity for perceiving the appearance of a super nova with the capacity for an instrument to measure it. Might Cavil's awe at witnessing the supernova have been a simply a human response? If he had been able to record the entire EM spectrum, might it not have been simply a piece of recorded data? Might the machine that supports Cavil's human appearance be having a human experience of a human sensory perception? Yet Cavil's questions are provocative. What is to be gained by appearing, in every possible way, human? Given the technology available to the Cylons, they might have created a robotic model that just looked human. A human skin covering all that Cavil longed for. This certainly would have been sufficient tactically, to camouflage the Cylons among the humans. Unless, there is something in what we humans feel, sense, know through our human bodies that coincides with what it is that ultimately makes us human. The Cylon Skin's appearance also coincides with their being. In spite of there robotic origins they are sentient; they love, live, fight, and long, as humans do. With their human counterparts they embark on a shared expedition to find a new home, a desire for which is expressly human.

