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Between Allegory and Seduction: Perceptual Modulation in *Battlestar Galactica*

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When Ronald Moore discussed the genesis of his remake of *Battlestar Galactica* (hereafter abbreviated to *BSG*), he acknowledged the radical impact of 9/11 on his creative vision. Bringing to the screen his competence as a political science major, Moore describes the show as a piece of informed docufiction about the war on terror (Moore, quoted in Bassom, 2005: 12). The show indeed offers a compelling conceptualization of the attacks that blurs the boundary between the spectacle of a fictional apocalypse and the reality of the war on terror, prompting scholarly examination to this day.

This article investigates the relationship between *BSG* and the post-9/11 ecology of agitation in light of George Bush's strategy of collective perceptual management. While most readings focus on *BSG* as an allegory for the war on terror, I address the audiovisual strategies by which *BSG* appeals to the viewer's senses, mapping the emergence of a post-9/11 sensibility. In doing so, I argue that the show's relationship with post-9/11 reality rests in its power to address the audience's feelings. To this end, I look at *BSG*'s aesthetics of crisis as operating as an affective vector, playing out in an informational system that provokes a bodily response in the audience through affective solicitation. As argued below, akin to the Bush administration's use of television as a form of perceptual modulation, *BSG*'s relationship with the war on terror is rooted in an ability to express meaning and feeling, keeping a sensation of agitation alive throughout a four-season run. To expose the political value of the show's aesthetics, I examine the expressions and style that make up a scenario of sensorial stimulation, where feeling becomes a biopolitical operator. Indeed, *BSG*'s cinematographic techniques and visuals, chromatic shifts and aural evocations effectively manufacture agitation, exposing a tension between the show's status as an allegory for the contemporary world and its complicity with practices of televised affective engineering.

An Allegory For the Post-9/11 World?

BSG's apocalyptic representations of nuclear annihilation, fundamentalism and violence provide "a look at ourselves" in light of an epochal event (Moore, quoted in Littlejohn, 2003). Set in a dystopic scenario, its tale

about warring civilizations, which evolved over a mini-serial, a four-season series, and various spin-offs from 2003 to 2009, is, in the words of critic Gavin Edwards, "TV's most vivid depiction of the post-9/11 world" (2006). A re-imagining of Glen Larson's 1979 show of the same title, *BSG* tracks the diasporic journey of a community of human survivors forced by a nuclear attack to leave their home planets, the Twelve Colonies. Behind the unexpected bombing are the Cylons, a race of biomachines invented by man to perform manual jobs and exiled once technological advancement became a threat to human supremacy. The modality of the attacks, carried across multiple locations by humanoid "sleeper agents" infiltrated in the colonial military outposts, is one of *BSG*'s many metaphors for 9/11. The Cylons' fervent belief in God, which the show opposes to the secular polytheism of the humans, is a second parallel with the dichotomic scenario of the war on terror.

Underlying this vision of humanity's fight for survival is a strong allegorical element that, according to Brian Ott, furnishes us with a "set of symbolic resources" against social anxieties (2008: 14). In an interview released after the premiere, Moore remarked that "[w]hat happens to the people in *Galactica* is what happened to us [Americans] in September [2001], but in several orders of magnitude larger" (quoted in Laroque, 2003). **[1]** The producer's intention is to use hyperbolic representations of disruption to "comment on things that are happening in today's society" (Moore, quoted in Bassom, 2005: 12), inviting a critical reception consistent with science fiction's identity as a genre of "cognitive estrangement" (Suvin, 1979).

Addressing some of the most pressing issues that emerged in the last decade, the show's vision of a world where liberties are curtailed in the name of security and democracy makes viewing an upsetting experience, where fantasy and fact blend. Individualism, violence and corruption figure as prominent vehicles for the show's social commentary. Disturbing scenes of abuse, for example, are found in "Flesh and Bones" (1x08) and "Pegasus" (2x10), two episodes broadcast at the time of the Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo scandals, which document the effects of torture and military rape on Cylon prisoners. Focusing on the political implications of these and other episodes, a large body of work comments on the dialogic relationship between *BSG* and its socio-cultural context (Potter and Marshall, 2008; Kaveney and Stoy, 2010). Assuming its crude representation of violence is exemplary of an engaged approach that transcends science fiction's supposed escapism, Erika Johnson-Lewis argues that the show complicates "easy or obvious answers to the question of what it means to be human" (2008: 28). Focusing on the political subtext of BSG's ambiguous representation of suicide bombing in Season 3, Christian Erickson (2007) observes that the show offers a potentially subversive critique of America's global hegemony.

