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Florent Favard

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# Battlestar Galactica: A Closed-System Fictional World

Florent Favard

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- 1 The Colonial Fleet, which has been travelling through the galaxy for the last three years, faces a new challenge: its president, Laura Roslin, has disappeared while onboard a basestar on a mission to deal a critical blow to the Cylon forces – enemies of both the Colonials and the Cylon rebels. Apollo, feeling wary of vice-president Tom Zarek, pays a visit to Romo Lampkin, a literal *devil's advocate* who helped him defend traitor Gaius Baltar a few months earlier. The Fleet needs Lampkin's flair for "character," Apollo says, in order to find another interim president. But Lampkin plays hard to get:

LAMPKIN. Appearances to the contrary, I'm actually in this for the money. I have a reputation to maintain, after all.

APOLLO. Okay, so what did Roslin offer you to defend Baltar?

LAMPKIN. Room with a view.
- 2 He points to a small window looking out into pitch black interstellar space, with a few ships of the Fleet completing this much-coveted "view", which Apollo himself admits he can't "improve on." While watching "Sine Qua Non" (S04E08), one might remember that this is a rare occurrence in *Battlestar Galactica* (Syfy, 2003-2009): besides Lampkin, only president Roslin has quarters with windows. Anyone else, especially the military – the focus of the science fiction series – sleeps in windowless quarters, even Admiral Adama. Unless they embark on smaller exploration or combat ships, they usually do not see the empty space they are lost in. They live in closed spaces.
- 3 The Fleet itself is cut from everything, barring the occasional Cylon armada, a recurring enemy throughout the four seasons of the series. The thousands of Colonials living in the Fleet are the last survivors of the destruction of the Twelve Colonies. Hoping to find Earth – our Earth, we are led to believe – they travel across the vastness of space with limited supplies and a lethal enemy tracking them. Their numbers decrease over the episodes, making the major question structuring the series' long-term plot – will the Colonials ever reach Earth? – a matter of time as well as of survival.

- 4 This paper aims at analysing the way *Battlestar Galactica* structures what I call a closed-system fictional world, i.e., a fictional world (created by the writers, and “reconstructed” by the viewers from the “instructions” contained in the text<sup>1</sup>) in which a seemingly isolated structure serves as the focus point of the story. Why? Because while television series, especially fantasy and science fiction, may often deal with closed-system in a given episode (say, a “pocket universe<sup>2</sup>” or an isolated town controlled by a computer<sup>3</sup>), it is another challenge to use a closed system as the main setting of a long-running program, since most series are still built on an “infinite model of storytelling” driven by ratings<sup>4</sup>. Since *The Prisoner* (ITC, 1967) and its strange village, very few series have pushed this concept further: the island in *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010) seems isolated in the first three seasons, but before long boats and planes come bearing new or returning characters, and the line between the island and the rest of the world proves porous. *Under the Dome* (CBS, 2013-2015), which focuses on a town cut off from the outside world by a mysterious dome, is a textbook example of a closed system fictional world, but even then, one that cannot remain hermetically closed throughout its three seasons. By comparison, *Battlestar Galactica* does not feature a dome or an island, but finds alternative ways to structure a closed system and, most importantly, highlights this structure every step of the way instead of using it as a mere starting point.
- 5 How can writers sustain a closed system in the long term while staying coherent with this aesthetic choice, and avoiding running in circles within their own fictional world? Following Marie Laure Ryan’s call for a “storyology,” a “study of the logic that binds events into plots<sup>5</sup>”, I intend to explore *Battlestar Galactica*’s use of the Fleet as a closed system throughout its four seasons, building on the intentions of the writers (as far as they can be known through the bible of the series) and on the close reading of episodes. I will start with the crisis at the heart of the series’ main plotline, before moving onto the visual aspect of the Fleet in the establishing shots, and the survivor count, a peculiar feature of *Battlestar Galactica*. I will then analyse how the idea of a closed system influences the series at the thematic level.

