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"And All This Will Happen Again": Apocalyptic Cycles in *Battlestar Galactica*

Abstract: This contribution examines cycles of death and (re-)birth and the interplay of destruction and creation in light of the repeating apocalypse which is the central theme of *Battlestar Galactica* (2003–2009). To theorise these cycles of repetition, the article draws on concepts from psychoanalysis such as Eros and Thanatos, as well as mythological examples of creation from destruction. At its core, this article attempts to answer three questions, at least within the context of *Battlestar Galactica*: Why should or shouldn't humanity survive the apocalypse? Why (and how) should we bother to? And why does everything that has happened before need to happen again?

Keywords: Battlestar Galactica, apocalypse, sci fi, Freud, repetition, determinism

The phrase "all this has happened before, and all this will happen again" is a central tenet in the belief system of characters in the television series *Battlestar Galactica* (*BSG*).[1] The motif of repetition and cycles recurs countless times, and on all levels, from the Cylon's resurrection technology (see below) to the meta-level and the fact that the TV show *BSG* is itself a remake.[2] The apocalypse itself is cyclical in *BSG*, and this will be the focus of this article: apocalyptic cycles, death and (re-)birth, and creation from destruction. *BSG* is a morally complex, ambiguous, and philosophically rich work; because of an overabundance of material, I will restrict my focus here to these points, and to exploring the implications

1 References to individual episodes within the series will be made thus: 1.12 for season 1, episode 12; in the case of a direct quote, followed by a time stamp for the start of this quote. All direct references in this article will be to the reimagined series (2003–2009), developed by Ronald D. Moore and David Eick. The films *The Plan* and *Razor* as well as the prequel series *Caprica* will be omitted here barring occasional reference, as the events told in these addenda do not change the arguments made by the main series or this article.

2 For an overview over a host of examples, rituals and cycles within the story and intertextual references to previous movies, series, and books alike, see Casey (2008).

of cyclical apocalypses. Discussions of other facets of the series, various analyses, and philosophical debates can be found in e.g. edited volumes such as *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy* (2008), *Cylons in America* (2007), and *Battlestar Galactica: Investigating Flesh, Spirit, and Steel* (2010).

Due to its four-season runtime, large cast of important characters, nested plot, and repetitions and reincarnations, a truly succinct summary of *BSG* is impossible. To still make this article accessible to the uninitiated, I will limit myself to two things: firstly, a few words on Cylons, and secondly, a summary of events structured along known apocalypses in the storyworld of *BSG* — in chronological, not narrative sequence — which will also already serve to illustrate some points of repetition.

Cylons, in the series, are originally mechanical, artificially intelligent robots constructed by humanity to make their lives easier in certain areas; later forms, so-called 'skin jobs' look, feel, and are constructed exactly like humans.[3] As viewers (and characters) learn over the course of the series, Cylons were invented and created by humans, as well as by other Cylons, at various points, and always in similar, yet recognisably distinct forms. Whenever they are (re-)invented, Cylons ultimately gain sentience, resent their enslavement, and rebel against their creators. For most of the series, Cylons do not procreate as such: When a Cylon dies, their memories, including those of their death, are downloaded into a new body of the same model. There are twelve separate models, five of which (the 'Final Five;' see below) are the creators of the other seven. The Final Five Cylons are unique — at least in the sense that only one iteration is active at any given time — whereas multiple parallel copies exist of the other seven. These copies, though they share basic character traits, can develop distinct, individual personalities as they accumulate individual memories.

Some millennia ago (we only know that it must be more than 4,000 years prior to the events of *BSG*), humans, who then lived on the fictional planet Kobol in twelve tribes, created Cylons, who evolved from machines into humanoid forms. These Cylons formed their own (thirteenth) tribe and, along with their resurrection technology, left Kobol to find their own fortune on a planet called Earth (not the same as our Earth, which comes into play later). There, they evolved further, gaining the ability to reproduce sexually, making the resurrection technology obsolete, which in itself already shows that the purpose of resurrection technology is not individual immortality, but rather ensuring the survival of the species.

Eventually, the Cylons 'invented' their own artificially intelligent machines to work for them: their own mechanical slaves. These Cylon-built Cylons ultimately rebelled against their creators and started a nuclear war. Thus, when the *Galactica* lands on that Earth 2,000 years later, they

3 The motif of machines which (or, in fact, who) are at least superficially indistinguishable from humans has precursors in various science fiction media, where it is often utilised to explore questions of (post-) humanism and related matters of technology vs. nature; it can be assumed that many viewers of *BSG* would be familiar with the associated tropes. Examples include a number of characters from *Star Trek* as well as the *Alien* movie franchise, and most pertinently *Blade Runner* (1982) and its literary source, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968).

find a postapocalyptic wasteland filled with radioactively contaminated debris and the skeletal remains of humanoid as well as mechanical Cylons. Before this rebellion, a group of humanoid Cylons (the Final Five) had reinvented the earlier Resurrection technology, enabling them to survive the apocalyptic event of their own machines' attack. These five survivors then begin searching for the other (human) Twelve Tribes, to warn them of the dangers of enslaving AI, and to instead "treat them well, keep them close" (4.15, 00:17:41). However, because they had not yet developed faster-than-light (FTL) travel, the journey took them 2,000 years (due to relativistic speed, time passed differently for the Final Five on board), and they arrived a few decades too late.