BSG's incorporation of an imaginary of emergency and conflict draws attention to the ways that the complicity of language and power feeds into a global culture of alarm. [2] Its visceral representation of brutality denounces the incongruence of the post-9/11 rhetoric of "good" versus "evil," exposing the double face of political discourses that demonize terrorism while inciting violence at home. Yet, as a production that aired throughout a period of great change, *BSG*'s allegorical stance responds to a diversified array of tensions: its life as serialized television hardly upholds a clear-cut vision of events. As the product of the collective effort of a large team, *BSG*'s criticism of the war on terror should be approached more as a symphony than the work of an individual mind. In this respect, its critique of governmental policies is far from stable. [3] However, what seems consistent in the show is an effort to produce a moody spectacle that powerfully delivers some of the electricity of post-9/11 American life.

Despite the great attention devoted to *BSG*'s evocations of contemporary traumas, it is rarely argued that the show's appeal stems as much from its imitation of reality as its ability to capture the complexities of our times. Taking 9/11 as an originary event of unforeseeable consequences, the show offers itself as speculative fiction, whose interest seems to lay in "capturing and depicting the latent futurity that [...] haunts the present" (Shaviro 2010: 66, emphasis in original). *BSG*'s apocalyptic imaginary is not only a metaphor for real-life events, but through its narrative and thematic ambiguities becomes a work where fiction and fact overlap, inviting consideration of its role in shaping political opinion. In this light, *BSG*'s allegory appears all the more unstable as it takes root in the changing "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1977) of post-9/11 America.

Staged Realism and Haptic Seduction

BSG's engagement with real-life concerns becomes an experiment with perception, where the relationship between what happens on screen and who receives the images is reconceptualized in visceral terms. In the producers' intentions, the show's emotive appeal stems from a reinvention of the aesthetic conventions of science fiction television, which brings about a "naturalistic" re-envisioning of the genre (Moore, 2003). [4]

Consequently, a seemingly spontaneous representation of events onboard a military convoy is encountered in multiple instances (especially in seasons 1 and 2), where technical and editing choices lend a patina of realism to the spectacle. On such occasions, a quasi-documentary effect is sought through use of hand-held cameras and montage. Commenting on the former aspect, Sérgio Dias Branco observes that "in *BSG*, the camera is seemingly documentary because of how it is placed in relation

to the fiction, standing both inside and outside the fictional world as something present and observant" (2010: 193). Correspondingly, recourse to a Hitchcockian model of "extending takes and long masters [is made to] pull the audience into the reality of the action rather than distract [it] through the use of ostentatious cutting patterns" (Moore 2003). This overall framing is further developed by each director's touch and experience, which may amplify the vibrations of hand-held cameras ("Final Cut" [2x08]), foreground the alterations of a voice and the imperfections of a face ("The Hub" [4x11]), or arrange bodies across the visual field so their glidings and repositionings choreograph sensuous movements ("Act of Contrition" [1x04], "Resistance" [2x04]). As I show in the following paragraphs, through different directing and editing techniques, *BSG*'s signature style diagrams the immaterial background of representation as it is also conveyed by diegetic sounds and soundtrack and by the rhythm of the filmed action, including the periodization of long story arcs.

Naturalistic ambitions are often encountered in science-fiction television and should not necessarily be interpreted as an indicator of quality programming. Yet, Moore and Eick's reiterated endorsement of verisimilitude invites an investigation of the processes by which *BSG* designs its allegory of the present. Indeed, the goal to pull viewers into the action is only intensified by techniques that, mimicking documentary footage, foreground the materiality of the image, until an almost tactile relationship is established with it. This resonance between meaning and feeling is the result of digital manipulations of the image that produce an embedded perspective on the narrated events and is always employed in the scenes set on the battlestar Galactica. The episode "Precipice," in which the Cylons attempt to crush the human insurgency on New Caprica, is a paradigmatic example. Several fragments of the episode show a police night raid against the rebels, and part of the operation is filmed from the policemen's points of view. In such instances, a sensation of spontaneity is engineered through the use of X-ray visors on cameras that create the impression of witnessing a live blitz at an enemy encampment in the desert.