## A Fleet in Crisis

- 6 Ronald D. Moore, the creator of *Battlestar Galactica*, is no stranger to space operas, having previously worked as a writer on the *Star Trek* series *The Next Generation* (Syndication, 1987-1994), *Deep Space Nine* (Syndication, 1993-1999) and *Voyager* (UPN, 1995-2001). He denounces some of the aspects of the genre in his manifesto, “Naturalistic Science Fiction or Taking the Opera out of Space Opera”, and insists on “reintroduc[ing] realism into what has heretofore been an aggressively unrealistic genre<sup>6</sup>.” Beyond the ban on evil twins and time-travel, Moore proposes a realistic visual style and a Fleet composed of “a variety of civilian ships, each of which will have unique properties and visual references that can be in stark contrast to the military life aboard Galactica,” an interesting point I will return to later.
- 7 The television series as it aired follows this realistic take on the space opera genre, for example when Saul Tigh, practically quoting the series’ bible, makes the following claim in “Water” (S01E02):
- TIGH. Most planets are just hunks of rock or balls of gas. The galaxy’s a pretty barren, desolate place when you get right down to it.

- 8 In line with our current understanding and observation of the galaxy, and directly constructed against space opera series bursting with aliens and lush worlds, this idea in turn emphasizes the isolation of the Fleet. In the miniseries that serves as “pilot” for the series, Adama, in his speech after the Fleet leaves Ragnar, starkly verbalizes the series’ concept:

ADAMA. [...] We’re a long way from home. We’ve jumped way beyond the Red Line, into uncharted space. Limited supplies, limited fuel. No allies, and now, no hope? Maybe it would have been better for us to have died quickly, back on the Colonies with our families, instead of dying out here slowly, in the emptiness of dark space. Where shall we go? What shall we do?

- 9 The mythical Earth is then sold by Adama to the human survivors as the refuge that will save Colonial civilization, and as the reward for a long journey into “uncharted space” with no help, no reinforcements, possibly no supplies or fuel. The Colonials do not willingly embark on a journey, they are thrown “into the emptiness” of space, an emptiness emphasized by the series’ most typical shot, the Fleet against a dark backdrop full of distant stars, a far cry from the richly colored nebulae of *Babylon 5* (PTEN>TNT, 1993-1998) or the planet of the week around which the Enterprise systematically orbits in the *Star Trek* franchise.
- 10 Of course, this “closed system” is nowhere near the thermodynamics definition, as the Fleet does exchange energy and matter with its surroundings, whether it be a planet stripped of its water, or a Cylon armada welcomed with a “nuke”. One could also argue that the narrative shifts back and forth between the Fleet and Caprica in the first two seasons “open up” the system.
- 11 But on a more practical level, the Fleet is a closed system because the narrative uses it as such – a rich but limited part of the fictional world that is decaying as time passes and it finds itself under almost constant Cylon attack: Caprica is conceived as a dead end that Helo is trying to flee, and that the Cylons later abandon. The series’ bible also insists on the absence of external forces such as the “strange space phenomenon” (a classic *Star Trek* plot device) or a third party. While the Colonials do find supplies, they are always hard to come by: harvesting water leads to a prison mutiny aboard the Astral Queen in “Bastille Day” (S01E03); getting fuel requires taking out a Cylon refinery in “The Hand of God” (S01E10) or defeating “Scar” (S02E15) while protecting the mining ship Majahual; food is painfully extracted on the algae planet (“The Eyes of Jupiter”, S03E11), reached only through a deadly radioactive nebulae (“The Passage”, S03E10).
- 12 As the series’ bible indicates, the Fleet is always in crisis, and even without the Cylons lurking, space is a hostile environment. In addition, the end of the Fleet is not something as abstract as “the end of the world”, since this structure comprising fewer than 50,000 people is easier to visualize, especially since recurrent establishing shots show the audience the entirety of the Fleet as a city alone in the stars; a fragile remainder of the Colonials’ lost civilization. This way, each Cylon attack, each incident is a *peripetia* pointing towards the end – of this small, fragile system – while never bringing the feared apocalypse. As Frank Kermode explains, the imminence of the end becomes the immanence of the end; the *peripetia* ironically plays with the end in a reflexive manner<sup>8</sup>. The perpetual state of crisis described by Ronald D. Moore and shown on the screen is Paul Ricœur’s “indefinitely distended” Crisis<sup>9</sup>, and it impacts a system that is contained within the frame of the screen, a system defined by a certain number of ships and a survivor count, both of which we will now explore in detail.