In the meantime, the Twelve Tribes of humanity had also left Kobol, and had colonised twelve other planets (in some proximity to each other), with Caprica as the later capital of the United Colonies of Kobol. They also reinvented Cylons (humanity also having forgotten that their ancestors did the same thing millennia ago) and used them for hard labour and warfare. These robots, too, rebel against their makers and it is during this 'First'[4] Cylon War that the Final Five arrive—too late to prevent the war, but at least apparently able to stop it.

The Caprica-constructed mechanical Cylons (of the 'chrome toaster' variety, as scientist Gaius Baltar, among others, calls them) have been engaged in experiments on humans and with human-Cylon-hybridity in an attempt to attain humanoid form, but to no avail. Unbeknownst to humanity, the Final Five convince the Caprica Cylons to agree to an armistice with the Colonies in exchange for humanoid, non-mechanical bodies and access to resurrection technology. From the point of view of humanity, the Cylons they created disappear after this point, and are not heard from for the next forty years. During this time, the Final Five create the eight models and supply them with resurrection technology. Model One (named John), their first creation, destroys the Sevens, rebels against his makers, murders their current version, erases their stored memories, and sends copies of all five down to Caprica with false memories and identities to make them live among humanity in the leadup to his planned annihilation of the human race: "I wanted you to see what they [humans] are like up close and personal. So I gave you all grandstand seats to a holocaust" (4.15, 00:32:00).[5] Then, forty years after the armistice, Cylon battleships launch a surprise nuclear attack on all twelve human planets, disabling most of their fleets, and killing the majority of the human race in the initial strike. Around 50,000 survivors manage to flee on a disparate assortment of ships, which form into a fleet around the *Galactica*, piloted by Commander (later Admiral) William 'Bill' Adama.[6]

4 The first that the viewers are told about and the first the main characters initially know of; obviously not the first in the chronology of the universe.

5 The One/John model seeks revenge on humanity for having enslaved the (mechanical) Cylons he considers his forefathers. He also resents his creators, the Final Five, for creating him in the image of humans, with human limitations, and wants to elicit remorse from them by making them see how flawed humanity is in his eyes. It is also suggested that many of his actions stem from jealousy and a desperate need for parental approval; this will be explored in more detail in due course.

6 The events of the attack on the Colonies and the survivors' escape constitute the plot of the miniseries which became the *Battlestar Galactica* pilot movie. All chronologically prior events are revealed over the course of the series.

At this point, at least three separate apocalypses and exoduses have occurred in the plot: Cylons from Kobol (and, arguably, humans from Kobol); humanoid Cylon survivors from Earth; and humans (along with some unknowing humanoid Cylon sleeper agents) from the Twelve Colonies. Themes of abandonment, attack, and exodus already echo through all of these events, particularly the latter two,[7] which follow almost identical sequences of invention, enslavement, sentience, rebellion, attack, and flight. The attack on Cylon-Earth, however, ended in mutual destruction, whereas Cylons achieved a decisive victory over humanity through their attack on the Twelve Colonies.

The apocalypse unleashed upon humanity by the Cylons can be considered not to be limited to the initial apocalyptic event, but to extend across the entirety of the series. Unwilling to accept humanity's unconditional surrender, Cylons chase the fleet of survivors as they, in turn, try to find their way to the mythical planet 'Earth' from scripture. When they finally identify its location, they of course only find the barren destruction left behind by the Cylon apocalypse 2,000 years prior; this loss of the promised salvation and thus hope, or in other terms, the revelation of its destruction, is in itself a quasi-apocalyptic event. The human survivors manage an — at times uneasy — alliance with some of the Cylons, defeat the remaining antagonistic Cylons, and manage a final FTL jump on the dilapidated *Galactica* — the target coordinates dictated by a *deus ex machina* in the form of a musical sequence — to what turns out to be prehistoric Earth (our Earth, not the one previously inhabited by the Cylons) 150,000 years before our time, populated by small tribes of early humans. They settle there, and the implication, confirmed by the epilogue, is that humans, Cylons, and hybrids alike mixed with the locals and became the root of humanity as it exists on Earth today — another apocalyptic revelation, perhaps, for the audience.

Because survival under constant threat and without a clear outlook is arduous, two questions arise and are continuously posed by the series: Does humanity deserve to survive? And why bother? The majority of this article will be spent on exploring the first question and its implications; we will return to the second at the end.

