

7. *Battlestar Galactica*

Ian Maull and David Lavery

In 1977, the first *Star Wars* movie was released; a year later, *Battlestar Galactica* appeared on ABC. The two were almost assuredly linked. The success of *Star Wars* had shown there was a market for space battles, quasi-religious sentiments, and good old-fashioned heroism. Though *Battlestar* would only last for one season, it achieved a modicum of cult success that survived over 25 years.

During this time, attempts were made to resurrect the show. Richard Hatch, who had played Apollo, spearheaded the campaign for continuation of the storyline. His efforts failed, though he may have succeeded in demonstrating a desire among fans for a return to the universe of *Battlestar Galactica*. In 2001, Bryan Singer and Tom DeSanto were announced as the new creators of a *Battlestar Galactica* series to be produced by the Sci-Fi Channel. Scheduling conflicts in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, however, meant that Singer became unavailable and the project ground to a halt.

Eventually, the concept was handed over to David Eick and Ronald D. Moore, with the former only agreeing to take part if he had the freedom to scrap Singer and DeSanto's work and start over. With this concession, Eick and Moore set about creating not just a continuation of the 1970's series, or a simple remake, but a wholesale reimagining; an attempt to make *Battlestar Galactica* relevant, and indeed important television for a 21st century audience. They succeeded.

In December 2003, the miniseries that would serve as a backdoor pilot for the show aired on the Sci-Fi Channel. It proved to be a ratings success, earning Sci-Fi the third most watched broadcast in their history. The miniseries introduced viewers to the world of *BSG*. In an undisclosed time, in an unnamed region of space, humanity has settled the Twelve Colonies; twelve states, under a single government. It is a time of relative peace; forty years earlier, however, a terrible war had been waged between the Colonials and the Cylons. The latter were robotic servants, created for hard labor and warfare. And, as with most artificial intelligences in science-fiction, the Cylons rebelled; turning against their masters, they fought a twelve year war before signing an armistice and retreating into deep space.

The Cylons are back, however; and this time they can appear human. Their agents have infiltrated the Colonies and sabotaged several defense systems, leaving

the humans utterly vulnerable for a devastating sneak attack. As almost all life is wiped out in the Colonies, the miniseries follows the efforts of the *Battlestar Galactica* and the civilian fleet it has rescued as they attempt to flee known space in a bid for survival.

Airing as it did just over two years after the 9/11 attacks, it would be naïve not to recognize the significance of a surprise attack in a television series. Though the nuclear attacks on the Colonies are larger in scale than the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, the sense of shock and disbelief amongst the people who witness them are just the same. As news gradually filters through the fleet about the attacks on their homes, the crew of *Galactica* are forced to wonder whether any of their family and friends are still alive, and what they did to deserve this in the first place.

Through the miniseries, we are introduced to the seven characters who appear as regulars in the show. Commander Adama, played by Edward James Olmos, is the paternal figure who holds everything together; though a decorated soldier, he is not a member of the admiralty, nor the CO of a particularly glamorous vessel. The *Galactica* is antiquated by modern standards, and Adama's insistence that the ship should contain no networked computers (which had proven vulnerable to Cylon attack in the past) has perhaps contributed to the planned decommissioning of the ship as depicted in the miniseries. *Galactica* is to be turned into a museum. Like his vessel, we get the impression that Adama is somewhat weary and prepared for retirement. The return to a war footing, however, seems to reinvigorate him as he settles upon the seemingly suicidal mission to drive the Cylons out of the Colonies.

He is talked out of this course of action by Laura Roslin, the former Secretary of Education who finds herself thrust into the role of President after the other 42 government officials in the line of succession above her are killed in the attacks. Mary McDonnell plays the matriarch to Olmos' patriarch; as the series begins, they are in typically gender-related roles.

That is not to say, however, that traditional gender is a particular consideration in BSG. The third of the regulars on the show is Katee Sackhoff, who plays the role of Kara "Starbuck" Thrace. Starbuck also appeared in the original BSG; *he* was a card-playing, cigar-smoking Viper pilot. This time around, Starbuck is a woman, but with many of the same attributes. Her status as a female soldier does not mark her out from any of her male colleagues; the women of the Colonial military serve in exactly the same roles as the men, and are just as tough; a punch-up

between Starbuck and her commanding officer, Lee “Apollo” Adama has no shades of sexism or woman-beating.

Apollo, played by Jamie Bamber, is the estranged son of Commander Adama, returning to the ship under orders to participate in the decommissioning ceremony. His appearance as part of a PR stunt probably saves his life, and he takes up the role as CAG (Commander of the Air Group) after *Galactica*’s CAG is killed in a skirmish with the Cylons.