The recourse to a sight enhancement device in use among the military is clearly meant to invoke memories of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts that were at their height at the time "Precipice" was broadcast. These sequences, which recall the combat videos that became popular on television news during the first Gulf War, invite an informed reading by the audience. Yet their staged realism also elicits another kind of response. The visors lend a greenish, grainy texture to the images, which also appear considerably less focused. The lack of homogeneous light, which is partially compensated for by the presence of a spot placed on top

of each camera, narrows the field of vision to only a few meters ahead of the soldier. Adjusting to these strained conditions, eyes become alert to the imperfections of the footage, so that the object of vision shifts from what is happening in the video (the content of the footage) to the process by which images are delivered (their materiality). Discussing how grainy images prompt a "memory of the senses" in the onlooker, Laura Marks argues that such "visual variations are not formal matters alone but have implications for how the viewer relates bodily to the image" (2000: 171). Marks' argument is framed within a discourse on "haptic" visuality, a reference to the Greek verb haptein (meaning "coming into contact with") to describe a critical practice of "touching with the eye" in video art. While "Precipice" is neither documentary filming nor visual art, Marks' considerations still apply to *BSG*'s aesthetics, which display many properties of haptic images, including densely textured images, changes in focus, under and overexposure and decaying film and video imagery.

It seems, indeed, as if the show's imagery strives to generate a sensual archive, where memories spring not from a recollection of facts, as from the unearthing of sensations summoned by what moves on the surface of the screen. On different occasions, *BSG*'s look imitates that of film and analog technologies, foregrounding the embedded point of view and distressed feel of amateur videos. A good example of this effect is found in "Occupation" (3x01) and "Sometimes a Great Notion" (4x12), where it is achieved by a combination of production and postproduction techniques. Notably, both episodes stage moments of intense despair, where the characters face the possibility of immediate death or extinction. In "Occupation," Cylon rule over New Caprica keeps humans imprisoned and under strict surveillance. In "Sometimes a Great Notion," the discovery that Earth (the planet described as the heaven where humankind would reunite with the gods) is a post-nuclear wasteland, forces the fleet into a desperate search for a habitable planet to colonize. In various sequences from these episodes, a number of elements combine to disturb the vision. The collective effects of grain, bleached negatives, cold lighting and the employment of natural light for outdoor shooting reduce the dark-to-light range, yielding strong contrasts where greys become black and the sky's pastel blue converts into an overexposed white blankness. The oscillation between the brilliant and desaturated colours produced expresses a change in perspective and communicates defamiliarization, delivering alteration and affective instability.

Furthermore, the scenography of dense colours created during postproduction makes the image's tiny flecks of grain stand out, creating the impression that people and objects emanate a pixelated aura. In such instances the identification with a character's emotions, which *BSG*'s use of close-ups invites, is disturbed by the presence of what appears as a form of static that engulfs vision, demanding that the viewer pay attention to the digital life of the image. The force of the grain's pull

causes a loss of external points of view that partly diverts attention from the show's alleged criticism of the war on terror. A sensation of uprooted perspective lingers after the allegory between the devastated New Caprica and Earth and the neo-colonized Middle East has been assessed. Indeed, the grainy images direct sight toward an inter-subjective realm of carnality, where images seduce and are seduced by a touching eye.

Such formal techniques that cause a disengagement with the cognitive aspect of narration demand an intensive engagement with visual technology that undermines traditional practices where watching happens from a distanced and objective position. As Danilo Totaro remarks, haptic images have a tactile quality of provisionality that invite "the viewer to contemplate the image as a material presence rather than an easily identifiable representational cog in a narrative wheel" (2002, unpaginated). As I have noted, Moore and Eick describe *BSG*'s naturalistic style as part of a televisual experiment that uses science fiction to push the limits of entertainment beyond the realm of the interpretive to perpetuate the force of shock. Certainly, *BSG*'s style disturbs detached observation and, even if its ambitions of realist cinematography happen within more clichéd approaches to representation, the show does more than unearth the trauma of the attacks. Its style orchestrates an affectively charged experience of agitation that keeps in check viewers' capacity to feel. Its reframing of fear engages viewers as a collectivity of perceivers, open to the contagion of an infectious syndrome of agitation. In this context, I take agitation to be a generic impression, entailing less an action than a "poising for action" that remains devoid of meaning (Massumi, 2005: 36). Within agitation's hold on the body, feelings emerge in multiple forms, spawning different reactions yet invariably bringing the nerves, hearing, skin and heartbeat into play.

Unable to completely master the object of vision, *BSG*'s haptic visuals leave the viewer in the grip of her body, operating now as a termination in a dispositif of biofeedback. This incorporation of the materiality of the body into a study of TV's audiovisuality considers the audience's experience of the show as an epidermal event where new thresholds of sensation are crossed. Measuring the weight of this disruption, however, becomes a theoretical challenge. The show is not conceived as experimental art. Overall, its haptic imaginary unfolds within a canonical approach to televisual representation, where narrative accumulation and a focus on the emotional life of the characters take precedence over experimentation. Yet its aesthetics also hijack the senses, making viewing less safe. The ostentation of imperfect visuals, which engineer agitation, is experienced as an embodied flux of sensory and corporeal overload that engrosses the viewer as she reciprocates the touch of the image. By the end of the show, agitation, unhinged from a staged imitation of real life events, is communicated by the intra-episodic

unfolding of a process of escalating and subsiding tension that, embedded in a larger climate of instability, keeps attention continuously suspended.