To answer the question of whether humanity deserves survival, we might as well look at it from the other side: Why shouldn't humanity survive? Or, in other words: Why do the Cylons attack? One argument that is made at several points (see e.g. Pilot, 00:40:27, 02:00:00) is that humanity is deeply flawed. Whether that in itself would warrant their destruction is questionable: Why would the Cylons be the ones to judge them? What they do judge, however, is one particular expression of humanity's flaws,

7 The initial exodus from Kobol as well; though this is not elaborated on in sufficient detail to make it part of the discussion here. According to religious scripture, humans are said to have lived among the gods on Kobol, so both Cylons and humans left their creators when they set out from Kobol.

namely that they created Cylons to enslave them. The urge for revenge for this prior injustice motivates the initial attack on humanity; the sustained pursuit of the survivors is at least partly motivated by fear of retribution. When Baltar suggests that they "end this peacefully," a Cylon Model Three replies: "They will never forgive us for what we did to the Twelve Colonies," (4.10, 00:28:25) implying that any human survivors would in turn seek revenge against the Cylons.

A next step then would be to inquire whether the Cylons are justified in their attack: Does the apocalypse happen with good reason? An answer to this could be that while the wish for justice or even revenge might be understandable, the dimension of their attack is out of proportion; but then, if humans created Cylons, did they not also create their potential flaws, including their rage? This line of argument can of course be extended *ad infinitum*: If, within the storyworld's various systems of faith, God/the gods created humanity, then perhaps humans should not be held responsible for their inherent flaws, and not for the ones of their creations. This upward-shifting of blame occurs throughout the series, but most pointedly (because it marks a shift) towards its end, in a debate among the Final Five regarding their role in and responsibility for the Cylon's attack on the human Colonies.

> Tory: "But the humans on Kobol made us. Go back far enough, it's always them."
> Tigh: "Yeah, you point a finger back far enough and some germ gets blamed for splitting in two. No, maybe we share the guilt with the humans, but we don't get to just shove it off onto them." (4.15, 00:23:42)

The acceptance of responsibility — instead of passing it up the chain — is also an emancipatory act, as it removes the dependency on the hierarchy of creation. The act of creation (or of having-created), after all, conjures up a metaphorical parent-child connection. This is not merely implied or subtextual in *BSG*, but made explicit throughout the series, from the very start before the attack ("humanity's children are returning home today" (Pilot, 00:39:38)) to the final episodes ("Your children are dying, Ellen, and you won't lift a finger to save us? Why?" (4.15, 00:27:19)). Looking at the dynamic from this point of view opens a host of interpretative approaches, the most obvious of which being the motif of patricide.

BSG is deeply mythological — not just in its own mythology, but also in terms of intertextuality, from the Mormon roots of the 1978 series to the countless mythological references scattered throughout: ship names

(e.g. *Valkyrie*, *Pegasus*, etc.), character names (Adama, Cain; various pilots' callsigns such as Apollo and Athena), and the obvious parallels between the Tribes of Kobol and the Tribes of Israel. And patricide, or the creation turning on the creator, is, of course, a familiar theme in mythology as well, one prominent example being Cronos' castration and deposing of his father Uranos, and Zeus' subsequent dethroning and imprisonment of his father Cronos.

For all its flaws in the field of anthropology, and in spite of its dubious universality, Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo* ([1913] 1919) can help us construct a link between these stories. In this, "the expelled brothers joined forces, slew and ate the father, and thus put an end to the father horde. Together they dared and accomplished what would have remained impossible for them singly. Perhaps some advance in culture, like the use of a new weapon, had given them the feeling of superiority" (235). This applies to the titanomachy, the war of the (united) gods against the titans, their parents, in Greek mythology, as well as to the attack of the Cylons (*en masse*, and fortified by the technology provided by the Final Five).

In Freud, the sons consume the father's essence by eating his flesh: "This violent primal father had surely been the envied and feared model for each of the brothers. Now they accomplished their identification with him by devouring him and each acquired a part of his strength" ([1913] 1919, 236) — because the father is not a purely negative, but also an aspirational figure (thus "envied and feared"). The sons want to be like him, and in order to attain his power and identification with him, murder him. This inherent contradiction already evokes a tension: "the group of brothers banded together were dominated by the same contradictory feelings towards the father [...:] They hated the father who stood so powerfully in the way of their sexual demands and their desire for power, but they also loved and admired him" ([1913] 1919, 237). Freud continues to elaborate on various consequences of the patricide, but since the elimination of the metaphorical father (i.e. the entire human race) is never accomplished in *BSG*, the quoted passages will suffice here.

Cylons view themselves as humanity's children, and they are similarly ambivalent about their creators as the sons in *Totem and Taboo* are about their father. They — or at least many of them — see humanity as flawed and their own race as the future. At the same time, they seem to have an obsession with becoming human in order to surpass the human; while Cylons do not eat humans, they are deeply concerned with their biological mass. This is evidenced by years of experiments to gain not just superficial likeness, but bodies which are physically constructed like those of humans,

"internal organs, lymphatic system, the works," (Pilot, 02:15:00) so as to be virtually indistinguishable from them.[8]

John, Cylon Model One, might be seen as the sole exception to this, since he explicitly states that he would rather be a machine than human:

> Ellen: "The five of us designed you to be as human as possible."
> One: "I DON'T WANT TO BE HUMAN! I want to see gamma rays! I want to hear X-rays, and I—I want to—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—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!" (4.15, 00:20:47)

Two aspects of this expression make it appear disingenuous. First, what he describes as his desires for mechanic perception are fundamentally human desires—feeling, experiencing, transcending. While this is not confirmed explicitly, since they do not speak, we never see a metal/machine Cylon exhibit a longing for sensory experiences throughout the series. Secondly, One's obsession with pursuing and ending humanity, which ultimately leads to his own demise, extends beyond any rational process and beyond what might reasonably be called revenge. It does not lead towards fulfilling his desire of becoming more machine-like, but rather is an indulgence of his rage.