## A visual reminder of entropy: the scars of the Fleet

- 13 Moore and his team of writers, producers and designers remained true to their word, creating a vast Fleet, rich with dozens of ships, each with its own look and characteristics. The two most prominent spacecraft are the eponymous Battlestar Galactica, an old but resilient “bucket”, and the streamlined Colonial One, the presidential ship. They are the spaceships seen most often in establishing shots, since the series focuses on the military and political powers leading the Fleet: those establishing shots on the Fleet are themselves invariable “nodal points<sup>10</sup>” of the series, an intrinsic, systematic part of its formula, featured in almost every episode.
- 14 While most ships are greyish, the unique design of Galactica, based on the original version from the 1970’s source series (ABC, 1978-1979), and the white and blue pattern on Colonial One evoking a commercial airliner, make them both highly recognizable, as “landmarks” in the Fleet. But serialized narration underlines the *entropy-driven aesthetics* of the closed system at the heart of the series, through the changes the ships gradually undergo.
- 15 Galactica, being the only warship of the Fleet for at least two thirds of the series, is on the front line during Cylon attacks. Both what we see on the screen and the indications given by the characters make explicit its role as both a weapon and a shield meant to protect the civilians. The spaceship undergoes severe damage over the course of the four seasons, mostly from missiles, nuclear missiles, and the occasional Cylon heavy raider crashing into it. Discrete burn marks can be seen on its hull as early as the miniseries; however, the ship does not change appearance during the first two seasons. It is the arrival of Battlestar Pegasus (in S02E10) that suddenly redefines Galactica’s design, as Pegasus, a sleeker, state-of-the-art battleship, is called “the beast” by the military (whereas Galactica becomes the “bucket”): the series’ eponymous flagship suddenly reveals its outdated structure and style – it already feels old, older than it initially appeared when it was, ironically, supposed to be decommissioned and turned into a museum at the start of the narrative.
- 16 A major plot point of the entire series, the liberation and subsequent exodus from New Caprica in “Exodus, Part I & II” (S03E03 and S0304), leaves Galactica with more burn marks and missing hull plates. Thus, while the Fleet is irremediably burdened by the events on New Caprica, with the main protagonists dealing with grief and lost hopes for at least the entirety of season three, the Galactica seems to bear the same injuries on its hull. While the whole Fleet is updated with burn marks following the “Passage” (S03E10) in a deadly nebula, Galactica is offered one final redesigning after ramming the Colony in the series finale.
- 17 Elsewhere in the Fleet, the absence of the luxury spaceship Cloud Nine (specializing in “rest and recreation”) may be noticed by the audience after its destruction in “Lay Down Your Burdens, Part II” (S02E20), since its unusual design – a luminous dome instantly noticed on the dark backgrounds – made it another visual landmark. Another landmark ship, the Zephyr, with its peculiar ring, is damaged in “He That Believed In Me” (S04E01), and can be seen undergoing repair throughout the first half of season four. Seasons three and four also visually “open” the fictional world by showing the inside of the Cylon basestar, turning it into a familiar setting from “Torn” (S03E06) onwards: no longer just a

mere enemy to be seen in countershot from the Fleet, the Cylons become protagonists in their own right as the series slowly hybridizes them with Colonials; the Cylon rebels' basestar becomes a familiar sight inside the Fleet in the second half of season four.

- 18 While these visual considerations may seem restricted to the documentation of a fictional universe as seen on fan wikis<sup>11</sup>, it is worth noting that they are in direct contradiction with televised, episodic space opera norms and conventions: until the 1990s, ships serving as the main focus of a series – say, the *Star Trek* franchise – might sustain damage in a given episode, but would always be restored to their default, polished state in the following episode: because the fictional world allowed this<sup>12</sup>; because of episodic conventions “rebooting” the status of characters and settings with each episode; finally, because of the costs involved in redesigning, especially for old space opera series using models. Both computer generated images and a serialized long-term plot aiming at continuity, coupled with Moore's desire for realism and a new form of space opera, allowed for this peculiar – and as far as American television is concerned, unique – take on an aging fleet of spaceships enduring years in space in dire conditions. The same can be said for another peculiar feature of the series: its survivor count.