As the ephemeral traces of this experience emerge, where bodily responsiveness comes into play, the question of how to address *BSG*'s aesthetic manipulations of televisual boundaries demands that we take into account its status as a work produced during a moment of crisis in American culture.

BSG as Post-9/11 "Expressive" Television

The epidermal address of *BSG*'s style collapses the distinction between bodily excitation and external points of reference, implying a sensual reciprocation with the image. It is my contention that the show's ability to resonate with the ongoing redefinition of life prompted by 9/11 can be attributed to its nature as a work expressive of an ecology of agitation. **[5]** In its reframing of fear for a television audience, the show triggers processes of affective discharge that are at one with the emergence of a global culture of (distressed) feeling.

Steven Shaviro elaborates on the notion of audiovisual productions as "expressive" works to describe films and videos that "give voice to [...] a kind of ambient, free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today, although it cannot be attributed to any subject in particular" (2010: 2). Caught in the hold of ambient feeling, expressive works become embedded in the emergence of new social processes, to the point of "generat[ing] subjectivity" (Shaviro, 2010: 3). As a show that began production twelve months after 9/11 and within critical conditions, *BSG*'s affective aesthetics partake in a larger dynamics of collective subjectivation. When it began production, not only was the temporal lapse separating the present from the attacks too short, the socio-cultural ecology of the television industry was saturated with the tensions connected to a sinking financial situation and to governmental and public pressures for patriotic alignment. Most importantly, television's functions were being remodulated by a government eager to control the affective life of its population. Indeed, far from operating in isolation as a platform of affective stimulation, *BSG* got caught in an extended redefinition of media and governmental communication strategies predicated on the mobilizing power of affective solicitation.

BSG's style of embodied audiovisuality surfs on the pervasive deployment of sensorial weapons that George W. Bush's government devised in an effort to shift the political address away from knowledge production and toward perceptual stimulation. In an effort to preserve order after 9/11, the Bush administration introduced televisual cues to moderate the American public's perception of the terrorist threat. The most visible example of this perceptual strategy is the color-coded system that

measures the level of terrorist alert on a scale from minimum (blue) to maximum (red). Associating color variations with changes in the level of governmental alertness to threats, the system operates on activation, at the intersection of sensation and thought. According to Brian Massumi, the terrorist alert scale addresses “bodily predisposition or tendency,” with shifts on the chromatic spectrum inducing “an immediate nervous response” (2005: 33). The goal underlying this strategy has less to do with making Americans perpetually fearful and more to do with keeping them alert, training their bodies to become immediately responsive to governmental calls to action.

At the heart of this enlisting of media’s perceptual power is the idea that publics must be approached as a living mass animated by the needs that govern the activity of a physical body. This involves redirecting political efforts away from the production of empirical facts and toward the biopolitical channelling of collective drives. In this respect, agitation, imagined as a force that implicates the body as matter and a conveyor of energy, becomes something that can be designed into informational dynamics. Its political value rests in the fact that it circumvents ideological interpellation to act on an individual’s capacities to think, desire and ultimately act. If the fight against terrorism is also a war of attrition, a conditioned state of agitation becomes a weapon that can be deployed to mobilize a collective war effort (or alternatively to defuse it). In the case of the color spectrum, chromatic cues become “signals without signification” (Massumi, 2005:10), which tune into social perceptions to regulate the level of public involvement with the war. Rather than subjectifying threat, these chromatic cues engender a process of affective feedback that originates in a network of hyper-excited subjectivities.

In this respect, the Bush administration’s color-coded system figures as part of a strategy of perceptual manipulation that makes use of immaterial weapons to influence the emergence of needs in the population. Envisioning television as a node that binds multiple layers of a hyper-connected media topology stresses its ability to regulate passages of intensity between private and public spaces (or isolated subjects and a population), intervening in the coming into being of previously unrealized events by clearing new paths of connectivity. Although the effects of exposure to televised perceptual management cannot be measured, the medium’s participation in the micropolitics of a “gut economy” invites a biopolitical reading of its formal aspects (Gregg and Siegworth, 2010).