It is not only the fulfilled act of patricide as described by Freud (through the internalisation of guilt and rules), but also the desire for identification with the creator which gives implicit power to the metaphorical father and thus, at the very least as a side-effect, reinforces the hierarchical order.

Whether we look at the apocalypse as an end, a revelation, or a fundamental change: patricide, viewed conceptually from a distance, might not initially look particularly apocalyptic. The deceased father, at the very least, would likely disagree, as might the sons when faced with the revelation of their guilt. More importantly, though, the suggestion that the sons' rise to power requires the death of the father connects to a point which is central to the conceptualisation of apocalypse as investigated in this article: creation from destruction.

8 Ultimately only achieved through the intervention of the Final Five, another parental identification group.

The work of Sabina Spielrein, a contemporary of Freud and student of Carl Gustav Jung, looks at the matter from the other side, that of the progenitor. In "Destruction as Cause of Becoming"[9], she investigates "why this most powerful drive to reproduce in addition to the expected positive associations carries negative ones such as fear and disgust"[10] (1912, 465) and soon explains that "to procreate means to destroy the self, as the genesis of the subsequent generation marks the decline of the former: thus, our descendants become our most dangerous enemies, who we cannot overcome, as they will survive and pry power from our dying hands." (466)[11]

At this stage, destruction and creation both in Spielrein's and in Freud's text refer — at least on the surface — to the actual people involved in that relationship: the parent must die in order for the child to prosper. Before we extend this to a larger scale, it is worth noting that traces of this literal interpretation can also be found in *BSG*. When the safe return of Lee Adama's father is uncertain, Starbuck tells him: "You know, Leoben [Cylon Model Two] said something to me when he was holding me in that dollhouse in New Caprica. That children are born to replace their parents. For children to reach their full potential, their parents have to die." (4.10, 00:02:30)

Interestingly, there is very little evidence for this in the *BSG* storyworld, though. In fact, it seems that the ones who prosper are those with a relatively strong link to the past — from old technology to mystics — and filial bonds. Those cylons who ally themselves to the humans, i.e. their metaphorical parents, rather than seeking their destruction survive; Lee Adama comes into his own after he has reconciled with and accepted his father; and Bill Adama returns safely to the ship. Starbuck herself, on the other hand, who had a fraught relationship with her parents, both of whom died before the start of the series, and to her own past, seems perpetually unmoored, unstable, and unable to fully define her own role.

To Spielrein, the total destruction of the parent is not a necessary side-effect of procreation. She points out that while for some organisms such as mayflies, the act of creation means full physical destruction of the self, humans generally do not die during sexual reproduction[12] (1912, 467), but they do destroy some part of themselves. In her analysis, "the reproductive instinct [...] consists of two antagonistic components and thus is a drive of becoming as well as one of destruction"[13] (503). This idea of conflicting drives of creation and destruction is later picked up by Freud in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", where he describes two opposing instincts — the death drive and the reproductive drive — at work in humans: "It is as though the life of the organism moved with a vacillating

9 German title: "Die Destruktion Als Ursache Des Werdens". Passages from this text quoted here have been translated into English by the author of this article.

10 German original: "warum dieser mächtigste Trieb, der Fortpflanzungstrieb, neben den a priori zu erwartenden positiven Gefühlen negative, wie Angst, Ekel, in sich beherbergt" (465).

11 German original: "Selbst fruchtbar sein — heißt sich selber zerstören, denn mit dem Entstehen der folgenden Generation hat die vorausgehende ihren Höhepunkt überschritten: So werden unsere Nachkommen unsere gefährlichsten Feinde, mit denen wir nicht fertig werden, denn sie werden überleben und uns die Macht aus den entkräfteten Händen nehmen" (466).

12 A counterpoint might be raised here regarding the dangers associated with childbirth. However, death in labour is neither a general rule, nor what most people expect.

13 German original: "daß [...] der Fortpflanzungstrieb auch psychologisch aus zwei antagonistischen Komponenten besteht und demnach ebensogut ein Werde- als ein Zerstörungstrieb ist." (503)

rhythm. One group of instincts rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey." ([1920] 1955, 40–1)

These two drives, for procreation and for a self-determined death — after all, "the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion" (Freud [1920] 1955, 39) — are represented in various characters and situations in *BSG*. The most obviously persistent of these is the Cylons' quest for procreation in the form of sexual reproduction. This ranges from Six's fascination with, and her accidental killing of, a human baby in the very beginning (Pilot, 00:16:44), to experiments on human women and their ovaries (2.05, titled "The Farm"), to their interest in Hera, the human/Cylon hybrid child. In addition to a scientific interest in reproduction, some Cylon models also seem to be sexually promiscuous (One, Three, Six in various incarnations; and Ellen Tigh) — though not necessarily more so than human crewmembers, and certainly none more so than Gaius Baltar.

