

## **The C-Word: Queering the Cylons**

Sample of research for:

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**The C-Word: Queering the Cylons\***

By Shira Chess

As one tends to do in the days of Netflix, Tivo, and Bit Torrent, last year I found myself doing some televisual binging. In particular, I was binging on two very different shows: *Battlestar Galactica* and *The L-Word* (two programs which could not possibly have any less in common). *BSG* is a dark remake of the 70s sci-fi show where the remainders of the human race try to escape robotic "Cylons" and attempt to find their way back to earth. *The L-Word*, on the other hand, is about a group of lesbians living in Los Angeles: a sort of lesbian *Sex and the City*. I had no reason to associate these shows except for the fact that they both made for good study breaks.

But television binges often lead to compelling results. In this case, I had just finished watching an episode of *The L-Word* and had turned to *Battlestar Galactica*. I was suddenly struck by the fact that characters on both shows were obsessed with an (il)legitimate form of reproduction made possible by changing reproductive technologies. I found this coincidence unsettling. I called a friend and told him about the shows, and then finally suggested, "I think it's possible that *BSG* is actually a narrative about queer reproduction." He paused and then responded, "How do you know that *The L-Word* isn't about a group of humans fighting cyborgs and trying to find earth?" I took some aspirin, briefly considered following my friend's brilliant argument, and in the end decided to stick with my initial hunch.

The more I began to consider the Cylon presence in *Battlestar Galactica*, the more I began to see that these characters were obsessed with legitimizing forms of queer, and alternate reproductive practices. *Battlestar Galactica* neatly enfolds homophobia into technophobia, and homosexual reproduction into technological production. Ultimately, the series reveals both the neuroses of technologically obsolete humans and reproductively unnecessary heterosexuality. The Cylons are not necessarily queer, per se,

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but what I will identify as "technoqueer": a technological representation of queerness as a means to work through these complicated and dizzying neuroses.

### **It's a Cyborg World After All**

As a starting point, it might be helpful to ask the question, "What is a cyborg?" One of the most famous essays on cyborgs was Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," where she defines cyborgs as creatures that are a combination of organism and technology. Haraway suggests that the cyborg has been made possible by three boundary breakdowns that have occurred in the twentieth century: between human and animal, human and machine, and physical and non-physical. These breakdowns have allowed Haraway's vision of the cyborg to become the mascot for feminist theories using technology as a tool of empowerment to liquidate gender, race, and class differences. To this end, she declares, "The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century" (p. 149). Thus the cyborg is a strong figure, and it is one that has penetrated many a science fiction story and often helps us question what it means to be human or machine. Even more importantly cyborg figures often give us an opportunity to question "human" attributes that we take for granted such as gender, race, and sexuality.

At the same time, though, it is important to understand that in many ways we are all cyborgs: glasses, braces, prosthetics, vaccinations, and plastic surgery are all ways that we combine ourselves with technology, blurring our own lines between ourselves and our machines. But our cyborg-ness doesn't stop there, and every day we are coming up with new technologies to improve ourselves, change ourselves, and make our bodies more efficient. To this end, it is useful to consider how reproductive technologies have also played into our cyborg selves. As more reproductive technologies have become available in recent years, each generation of humans are subsequently born with a little less organic and a little more machine.

Because of this, science fiction cyborgs often represent fears of the technologies already embedded in us. This notion is best explained by Scott Bukatman in *Terminal Identity*. According to Bukatman, cyberpunk novels and films such as *Tron* often are a space to play out these fears. He explains that the cyborg in these conditions represent

fears of human obsolescence: "Faced with the possibility of its own extinction, or at least its new irrelevance, the human subject has produced a range of representations of itself as melded with the matrices of terminal existence" (p. 208). While the texts examined in Bukatman's book are now slightly dated, the sentiment remains unchanged: there is an undeniable ambivalence reflected in media depictions of embodied technology.

This ambivalence is readily apparent in the image of *Battlestar Galactica's* Cylons. Obviously (as already discussed) we are all cyborgs, but the Cylons who often masquerade as humans are cyborgs par excellence. In the series, the *BSG* Cylons have recently defeated the majority of human society—the remaining human survivors are now on the run from the Cylons. The Cylons are depicted as horrifying, cold-blooded killers, but simultaneously often melodramatic and pitiable. Within their human forms, they often attempt to lead real humans astray, most often tempting them through sexuality. Even when those temptations are not overtly homosexual (Cylons seducing or attempting to seduce the same gender, as Gina does with Cain in "Razor"), the Cylons can be read as constant representations of queerness through their seductive technologies: they are the technoqueer. Technoqueer is not about gay-versus-straight, but more about ways that fears of technologies overlap with fears of new forms of reproduction, and are embodied in cyborg figures.

In her essay, "My, is that Cyborg a little bit queer?" Esperanza Miyake comments on the inherently queer nature of the cyborg replicants in the film *Bladerunner*. She explains, "The queer cyborg, with a hand on its (in)organic crotch, 'rejoices' its perverse status/strategy and confronts authority whilst challenging the Western quest for innocence and origin" (p. 57). Thus, Miyake's cyborg is a necessarily queer creature—a constant representation of heterosexual otherness. The Cylon, like other cyborgs, embodies this queerness and becomes the technoqueer.