## A matter of numbers: the survivor countdown

- 19 Appearing in the opening credits as soon as the season two *premiere*, it highlights the series' focus on a decreasing population of survivors, the very essence of the threat embodied by both the Cylons and the Fleet itself, which is prone to mutiny (mutinies break out at various times during the four seasons) as well as despair in the face of impossible odds of survival. Even before this survivor countdown appears in the credits, from the very opening of the series, the issue of numbers is verbalized when President Roslin decides to abandon sub-light speed ships to flee from an incoming Cylon armada:
- DORAL. You can't just leave them all behind, you'll be sacrificing thousands of people.
- APOLLO. But we'll be saving tens of thousands. I'm sorry to make it a numbers game, but we're talking about the survival of our race, here, and we don't have the luxury of taking risks and hoping for the best. Because if we lose, we lose everything.
- 20 Hence Roslin's later advice to Adama:
- ROSLIN. The human race is about to be wiped out. We have 50,000 people left, and that's it. Now, if we are even going to survive as a species, then we need to get the hell out of here, and we need to start having babies.
- 21 Roslin's whiteboard appears for the first time in “33” (S01E01), materializing the dreadful number on the screen, making it real for both the characters in the fictional world and the audience. An overestimate of 300 people leads Roslin to erase the number 50,298 and correct it to 49,998, falling below the symbolic, round limit of 50,000, in a scene of heavy silence. When Apollo is forced to destroy the Olympic Carrier, a ship carrying 1345 survivors, and other census readjustments happen in deleted scenes or off-screen, the total number drops to 47,972, only to be increased to 47,973 because of a birth – the first sign of hope to be bestowed upon Roslin and the Fleet.
- 22 While “33” is the most number-focused episode of season one, the looming threat continues to generate narrative tension, for example in “Water” (S01E02), when Gaius Baltar starts talking about rationing. When Baltar faces 47,905 blood samples to be tested in his Cylon detector (“Tigh Me Up, Tigh Me Down”, S01E09), he estimates it will take him

61 years and does not seem to be eager to start, even if he holds in his hands the very (symbolic) life of every person in the Fleet, and red test tubes literally fill the screen. The whiteboard can be seen repeatedly in Roslin's office – a familiar setting of the series – usually floating somewhere above her head like an omnipresent – if discreet – thought bubble.

- 23 The decision to include the survivor count in the opening credits at the start of season two underlines the threat, and at the same time makes it more familiar – a part of the viewing routine as well as a nodal point. Its steady decrease is surprisingly broken in season two by the arrival of the battleship Pegasus. The total population then goes back up to 49,605 in “Pegasus” (S02E10): if we crunch the numbers and take into account the survivor count at the end of season two (49,550), the count never reaches even a 5% decrease over two seasons, and “Lay Down Your Burden, part II” (S02E20) concludes with almost the same survival count as at the beginning of episode “33”. The fictional world may then appear *homeostatic* in nature, going back to a “comfort zone” and not taking risks with its pool of survivors. It takes Baltar – again – to infuse some sense of danger, in “The Captain's Hand” (S02E17):

BALTAR. If we continue on our present course, within the next eighteen years, the human race will simply be extinct.

- 24 This long-term, more invisible threat – evoking another “invisible” real-world threat such as climate change – makes for a very political episode: when the Cylons are not killing Colonials, human rights are under attack, a direct consequence of Roslin's injunction to “start having babies”, now colliding with the case of a young girl seeking an abortion. Even when they are steady, the series uses the numbers as a plot-moving force: it is because of them that Baltar wins the presidential elections on the promise that New Caprica will be the Colonials' new home, a refuge to rebuild their civilization.

- 25 Season three is undeniably a tipping point in that regard, underlining the more evident, visual and straightforward Cylon threat and the occupation of New Caprica to decrease the population count down to 41,435 survivors (in “Collaborators”, S03E05). This terrible loss echoes on a personal, individual level, when, in “Exodus, Part II” (S03E04), Adama and Tigh reunite after Helen's death:

ADAMA. You brought 'em home, Saul.

TIGH. Not all of them.