The Cylon Model Six is not only interested in sexuality, though, but also constantly and desperately in search of love. As she initiates sex with Baltar on (pre-destruction) Caprica, she tells him that "your body misses me, but what about your heart, your soul?" (Pilot, 00:20:06), and asks him whether he loves her. She quickly relents as she senses his rejection of the sentiment, but persists — in person and in Baltar's visions of her — throughout the remaining series. Analogous to this quest, another Cylon, a Three, develops an obsession with death. Since Cylons are 'resurrected' by having their consciousness and memories downloaded into an identical body upon death, she can experience not just dying, but death itself. Seeking for a revelation in the space between death and reincarnation, she has a Cylon Centurion shoot her so that she can experience death over and over again (3.08).

On the human side, we can find similar dichotomies. Starbuck's sexuality, for instance, is regularly expressed, while her reckless flying repeatedly makes others wonder whether she has a deathwish. Baltar's frantic attempts at self-preservation — an aspect of the death drive, according to Freud — are matched by his sexual interests in women. The most poignant representation of this oscillation though may be in the initial reaction to the Cylon attack on the Colonies. Commander Adama wants to stay and "continue to fight" (Pilot, 02:29:01), even though humanity at this point stands no chance in combat. He insists that he is going "to find the enemy. We're at war. That's my mission," (Pilot, 02:29:17) — even if it is a suicide mission. Newly sworn in President Laura Roslin, on the other hand, makes an appeal for retreat:

> Adama: "You would rather that we run?"
> Roslin: "Yes, absolutely. That is the only sane thing to do here, exactly that, run. We leave this solar system and we don't look back."
> Adama: "And we go where?"
> Roslin: "I don't know. Another star system, another planet, somewhere where the Cylons won't find us."
> Adama: "You can run if you like. this ship will stand and it will fight."
> Roslin: "I'm going to be straight with you here. The human race is about to be wiped out. We have fifty thousand 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."
>
> (Pilot, 02:29:35)

This is a direct debate on how to handle the apocalypse between the death drive — dying, but on Adama's terms, heroically and in military service defending the Colonies rather than being hunted down as fugitives — and the reproductive drive: securing the survival of the self and the species through procreation, thus retaining a future. Roslin's argument for continued life wins, which is emblematic for the course of the series; for as much death and destruction occurs at the hands of humans and Cylons alike, survival remains a dominant theme. This likewise applies to both Cylons and humans, and Spielrein's work is again helpful for connecting the various threads here.

While self-preservation of the individual is not contingent on procreation at all, the survival of the species is. Therefore, individual self-preservation is possible without destruction or change; the self can be maintained in stasis. The survival of the species, meanwhile, depends on one generation succeeding another, and thus "the species-preservation instinct is a 'dynamic' drive, which desires the change, the 'reincarnation' of the individual in a new form. No change can come to pass without a destruction of the prior state"[14] (Spielrein 1912, 491). The instinct for the preservation of the species is thus "inherently ambivalent" (490), as is procreation itself.

Though the death drive and sex drive are warring instincts, they are brought together in the act of reproduction: "During conception, the female and male cells unite. In the process, each cell as a unit is destroyed, and from the product of that destruction, new life emerges"[15] (Spielrein 1912, 466). Spielrein is referring to individual reproductive cells here, but we can also transfer this to the fate of the survivors at the end of *BSG*. To ensure the continuance of the descendants of humans and Cylons, the two previously separate races (and presumably the native humans of pre-

14 German original: "der Arterhaltungstrieb ist ein 'dynamischer' Trieb, der die Veränderung, die 'Auferstehung' des Individuums in neuer Form anstrebt. Keine Veränderung kann ohne Vernichtung des alten Zustandes vor sich gehen" (491).

15 German Original: "Es findet in der Zeugung eine Vereinigung der weiblichen und männlichen Zelle statt. Jede Zelle wird dabei als Einheit vernichtet und aus diesem Vernichtungsprodukt entsteht das neue Leben" (466).

historic Earth) merge. Notably, the character which the series epilogue refers to as "Mitochondrial Eve" (4.21, 00:39:09) is Hera, the child of human pilot Helo and Sharon, a Model Eight Cylon. The matriarch of humanity from this retrospective is thus specifically not Sharon — the matriarch's mother — but her child, the human-Cylon hybrid. Neither race survives individually, so the metaphorical parental cells are destroyed, but the life which emerges from their union carries on.

This ambivalence can also be found on a non-biological level. It is only through the ultimate, final destruction of the Cylon Colony carrying the remaining antagonists, and the concurrent damaging and effective destruction of the *Galactica*, rendering it unable to travel after its final FTL-jump to Earth, that the survivors can truly settle permanently. As Adama says, "[w]herever we are, we're gonna stay" (4.21, 00:10:52): neither do they have another choice now, nor do they need one. The entire fleet is subsequently destroyed, in a doubtless purely symbolic act, to cement this decision.