The Cylons’ success in attacking the Colonial fleet is largely thanks to Gaius Baltar (James Callis). A scientific genius entrusted with creating a new defense system for the military, Baltar is seduced by the Cylon agent Number Six (Tricia Helfer). Baltar unwittingly allows Six access to the defense systems, into which she programs a critical weakness. Baltar’s ego and libido are his undoing, and though he escapes the attack, he is haunted by visions of Six throughout the series.

The final regular on the show further represents the Cylon goal of subterfuge and infiltration. Sharon Valerii, as played by Grace Park, is a sleeper agent; a Raptor pilot on *Galactica*, she initially has no knowledge of her true nature, which gradually comes to light, however, as she finds herself carrying out acts of sabotage on the ship.

Like most quality TV programs, *Galactica* relies heavily on a large supporting cast; indeed, some of the most critical characters on the show appear throughout the entire run as non-regulars, such as the alcoholic XO of *Galactica* Saul Tigh and Chief of the Deck Galen Tyrol. Such an expansive supporting cast helps to maintain a sense of realism within the series; even minor roles, such as the journalists who attend Roslin’s press conferences, are regularly played by the same actors to provide a sense of continuity.

Such a use of the cast is to be expected, considering Ronald D. Moore’s pursuit of “naturalistic science-fiction.” *BSG* avoids many of the typical science-fiction staples; with the exception of the Cylons, there are no aliens in the universe of *BSG*. Indeed, Edward James Olmos mentioned in an interview that he would walk off the set the minute he saw an actor in a *Star Trek* style latex mask. This is not the only stylistic disparity between *BSG* and other modern sci-fi shows. There are none of the familiar viewscreens of *Star Trek* aboard the *Galactica*; instead, the Command Information Centre (CIC) which serves as the bridge is a multi-tiered, militaristic chamber filled with DRADIS screens and old-style telephones. The crew can’t just grab a snack from a nearby food replicator; instead, supplies are rationed, and from

the third season onwards, the crew largely subsist on processed algae paste. And when the time comes for relaxation, no one can just drop into the nearest holodeck; leisure time is sparse, and when it does come, its often in the form of a drunken fistfight.

The show is dark—and rightly so; after all, the human race has almost been wiped out and its survivors live in cramped conditions, terrified that each moment may in fact be their last. In such extreme circumstances, the writers are keen to explore the moral issues that arise from such a life. *BSG*, since its inception, has never been one to shy away from addressing ethical concerns. Issues ranging from abortion rights to the freedom to vote, from religious persecution to personal responsibilities, the creative team behind the show have chosen to address head on. Lesser shows might have sidestepped these moral quagmires with pat answers and *deus ex machina* solutions; *BSG* builds whole story arcs out of them.

A speech that Adama gives in the miniseries is critical to the entire run of the show; which, by its conclusion in Fall 2008, will have included 79 episodes, 10 webisodes, and a made-for-TV movie. During the planned decommissioning of the ship, Adama breaks away from his prepared notes:

The Cylon War is long over, yet we must not forget the reasons why so many sacrificed so much in the cause of freedom. The cost of wearing the uniform can be high, but. . . Sometimes it's too high. You know, when we fought the Cylons, we did it to save ourselves from extinction. But we never answered the question; why? Why are we as a people worth saving? We still commit murder, because of greed, spite, jealousy, and we still visit all of our sins upon our children. We refuse to accept the responsibility for anything that we've done. Like we did with the Cylons. We decided to play god, create life. When that life turned against us, we comforted ourselves in the knowledge that it really wasn't our fault, not really. You cannot play god, then wash your hands of the things that you've created. Sooner or later, the day comes when you can't hide from the things that you've done anymore.

Responsibility is a cornerstone of *BSG*; every action has a consequence. One of the most significant plotlines of the show takes place at the halfway mark, from the last few episodes of Season Two and into the first six of Season Three.

The second season of *Battlestar Galactica* concluded with the horrifying visage of Cylon centurions, polished and perfect, marching through the rags and dirt

of New Caprica City whilst former soldiers and leaders looked on, impotent and overwhelmed. Whilst echoing the miniseries in many ways—a surprise attack, with a certain Gaius Baltar partially responsible—the final few shots of “Lay Down Your Burdens” leave us with a huge sense of hopelessness for humanity. With Cylon forces marching into New Caprica city on our screens, three years after Coalition forces took Baghdad, Ronald D. Moore plunged headfirst into tackling some of the most prominent concerns raised by the Iraq War, and the wider “war on terror.” From “Occupation” through “Exodus” and beyond, the show explored themes of occupational tactics, suicide bombing, collaboration with the enemy and torture, both physical and psychological. Perhaps the most striking and controversial aspect of the occupation arc which opened the third season of *Galactica* was that, symbolically speaking at least, our Colonial heroes were Iraqi citizens. While some fans decried the lack of subtlety in what they dubbed the “New Iraqtica” storyline, others embraced the bravery of the show for daring to suggest that insurgents just might be real people too.