- 26 If we are to understand that Tigh is speaking about Helen, this line also works at the scale of the entire Fleet. The loss that kickstarts season three is also the loss of innocence, and even the loss of one's soulmate, since “Unfinished Business” (S03E09) reveals Apollo and Kara's one and only night on New Caprica. This loss hits closer to home than the unimaginable billions that died in the miniseries, and that the series treated in a 9/11 analogy<sup>13</sup>. It is a loss that ripples through the third season, until the shocking death of Kara in “Maelstrom” (S04E17). It is in line with the way the series avoids using the survivor count as an abstract plot device: Apollo is haunted by the destruction of the Olympic Carrier in season one, and “Scar” (S02E15) shows the pilots honoring their dead by citing names of actual secondary characters that lived and died on screen. Each subtraction from the total count echoes personal, intimate loss.
- 27 One of the last explicit intradiegetic uses of the numbers concludes this mournful season, when, during Baltar's trial, the prosecution uses a whiteboard in its opening speech (in “Crossroads, part I”, S03E19). It is as if Roslin's whiteboard had finally found whom to



blame for its decreasing count; at the same time, it is the series itself commenting in a reflexive manner on its use of numbers:

CASSIDY. How do we measure loss? [...] When the scale of it becomes... too hard to absorb any other way, we use numbers. How many killed. How many maimed. How many missing. And when those numbers become too vast to comprehend, as they did two years ago, we had to turn it around. We began to count the living. Those of us who survived to continue the saga of the human race. 44,035. The sum total of survivors from the Twelve Colonies who settled on New Caprica with President Gaius Baltar as their leader and protector. 38,838. Our number the day after we escaped<sup>14</sup>. And the missing number, the one that no one wants to face. 5197. 5197 of us killed, left behind, or simply disappeared. 5,197 of all that remains of the human race. Lost.

- 28 Intriguingly, the fourth season doesn't play on numbers as heavily beyond the usual opening credits survival count; it is nevertheless a bloody season, most notably because the final mutiny of the series (occurring in "The Oath/Blood on the Scales" S04E15 and S04E16) happens when "all bets are off" and the series is already on its way to an end. The Cylon rebels are not counted, as if to further imply that humanity is reaching its own end, falling under the 40,000 limit to a final estimate of 39,406 survivors when the Colonials finally reach our Earth.
- 29 What the use of numbers in *Battlestar Galactica* tells us is that the threat of human extinction is used very carefully, so as not to reduce the pool of survivors too soon in the series, which would make it scientifically improbable to ever rebuild a civilization, in a program that values its realistic approach to science fiction; more importantly, a sufficient number of civilians must be kept alive for the series to keep a positive outcome possible for the Fleet. Yet the steady, sometimes bumpy, decrease is precisely used as a way to manifest the perpetual crisis of the Fleet, coupled with individual losses that may elicit a better emotional response from the audience. While the series never shows the 50,000 Colonials who escaped the Twelve Colonies, their presence is reinscribed and felt through the survivor count.

## Decomartmentalization of the fictional world: entropy aesthetics

- 30 Emphasizing its perpetual crisis, the decaying of the Fleet and the decline of its survivor population, *Battlestar Galactica* thus highlights the "eventual intervention of time<sup>15</sup>" at work in literary cycles, and today in serialized television. Time inside the fictional world is slowly catching up with the initial broadcast time of the series: season one covers approximately 50 days, season two almost 230, plus a time jump of 500 days. While season two contains a number of chronological inconsistencies<sup>16</sup>, seasons three and four avoid them by keeping a looser track of time as characters do not systematically refer to how much time has elapsed in each episode. Time is contracting, allowing for a certain synchronicity between broadcast time and Fleet time in the series finale, considering that the Colonials spend approximately four years in space (including time passed on New Caprica): the time spent by initial viewers in front of their screens can serve as a proxy for measuring the weariness of the characters in the last episodes.
- 31 Far from being a *homeostatic fictional world* bound to find balance each season, with each cliffhanger and high stakes situation eventually resolved, *Battlestar Galactica* is more of an



*unstable fictional world* since it focuses on a closed system where everything keeps getting worse. It is true that the Colonials slowly learn to defend themselves against the Cylons, as even the series' bible sets this as a goal:

As a general rule of thumb, we should encounter an actual Cylon raid every third episode and in between encounters our people should constantly be studying and testing new ways of fighting their implacable enemy. It's important to note that while the Cylons were virtually invincible in the pilot, that there will be a more level playing field as the series goes on<sup>17</sup>.