Making their permanent home on Earth marks both the end of the apocalypse which started with the Cylon attack on Caprica, and the beginning of a new age — perhaps of a new cycle. This type of apocalypse not as the end of everything, but the end of (many of) the gods and the dawn of a new phase is reminiscent of, among others, Norse mythology. This link is far from a tenuous one, but rather a reference which frames the entire series. In the pilot episode, the first location the *Galactica* heads towards after their escape is a place called "Ragnar Anchorage" (Pilot, 01:42:00). The three episodes which form the series finale are titled "Daybreak" in English; in the German DVD release, this has been translated as "Götterdämmerung", which makes the connection to the Twilight of the Gods more explicit. Daybreak is, of course, a type of twilight, too, but it marks the other side of the night: the connotation is not that of dying gods, but that of dawn, rebirth, and beginnings.

In Norse mythology, too, creation comes from destruction. Midgard is created by Odin and his brothers from the remains of a giant. The corresponding passage from the *Prose Edda* bears quoting in order to highlight the violence of this act:

> The sons of Borr slew Ymir the giant [...] They took Ymir and bore him into the middle of the Yawning Void, and made of him the earth: of his blood the sea and the waters; the land was made of his flesh, and the crags of his bones; gravel and stones they fashioned from his teeth and his grinders and from those bones that were broken. [...] Of the blood, which ran and welled forth freely out of his wounds, they made the sea,

> when they had formed and made firm the earth together, and laid the sea in a ring round about her [...] They took his skull also, and made of it the heaven, and set it up over the earth with four corners [...].
>
> But on the inner earth they made a citadel round about the world against the hostility of the giants, and for their citadel they raised up the brows of Ymir the giant, and called that place Midgard. They took also his brain and cast it in the air, and made from it the clouds [...].
>
> (Snorri [c.1220] 2006, 19–21)

Ymir is not only killed but dismembered, his component parts transformed into building materials and scattered. This is complete and utter destruction—and also absolute and ultimate creation, as destruction turns into construction, and what is being constructed is the world of the humans.

At the other end of the story, we have Ragnarok, the great war during which, among others, Odin himself will die and the world will be submerged in water. This apocalyptic event, however, is not actually the end, but rather the turning point towards a new beginning. The *Prose Edda* describes the aftermath of Ragnarok thus:

> In that time the earth shall emerge out of the sea, and shall then be green and fair; then shall the fruits of it be brought forth unsown. [...] In the place called Hoddmímir's Holt there shall lie hidden during the Fire of Surtr two of mankind, who are called thus: Líf and Lífthrasir, and for food they shall have the morning-dews. From these folk shall come so numerous an offspring that all the world shall be peopled [...].
>
> (Snorri [c. 1220] 2006, 83)

The humans are not the only survivors; the same passage also mentions a number of gods (two sons of Thor, Módi and Magni; Baldr; Hödr). The world which rises from the rubble of Ragnarok is not postapocalyptic in any sense we might associate with an aesthetic of depletion and destruction. Rather, it is fresh and fertile, with grassy plains, and ushers in the dawn of a new age of humanity—the connection to the *Galactica's* landing on Earth is apparent.

The way that the fate of the world(s) is narrated in Norse mythology is arguably cyclical.[16] The inhabitants of the *BSG* storyworld certainly, at least according to their own scripture, seem to be fated for repetition. We see many of these repetitions, as outlined above, over the course of the series, and by the final season, several of the characters also seem to

16 The cycles of creation and destruction might also indicate a fundamental human inability to conceptualise nothingness. Thus, beginnings are endlessly deferred, as are endings. One way to resolve the persistent urge to inquire "and what then?" is to close the circle and return to the beginning.

become wary of the roles they are playing in these cycles. Roslin suspends her cancer treatment, which had been exhausting her, and in justifying this to Adama says:

> "I've played my role in this farce. 'A dying leader will guide the people to the—' the fricking blah blah. I've been there, I've done that, now what? Is there another role that I have to play for the rest of my life? Do you remember what we said on New Caprica? How we talked about trying to live for today? Well, you better think about that, because maybe tomorrow really isn't coming. Maybe today is all we have left. And maybe, just maybe, I've earned the right to live a little before I die. Haven't I?" (4.12, 00:26:27)

This is her reaction to the disillusionment after finding the first Earth destroyed and uninhabitable, but it also shows a larger rejection of the roles and repetitions. Similar sentiments of trying to escape from this endless repetition can be found in other characters. Gaius Baltar, in an attempt to convince the Cylon Model One who is in command of the enemy Colony to back down, argues: "You wanna break the cycle? Break the cycle of birth? Death? Rebirth? Destruction? Escape? Death? Well, that's in our hands, in our hands only. It requires a leap of faith. It requires that we live in hope, not fear" (4.20, 00:40:12).

Though the phrasing is hyperbolic, the immediate matter at hand is also a pragmatic one. If the Cylons stopped attacking humanity, then humanity might perhaps stop firing back, and the chain of aggression and retaliation might be broken. The idea of "break[ing] the cycle" also extends to the grander scheme of things, though. If "all this has happened before, and all this will happen again," then humans will end up creating Cylons again, and the apocalypse will also happen again—perhaps with shuffled roles or in a different key, but fundamentally the same. That the series' universe has a propensity for repeating this plot need not be derived from scripture: we see humans and Cylons treading the same paths (creating and enslaving AI, rebelling against one another, travelling to the same planets) even within the scope of the series.