### **Well isn't that just a little bit queer?**

But what do we mean by the word "queer"? Isn't that just a mean way of saying "homosexual"? Not exactly. Queer—a term that has been reappropriated by many philosophers and literary theorists is often used to describe the "other" in a society that has constructed heterosexuality as the standard. Judith Butler—one of the most important

queer theorists of the past twenty years—discusses how gender, sex, and sexuality (sexual preference) are used to normalize heterosexuality: what can be called “heteronormativity.” According to Butler, our notions of these things (gender, sex, and sexuality) help power structures produce and maintain subjects (read: us) on a heterosexual matrix. Judith Butler isn’t saying, here, that we are all homosexual or queer and entrained into being heterosexual: instead, she is talking about the *normalization* of heterosexuality, and the idea that heterosexuality is taken as status quo. Thus, queerness in this configuration becomes the “other”.

So, just to be clear, when we are talking about the “technoqueerness” of Cylons, it is not necessarily the same as saying that they are gay. While at least one Cylon (Gina in “Razor”) showed overtly homosexual proclivities (or at least bisexual proclivities), for the most part the Cylon race of half-human/half-cyborgs show decidedly *heterosexual* tastes. At the same time though, their reproductive methods which are portrayed as unholy and unnatural can be seen as representing larger fears—not only about queerness and fear of the “other”, but also involving previously mentioned neuroses about technologies. Reproductive practices performed by homosexuals show an unnecessaryness to heterosexual reproduction, and the technoqueer. Cylons are a manifestation of these neuroses.

In her book *Reproductions of Reproductions*, Judith Roof explains that these kinds of representations and neurotic manifestations of illegitimate reproduction are not uncommon in fantasy, horror, and science fiction. For instance, she discusses the figure of the vampire as mimicking the progress and changes of mechanical reproduction as well as the significance Arnold Schwarzenegger’s cyborg roles as both terminator and pregnant father. Of these figures, she explains, “If reproduction no longer requires the participation of two parents, the oedipal nuclear tripartite structure of father/mother/child is opened up. Genders no longer necessarily align with reproductive roles [...]”(p.92). Indeed, it seems like the technoqueer Cylons fit nicely into this model, reproducing asexually and technologically, rather than heterosexually.

**"I'm in love with a woman I know isn't a woman."**

The Cylons of *Battlestar Galactica* embody this technoqueerness, and ultimately reject the heteronormativity that the humans on the show embrace. Their sexuality—mostly seen in the female Cylons—is undeniable. They are constantly tempting the straight humans with their unholy and illegitimate sexuality. The sexual temptations of the Cylons is primarily seen through two characters—the self-aware, very blonde #6 (often known as "Gina"), and Boomer—a sleeper agent who learns of her technoqueerness a little too late. The male Cylons may occasionally venture into queer moments, but it is through these female Cylons that we really see a deeper *modus operandi* (one that is embedded with reproduction). Within this argument, Boomer is perhaps the more compelling of the two: she is closeted for the entire first season of the show, and thereafter constantly in denial of her Cylon queerness.

During the course of the series, Boomer has two relationships with human men—tempting them into her queerness. One, Chief Tyrol, occurs while she is closeted and does not know that she is a Cylon, but the other, Helo, decides to continue a relationship with her despite her queerness because she is carrying his child. The ambivalence of this queer situation is most succinctly expressed by Helo when he sadly explains, "You think I don't wonder if I'm losing my frakking mind? I'm in love with a woman I know isn't a woman." ("Resurrection Ship: Part 1") The transgender and queer implications of this statement are undeniable. If the woman he loves is not a woman, then who is she and how might that de-gender the other cylons? This is compounded by the contempt with which he is treated by other members of the crew, who refer to him as a "toaster lover" or "Cylon lover" because of his sexual preference ("Flight of the Phoenix"). A similarly queer sentiment is made by Gaius Baltar—another "Cylon lover"—when he sadly remarks of his transgressions, "She was a Cylon and she changed my life in a very real, very fundamental way in that I have quite literally never stopped thinking about her." ("Pegasus") This statement is true—throughout the series Baltar is literally being haunted by the memory of his queer encounter and constantly second-guessing and questioning his own loyalties (and, presumably, his own sexualities).

The similarity between Cylons and homosexuals becomes most unsettlingly apparent in the episode "Pegasus" when an officer attempts to rape Boomer. The officer's

queerness is not questioned for this act. Instead, he is lauded by many of the crewmembers, in a decidedly heterosexual (and creepily homophobic) way. When others question the morality of the rape, we are told, "You cannot rape a machine." ("Pegasus") This notion is not conclusively accepted, but rather debated by crew members who have varying opinions on the subject. The technoqueer can perhaps be raped and can be wronged, but the morality of the situation is up for debate.