- 32 From a storyological point of view, this is a textbook rule of writing: make the situation desperate, but keep a glimmer of hope so that the audience still roots for the protagonists and can make prognoses as to their eventual victory. This evolution of warfare allows the series to keep a subtle balance between action and reaction, and to constantly renew its combat situations, which is especially critical for a long-running television series.
- 33 But on a more character-based and thematic level, things relentlessly go downhill from the very opening of the series: the issue of numbers is verbalized for the Colonials from the miniseries onwards. Like such shows as *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013) or *The Big C* (Showtime, 2010-2013), *Battlestar Galactica* centres on a character diagnosed with cancer: along with the quest for Earth and the mystery of the identity of the remaining Cylon models, this plotline is teleological, always pointing to its eventual – and feared – outcome. But Laura Roslin's cancer is a much more intimate threat coming from within, especially since she is the president of what is left of the Colonies. She is the “Dying Leader” predicted by the Sacred Scrolls, and if she is to believe the prophecies, she will never see the Earth she is leading the Fleet towards. The decaying of the Fleet and the survivor “countdown” echo Laura's battle against cancer, and vice-versa.
- 34 For even without the Cylons, something is eating at the Fleet, and its name is despair. The promised Eden is not only the hope to rebuild a civilization, but a way out of the claustrophobic corridors of the Fleet where xenophobia, paranoia and a general cabin fever slowly set in – allowing for a series rich with interpersonal conflicts, but not a desirable way of life for the Colonials themselves. *Battlestar Galactica* can seem bleakly contemplative at times, as the audience observes the doomed romantic relationship between Apollo and Starbuck, the horrors aboard Pegasus or the first, horribly failed attempt at cohabitation imposed by the Cylons on New Caprica.
- 35 Another, more neutral effect of entropy in this closed system is the decompartmentalization of the Fleet<sup>18</sup>. Just as sugar, even unstirred, will slowly dilute itself in water over time, the “ragtag” Fleet starts as a structured, heterogeneous system, mainly opposing the civilians and the military through the dichotomy Roslin/Adama – one that almost leads to an insurrection in “Home, Part I & II” (S02E06 and S02E07), before Kobol gives the Colonials a renewed hope that surpasses their internal division. The Roslin/Adama romance leads to a more synchronous, shared use of political and military power, as they serve as the Father and Mother figures of the Fleet.
- 36 Fleet-wide, New Caprica is also a defining moment when one looks at the structure of the fictional world: Galactica, once a strictly military vessel, has to take aboard refugees whose ships have been destroyed during “Exodus”. The mess, a military environment, is replaced by Joe's bar, a military/civilian establishment built in unused parts of the Galactica. Slowly, the Fleet is hybridizing, a fact verbalized by Apollo during Baltar's trial:

APOLLO. We've been pretty creative at finding ways to let people off the hook for everything from theft to murder. And we've had to be. Because we're not a civilization anymore. We are a gang. And we're on the run. And we have to fight to survive.