If the creators of *BSG* have crafted a show that asks questions of the audience, the reverse is also true: many viewers are heavily invested in learning more about the religion, society, technology, and culture of both the Cylons and Colonials. Although this curiosity has never quite hit the obsessive feverish pitch of *Lost*’s most eagle-eyed viewers, keenly devouring each frame of an episode for the latest clue, one long-running mystery has kept *BSG* viewers gripped: the identity of the twelve Cylon models. The initial miniseries depicted four of the humanoid Cylons, but it would take until the end of the second season before another three were revealed. Season Three answered a critical question that the audience had been asking; why have we only seen these (fan-dubbed) “Significant Seven”? Although most likely the result of practical concerns (a consequence of the expense and narrative difficulty of servicing twelve actors), the writers of *BSG* capitalized on the enigmatic nature of these “Final Five” Cylons by making them a critical component of the final two seasons of the show.

Suddenly, the audience had a new mystery to solve; who are the Final Five? Clues were drip-fed tantalizingly slowly during the third season, resulting in the revelation of four of the Five at season’s end. With only one remaining, speculation has intensified concerning the identity of the final Cylon. Fan speculation ranges from Lt. Dualla, whose first name of Anastasia derives from the Greek for “resurrection” (an important Cylon concept), right through to Roslin or Adama

themselves. Internet discussion forums are rife with opposing viewpoints. Some argue that the final Cylon would surely have to be a significant main character, if only so as not to be anti-climactic after the reveal of the other four Cylons. Others follow Moore's words when, interviewed about a promotional photograph for the fourth season depicting many of the central characters in a "Last Supper" scenario, he "let slip" that the final Cylon is not present in the tableau. More esoteric suggestions have also been made: is Earth the final Cylon? Is *Galactica*? Is the final Cylon the source of the incorporeal visions witnessed by several characters?

Whoever, or indeed whatever the final Cylon turns out to be, there's a concerted effort to find out; the search term "final five cylons" elicits 13,400 results, a respectable amount for a television show which has averaged between 2 and 3 million viewers throughout its run. Indeed, the strong online presence of *BSG* fans and their attendance at conventions featuring actors from the show is a testament to its cult success. The show has also leapt beyond the bounds of television; those fans who feel they need an additional, or indeed slightly more saucy fix of *BSG*, can turn to fanfiction. One website currently hosts over 3,000 fanfic stories based on the show, ranging from alternate universe stories to crossovers with *Star Wars* and beyond. This internet-based fandom was also in prime position for the "webisodes," mini-episodes that were produced between the second and third seasons of the show which depicted life on occupied Caprica. Totalling twenty-five minutes in length, and broken into ten parts, the webisodes were broadcast online for US viewers only, with the international audience required to hold out for them as DVD extras. The technique of using the Internet as both a marketing tool and a conveyor of additional (if ultimately unnecessary) narrative had been used to great effect by *Lost*, another example of a cult television show tapping into the tech-savvyness of a modern audience.

Moore also regularly produces podcasts, much like DVD commentaries, to accompany episodes,, whilst his co-producer David Eick frequently updates a humorous video blog on Sci-Fi's website—Lucy Lawless' appearance as a demanding, bitchy diva rooting through garbage cans is just one example. The eagerness of the cast and crew of the show to interact with their audience reflects the amount of mutual respect in that relationship.

At the time of writing, the most recent episode to air is "Revelations," serving as the mid-season cliffhanger of Season Four. With only ten episodes remaining, many fans are already beginning to mourn for the show, although there seems to be

a general acceptance that the story has run its course. *BSG*, by its very nature, was never going to match the extended run of its fellow Sci-Fi show *Stargate SG-1*. Fans do have something to cling to, however; rumors of additional made-for-TV movies in the same vein as *Razor* are beginning to surface—one of them apparently to be written by Jane Espenson and directed by Edward James Olmos. Viewers can also look forward to seeing Colonial society before the attacks in the prequel movie *Caprica*, set at the time of the Cylon creation, which looks likely to serve as a pilot for a full-blown spin-off. *Galactica's* journey may be coming to an end, but the story may just be beginning.