### **The Secret Plot of 'Baby Boomers'**

But even more compelling than the technoqueerness of Cylons is their obsession with legitimizing their reproductive practices. Cylons are able to reproduce technologically and asexually—they are duplicates of one of twelve models that upon death can be downloaded back into a new (and identical) body. This form of "reproduction" should seem natural to them, given their technological origins. But instead of embracing this form of alternative reproductive practices, they are obsessed with legitimizing their reproduction by emulating sexual reproduction, and having babies in a very heteronormative way. Both Boomer and #6 make it clear that this kind of reproduction is a large part of their modus operandi for wooing humans. When Boomer does become pregnant with the child of a human, this is an anomaly and considered one of the mysteries of the series.

Why would the technoqueer be interested in luring seemingly straight humans into their queer lifestyles? In the episode "The Farm," one character, Anders, explains of the Cylons, "Supposedly they can't reproduce, you know, biologically so they've been trying every which way to produce offspring." Helo later expands that the Cylons felt that the missing ingredient (and why biological reproduction would not work for them) was a lack of love: thus the capacity for "love" began to be programmed into newer Cylon models. (In fact, it is inferred that this is why Boomer might be able to reproduce heterosexually.) Essentially the Cylons were using technological production in order to facilitate a legitimized form of reproduction. "The Farm" illustrates the Cylon's overall obsessions with reproductive practices: the episode finds one female protagonist, Starbuck, trapped in a facility where they cylons are attempting to fertilize young human women without their consent. At first, the Cylon "doctor" (posing as a human), attempts

to convince Starbuck of the importance of having children. After giving her a gynecological exam, this doctor creepily suggests to Starbuck, "Gotta keep that reproductive system in great shape. That's your most valuable asset these days. [...] Finding healthy child bearing women your age is a top priority for the resistance... and you'll be happy to know that you are a very precious commodity to us." ("The Farm") Later, Starbuck learns that rather than courting women with flowers and candy, humans are being "farmed" and impregnated by the Cylons. ("The Farm")

This obsession with legitimizing reproduction seems to run counter to what Donna Haraway says in the previously mentioned "Cyborg Manifesto." In the Manifesto, Haraway suggests, "Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and cosmos" (p. 151). While this might be true for the traditional cyborg, the Cylons seem to sit on the cyborgian fence: they both reject heteronormativity but genuinely wish to emulate it in order to properly reproduce. In essence, the technoqueer Cylons are trapped by their ambivalence of trying to be both queer cyborg and straight human.

The ambiguities of the technoqueer Cylons are no small coincidence, though. As suggested by Bukatman's earlier quote, the Cylons are representations of technophobia. In this case, though, they represent one specific technological fear: the fear of non-sexual reproductive practices that have become increasingly prevalent in our society. New reproductive technologies have created new avenues for anxieties: cloning, sperm donation, fertility drugs, and other technological advancements have begun to make heterosexual reproduction seem outmoded and far less relevant than it used to be.

The anxieties of reproductive obsolescence, thus, becomes a central theme within the narrative of *Battlestar Galactica*. This theme is most obvious in the plots surrounding the birth of Boomer's illegitimately queer baby (the "baby boomer", if you will). What to do with Boomer's baby is heavily debated by many of the show's characters who often refer to the birth as being "unnatural" and "risky." The President, Laura Roslin thoughtfully comments at one point, "Allowing this thing to be born could have frightening consequences." ("Epiphanies") Roslin is correct in this assessment: the "baby boomer" would simultaneously legitimize technological reproduction and the

technoqueer—all signs of her own obsolescence. Boomer, conversely, becomes hysterical and violent when learning that her baby might be terminated, "They want to be afraid of something? [...] Just let them try to take my baby!" ("Epiphanies") she screams while throwing herself helplessly at the glass walls of her prison cell.

And this moment, returns me to my starting point: the common ground which *Battlestar Galactica* shares with *The L-Word*. The scene in *The L-Word* that struck me as similar to Boomer's angry hysteria involved, Bette, a lesbian woman and her partner, Tina telling Bette's father that Tina is pregnant with their child. Bette's father rejects the pregnancy, angrily noting "Unless there has been a medical breakthrough that I don't know about, the possibility that this child will be my grandchild does not exist." ("Lawfully") It struck me, at that moment, that the anger and fear that this father felt towards the technological capacity to reproduce queerly—and non-heterosexually—was almost identical to the fear that the humans felt towards the "baby boomer" in *Battlestar Galactica*. Additionally, the anger displayed by these women in response to the rejection of Bette's father was not dissimilar to Boomer's anger. When a custody battle later ensues in the series, both Bette and Tina grow increasingly angry and hysterical over the possibility that their queerness might cost them their child—often expressing this similarly to Boomer throwing herself against the walls of her jail cell. While they may not be the same, their mothers represent the same kinds of hysteria as uncompromising heteronormative societies tell them that their children are not legitimate. Thus, while both children come from different kinds of queerness, their existence represents the same neuroses that because of emerging technologies, heterosexuality just isn't necessary anymore.

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