- 37 No longer a civilization, the Fleet is indeed acting like a gang. And yet the Colonials have to wait for the bloodshed of “The Oath”/“Blood on the Scales” (S04E15 and S04E16) to finally acknowledge that their government cannot be defined by the ancient Colonies, and that their representatives should be the captains of their respective ships. The Fleet is as physically trapped in ships as they are mentally trapped in “the old days” of the Colonies.
- 38 Interestingly, while Earth seems to be a distant dream, and New Caprica a nightmare – i.e., the ships of the Fleet may be the final and deadly cul-de-sac the survivors are trapped in – escape from this closed and decaying system is made possible through prophetic dreams<sup>19</sup>, an experience of the divine, and a belief in a cyclical – rather than linear – pattern of time. If “All this has happened before, and all of it will happen again”, then the feared end of the Fleet loses its “closure value”, opening instead towards future and previous cycles. The Cylon way of “projecting” into an imaginary, sometimes shared, dream world, along with the visions of various characters, and Kara’s out-of-body experience (and later resurrection) systematize the ability of the characters to go beyond the limits of the flesh and silicate relays, beyond the “prison” of both ships and endless revenge and violence. The intervention of “God” (it doesn’t like that name) could be conceived as an external force, especially in season four when its influence becomes explicit: going against its bible, the series involves an actual yet unrepresentable third party in the fictional world, one that reunites Colonials and Cylons.
- 39 The physical hybridization of the Fleet in season four, when the Cylon rebels slowly integrate into it and even modify colonial technology, making the Galactica part organic, part mechanical, only confirms the initial blending of Colonial and Cylon through the prophetic dreams of the Opera House, involving humans and machines, and in season three and four, the very symbol of their joined destinies: Hera, the hybrid human/Cylon child. When viewed as a whole, the series plotlines seem to indicate that the Colonials and the Cylon rebels that joined them will never physically find a way out of their closed system if they don’t “open up” to the other first, a move completed when their joint forces make a desperate attempt at saving Hera in the Colony during the series finale – they are then “rewarded” by “God” with the coordinates of Earth.
- 40 As such, the characters’ decision to send their ships into the sun in the series’ finale could be seen as the ultimate “opening up”, breaking free of the errors of the past by sacrificing the metal cages that brought them here. The final episode’s wide shots of an idealized Eden in the form of prehistoric Tanzania, and the long ellipsis flying over distant lands until it reaches present day, seem to be the antithesis of the series’ aesthetics of entropy: this lush, green land is conceived as a new world of unimaginable dimensions and potential compared to the Fleet.
- 41 Yet, the series deliberately rejects escape from another critical thematic thread, that of repetition, in a final scene designed around dramatic irony. In present day New York, the “angels” Caprica Six and Baltar wonder if the much more complex and vast closed system that is the universe will repeat a familiar pattern, that of the destruction of organic life by artificial intelligence:

BALTAR. Does all of this have to happen again?

CAPRICA SIX. This time, I bet no.

BALTAR. You know, I've never known you to play the optimist. Why the change of heart?

CAPRICA SIX. Mathematics, law of averages. Let a complex system repeat itself long enough, eventually something surprising might occur.

- 42 The cyclical time of the Colonials, which is a reality if we are to believe the supernatural beings, is in itself both an open system (each cycle is not “the end”, since it is possibly endless) and a closed one bound to repeat itself until “something surprising occurs”. When one looks at the series as focused on a closed system, the open end of the series seems willingly paradoxical, as it admits that we may have left a closed system for another, bigger one – our own, marked by a cycle of violence which can feel just as claustrophobic as that experienced by the Fleet.