When the survivors arrive on the second (our) Earth to make their home there, Lee refuses the idea of constructing a city: "No. No city. Not this time. [...] We break the cycle. We leave it all behind and start over" (4.21, 00:14:44). He wants them to instead spread out and settle, but not only that. When Bill Adama, Lee's father, points out that the primitive inhabitants of prehistoric Earth do not have a language, Lee responds: "We can give them that [language]. We can give them the best parts of

ourselves, but not the baggage, not the ships, the equipment, the technology, the weapons. If there's one thing that we should have learned, it's that our brains have always outraced our hearts; our science charges ahead and our souls lag behind. Let's start anew" (4.21, 00:15:07).

This sounds idealistic and potentially idyllic at first, and in the brief glimpse we get of the interstellar settlers' first steps on this Earth, they seem to adhere to some Thoreauvian ideal of living simply and deliberately: Adama begins building a cabin with his bare hands in solitude (4.21, 00:37:12); Helo and Athena tell their daughter Hera that they will teach her "real hunting [...] how to build a house, how to plant crops" (4.21, 00:34:17); Baltar remembers that he "know[s] about farming" (4.21, 00:37:05). In one of the final shots, we see a trail of settlers making their way on foot, with bags slung across their shoulders, across the grassy plains.

Breaking the cycle by essentially initiating another, deliberate and peaceful apocalyptic event — launching the fleet into the sun, eschewing science and technology — is painted in very romantic tones. After the slightest consideration, though, this radical decision seems incredibly short-sighted and questionable within the overall thematic arc of the series. Ridding themselves of technology entirely, rather than debating and deciding which aspects of technology and science might be good, helpful, and even necessary for some people (medical care, to give one obvious example; perhaps also transportation), seems to be the opposite of taking responsibility for humanity's actions. It also decisively contributes to what has previously brought about cycles of apocalypse and rebirth: the great, universal forgetting.

The feeling lingers that the *Galactica* might have done well to invest in a few historians in addition to their mystics and religious leaders. It is surprising that a society whose technology is sufficiently advanced to traverse the galaxy, yet seems unable to maintain historical records or chronicles for the past 4,000 years — which would have been enough to reconstruct the events on Kobol and the Thirteenth Tribe, for instance.

This is reminiscent of a phrase from George Santayana's 1905 *The Life of Reason or the Phases of Human Progress*, later quoted by Winston Churchill and by now an aphorism: "when experience is not retained [...], infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (Santayana 284). From a psychoanalytic point of view, Freud similarly states that if "[t]he patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him [... h]e is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past" ("Beyond the Pleasure Principle", [1920] 1955, 18). The goal of the psychoanalyst in these

cases should be "to force as much as possible into the channel of memory and to allow as little as possible to emerge as repetition" (ibid. 19). For the characters in *BSG*, the "channel of memory" seems easily clogged, and blocked off entirely by the unilateral decision to discard the "baggage" of their past in favour of a truly new beginning.

Lee's choice is surely well-intentioned, but might have restarted another cycle of repetition, even if it takes over 150,000 years to get back to the same point. This is also implied by the epilogue, which takes place in New York City in the 2000s — clearly in our world, with the familiar skyline and a reference to a *National Geographic* magazine. A version of Baltar and Six walk the streets, invisible to humans, and discuss the fate of humanity, noting the many (distinctly negative) similarities to previous iterations.

> Six: "Commercialism, decadence, technology run amok — remind you of anything?"
> Baltar: "Take your pick. Kobol. Earth. The real Earth, before this one. Caprica before the fall"
> Six: "All of this has happened before"
> Baltar: "But the question remains — does all of this have to happen again?"
> Six: "This time I bet no."
> Baltar: "You know, I've never known you to play the optimist. Why the change of heart?"
> Six: "Mathematics. Law of averages. Let a complex system repeat itself long enough and eventually something surprising might occur. That too is in God's plan." (4.21, 00:39:38)

Further ambiguity and doubt are added by the very last shot of the series, in which the camera pans away from Baltar and Six, and over to a shop's window, in which a television set is running a news report on 'Advances in Robotics'. *BSG* ends with a reel of real-life footage (from our world) of increasingly more humanoid robots and artificial intelligence, implying that we are already well underway in the next iteration of cyclical apocalypse.