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## NOTES

1. Lubomír Doležal, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, p. 20-21.
2. For example, the one in “Hide” (S07E09), an episode of *Doctor Who* (BBC1, 2005-present), in which the pocket universe seems to be moldering, and time is running amok.
3. In *Stargate: SG1* (Showtime>Syfy, 1997-2007), the episode “Revisions” (S07E05) features a computer safeguarding a town surrounded by a toxic atmosphere. But this atmosphere is slowly draining the energy shield, forcing the computer to reduce its diameter, and in turn, to send people to their death beyond the shield to maintain balance.
4. Jason Mittell, “‘Previously On’: Prime time serials and the mechanics of memory”, in *Intermediality and storytelling*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Marie-Laure Ryan, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2010, p. 81 [p. 78-98].
5. Marie Laure Ryan, “Cheap Plot Tricks, Plot Holes, and Narrative Design”, *Narrative*, vol. 17, n°1, 2009, p. 73 [p. 56-75].
6. The manifesto, or “mission statement”, can be read at the beginning of the series’ bible, and is available online at [http://en.battlestarwiki.org/wiki/Naturalistic\\_science\\_fiction](http://en.battlestarwiki.org/wiki/Naturalistic_science_fiction); the bible itself can still be found at [http://leethomson.myzen.co.uk/Battlestar\\_Galactica/Battlestar\\_Galactica\\_Series\\_Bible.pdf](http://leethomson.myzen.co.uk/Battlestar_Galactica/Battlestar_Galactica_Series_Bible.pdf) [accessed October 2016].
7. Series’ bible, p. 32.
8. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1967 (revised edition, 2000), chapter 1.
9. Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit 2: la configuration dans le récit de fiction*, Paris, Points Seuil, 1984 (pocket edition), p. 47 (in which Ricœur links the Crisis with Kermode).
10. Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, *Les Séries télévisées : L’Avenir du cinéma ?*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2010, p. 26.
11. The main fan wiki on the series features a detailed section on ships, at <http://en.battlestarwiki.org/wiki/Portal:Ships> [accessed in October 2016].
12. There are plenty of ways the ship could be repaired in between episodes: by having the Enterprise dock a space station of the Federation, or because the ship was self-regenerating, like *Farscape’s* Moya (Nine Network, 1999-2003).
13. On the subject, see for example Bryan L. Ott, “(Re)Framing Fear: Equipment for Living in a Post-9/11 World”, in *Cylons in America: Critical studies in Battlestar Galactica*, ed. Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall, London, New York, Continuum, 2008 [p. 13-26].
14. The prosecuting attorney Cassidy is only counting the civilians. Those numbers may be contradictory, as pointed out on the wiki [http://en.battlestarwiki.org/wiki/Crossroads,\\_Part\\_I](http://en.battlestarwiki.org/wiki/Crossroads,_Part_I), section “Notes – The Trial” [accessed October, 2016]. It is interesting to see that even the writers had trouble keeping count.
15. I am translating “l’intervention fatale du temps” in Anne Besson, *D’Asimov à Tolkien : Cycles et séries dans la littérature de genre*, Paris, CNRS-Editions, 2004, p. 54-56.
16. [http://en.battlestarwiki.org/wiki/Season\\_two\\_timeline\\_discontinuity](http://en.battlestarwiki.org/wiki/Season_two_timeline_discontinuity) [accessed October, 2016].
17. Series bible, p. 31.
18. From now on, the rest of this paper draws on the analysis of the organization of the Fleet in Julie Ambal, Florent Favard, “Une ville dans les étoiles: Lieux de vie en mouvement(s) dans la série *Battlestar Galactica*”, paper to be published, 2016.
19. On the subject, see Sarah Hatchuel, *Rêves et séries américaines, la fabrique d’autres mondes*, Aix-en-Provence, Rouge Profond, 2015, p. 177-192.

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## ABSTRACTS

This paper deals with the way the science fiction series *Battlestar Galactica* (Syfy, 2003-2009) creates a fictional world that can be conceived as focused on a closed system, the Colonial Fleet. It analyses how the series maintains a perpetual crisis inside a universe designed as vast and empty, with no other antagonistic force than the Cylons. The evolution of the general design of the Fleet, a nodal point of the establishing shots, is a major point of the series' aesthetics of entropy, as is the survivor count. The paper concludes with an exploration of the consequences of this closed system on a thematic level, highlighting the ambiguous divide between the physical "prison" of the Fleet and the characters' dreams and visions.

Cet article s'intéresse à la façon dont la série de science-fiction *Battlestar Galactica* (Syfy, 2003-2009) déploie un monde fictionnel que l'on peut concevoir comme centré sur un « système fermé », la Flotte coloniale. Il explore la façon dont la série maintient de manière explicite une crise perpétuelle au sein d'un univers conçu comme vaste et désert, sans autre force antagoniste que les Cylons. L'évolution de l'allure générale de la Flotte, point nodal des plans d'ensemble qui rythment les épisodes, est un point saillant de l'esthétique de l'entropie développée par la série, de même que son usage du décompte des survivants. L'article se conclut par une analyse des répercussions de ce système fermé au niveau thématique, et la tension entre la « prison » physique qu'est la Flotte et les rêves, visions et expériences divines des personnages.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Battlestar Galactica, entropie, narration, narratologie, monde fictionnel; système fermé; design

**Keywords:** Battlestar Galactica, closed system, design, entropy, fictional world, narration, narratology

## AUTHOR

### FLORENT FAVARD

Florent Favard est Docteur en Études Cinématographiques et Audiovisuelles de l'Université Bordeaux Montaigne. Il travaille sur la complexité narrative des séries télévisées, les genres de l'imaginaire et le *transmedia storytelling*, dans une perspective narratologique contextualiste et transmédiatique.

Florent Favard holds a PhD in Cinema and Audiovisual Studies from Bordeaux Montaigne University. He works on the narrative complexity of TV series, on science fiction and fantasy genres, and on transmedia storytelling, within the field of transmedial narratology.