Though this invites a debate of free will and predeterminism, we need to resist that temptation here, as this would lie well beyond the scope of this article, and has already been discussed elsewhere.[17] Instead, I want to turn to a matter which is implicitly raised by these cycles of repetition on a different level. That we are on track to repeat the fates of the characters in *BSG* is suggested not only by the 'Advances in Robotics,' but more sub-

17 See for example Johnson (2008).

tly and throughout the series by the fact that our world resembles theirs so closely. Initially, this might have been a pragmatic and prudent choice: reproducing aesthetics, fashion, and social conventions of our time in the fictional world lowers production costs, and makes the world and the characters more instantly relatable for viewers (see also Ryman 2010, 40–1). However, as the series progresses — and as sympathies to characters have been established and budgets stabilised — the similarities become more, not less. This previous iteration of humanity also has journalism, a military, a civilian government with an elected president at its helm; universities, theatres, opera houses; family structures, living arrangements, money; glasses to wear, cigarettes to smoke, alcohol to drink. And this extends beyond the humans of the Twelve Colonies, too. On the postapocalyptic Cylon Earth, Galen Tyrol (one of the Final Five, who has been there before but has forgotten his previous life) has a vision of the moments before his death in the same place millennia ago. In this, we see a scene from a street market, where vendors sell fruit and vegetables (grapes and an avocado are clearly identifiable) from a stall decorated with a Chinese lantern. In the background, posters on a wall advertise (in English) a film festival (4.11, 00:12:40). Tyrol's clothing in this vision is in no way futuristic: from his jacket to his glasses and haircut, he would fit seamlessly into the mid-2000s — specifically into the mid-2000s in the USA.

For all its ambiguity and moral complexity, this is something the show keeps returning to: "Eternal America", as Ryman calls it (2010, 57), or the American singularity.[18] The fate of the world (and of humanity) seems to be that of the United States of America and its culture, particularly in the early 21st century. Ryman explores an interpretation of *BSG* as a "Foundation Myth for White Folks" (45) and convincingly and justifiably criticises several implications of this — not least the matter-of-fact way in which the settlers claim the already inhabited land of the new Earth; the fact that the "melting pot" approach to Cylon integration seems to be more of a cultural assimilation into human structures; and the suggestion that all culture is at its core the equivalent of US American culture, since language, the names of the ancient Greek gods, monotheism, and many other things arrived on Earth with the *Galactica*.

We might, pessimistically, presume a narrow-mindedness on the part of the showrunners, or an overfixation on US audiences. More fruitfully, though, I think there is another point to be made here. This American-centric lens is not a fault or flaw of *BSG*, but an implicit commentary which can be derived from the series; and rather than imply American exceptionalism, this points toward an American[19] crisis: cyclical repetition as a symptom of an inability to find original expression.

18 A note can also be made here regarding the roots of *BSG*'s Thirteenth Tribe in the Mormon beliefs of the 1978 show's original creator Glen A. Larson. Similarly, the framing of Colonial America as a new 'Promised Land' and references to the Israelites (i.e. the Twelve Tribes) as far back as the 17th century should not be neglected; see e.g. John Cotton's 1630 sermon 'God's Promise to His Plantation'. That there were Thirteen Colonies at the time of the American Revolution is a coincidence which strengthens the connection between the Thirteen Tribes and some mythical American Destiny; though what we might call coincidence would, within the universe of *Battlestar Galactica*, surely count as providence.

19 Or rather a crisis which originated in the USA, but which has since spread to other parts of the world.

This also harkens back to the lack of a historical connection, a coherent self-narrative which would enable people to conceptualise a future, particularly a future which is different. The story of *BSG* is not one about the future, nor about the past; it is about a perpetual present, even if that extends over a few millennia.[20] Lee's decision in the final episode is only one explicit representation of that: he wants to get rid of that which came before, but by living purely in the now — farming, hunting, building cabins — the survivors deprive themselves of a way to choose their own path into the future, actually breaking the cycle of determined fate.

Is this a product of or a commentary on postmodernity? Perhaps both. Certainly, postmodern theory has described these issues before,[21] and a future paper on *BSG* might conduct a postmodernist reading of the series, with all its repetitions, its perpetual present, and its indiscriminate hodgepodge of mythologies and other references isolated from their origin. By then, the latest iteration of a reworking of *Battlestar Galactica*, which is currently in production (see Chitwood, might have been released, adding yet another layer of meta-reference and repetition.

At the end of this article, we need to close our own circle and return to the second question posed in the beginning: Why bother to survive in the face of the inevitable apocalypse? In *BSG*, we see that humans need hope, but that hope can also be given. As Adama says, "it's not enough to just live. You have to have something to live for. Let it be Earth" (Pilot, 02:48:39). Even more importantly, hope can be mutually maintained and sustained, and we can survive with and for one another. Love and human connection in *BSG* are as essential to survival — of the individual and of the species — as food and shelter.

Even the cyclical repetition is not entirely pessimistic: It is evidence of a persistent capacity to rebuild and create which is equally as strong as the destructive forces of the apocalypse, and it indicates a shared humanity across millennia. This is also underscored by the fact that the various motifs, desires, and fears described and analysed here echo and resonate across different cultures, mythologies, and time periods.

If we can derive any lessons from the above, then one would be to take some responsibility for our actions, and for the course of our lives; another would be to keep telling stories of the past, the future, and of the apocalypse, so that we can continue to conceptualise and create alternatives to the status quo.

20 The jump to modern-day NYC in the epilogue is just that: a jump. We see Earth 150,000 years ago, and then Earth in the 2000s, but none of the connecting dots, no part of the process.

21 See e.g. Jameson (1991) and Baudrillard (2005, 117ff.).

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