Conceived in a time of crisis, *BSG* absorbs turbulence, releasing it through its aesthetic of crisis. Observant camerawork and an uneven play of camera apertures produce embedded and unstable points of view in almost all episodes. A predominance of cold and angular lighting that

ostensibly leaves parts of the scenic space in the dark foregrounds the failure of transparent vision that humans and Cylons experience in their search for some inner truth. This feature also creates an internal differentiation between narrative moments, as it is applied with divergent effects in human and Cylon environments. On the human ships, the color accents produced by fluorescent lighting are complemented by chromatic techniques that exalt blue and sandy nuances, giving the cold colors of the military uniforms aesthetic prominence in the show's chromo-affective register. In the same way, scenes set on the Cylon mothership (as exemplified in "Collaborators" [3x05] and "Torn" [3x06]) privilege strong, hyper-white light. Whereas the effect of contrasted light and shadow associated with the human environment symbolizes a domain alive with life forces, hyper-white "rids the space/spaces connected to it of colour, lines, shapes, texture and depth" leaving characters in "a state of collective negation" (Redmond, 2006). In such instances, color shifts lend movement to the spectacle, partially substituting montage as a means to multiply the affects produced by the moving images.

Postproduction processes also invited a hypersensitive response to colour shifts by magnifying chromatic dissonances and chiaroscuros. Alterations to the lights' temperature and balance (determined by the passage from under- to overexposure) disrupt paths of visual habituation, engendering a dynamic of sensorial readjustment that makes the spectacle less predictable and manageable. Such features belong to a stylistic vocabulary that, as Kevin McNeilly argues, creates a form of "viral or contaminated visuality" (2008: 187) that breaches the fourth wall. Disrupting its, "hygienic rationality", *BSG*'s visuals undermine the cognitive premises of allegorical recognition and demand a more immediately felt, visceral response (McNeilly, 2008: 188).

Forced to adjust to the distressed look and temporality of a media production that generates and is generated by ongoing tensions, identification with the imaginary universe of the show blurs into an experience of subjective production involving the senses as much as the brain. If terror has "perceptual and somatic coordinates," the destabilizing appeal of *BSG*'s variations of chromatic accent and lighting may be experienced as an affective event: a "transactive rather than communicative" experience that internalizes the Bush administration's strategies of perceptual engineering (Feldman, 2006: 431). Here, the flow of sensations triggered by the spectacle operates as an aggregative vector that brings together a population of sensing bodies into a community of agitated viewers, whose reaction to perceptual solicitation exceeds the laws of causal determinism. In place of a clear-cut critique of the war on terror, *BSG* therefore presents us with an experiment in embodied vision, where the passage of affects is regulated by the membranous function of a screen, aiding the formation of new subjectivities.

Editing Crisis

Documenting its own engagement with the post-9/11 ecology of agitation, *BSG*'s style maps streams of sensations, "actively construct[ing] and perform[ing], the social relations flows and feelings [they are] ostensibly about" (Shaviro 2010: 7). In this respect, the opening episode of Season One is one of the most visceral of the series. After showing the destruction of the Colonies, the episode starts in medias res at a moment of exhaustion for the humans, who remain adrift in the universe, having failed to evade Cylon attacks. With the final genocide of the human race established as a narrative possibility, the episode becomes affectively charged, creating a sense of agitation through mobile camerawork and editing.

Titled "33" in reference to the number of minutes that pass between consecutive Cylon attacks, the first episode of Season One that followed the feature-length pilot expresses a nervous rhythmicity that materializes in a montage of fast cuts among different characters and scenarios, spanning the human fleet, Cylon stations, the bombed Colonies, trapped and dying characters, and so on. Jumping among multiple points of view, the aesthetic of "33" is characterized by abrupt changes in focus and exposure and erratic camera positioning. These formal techniques, which deliver ferment, are complemented by recourse to image manipulation that also introduces the show's characteristic use of the grainy texture. Through these production choices, "33" synthesizes the affective overflow of agitation that characterized *BSG*'s look in the codified protocol of emergency operations, at the same time experimenting with techniques that were later incorporated in the show's signature style.

This is the first time that *BSG* presents the hyper-excited representative protocol it would recursively deploy to signal moments of intense crisis. Here, conventional rules of televisual representation are temporarily suspended in favour of an impressionistic display of pure visuals. This style brings together a flow of images, replete with special effects, which are more atmospheric than informative. Often in the show, fragmentary long takes relating to military life are juxtaposed with shots of space fight and fleeting close-ups of individual characters, shifting from narrative exposition to moments of spectacle. Foregrounding incompleteness and partial perspective—as well as an overall lack of clarity due to grain, texture, focus shifts and distressed perspectives—the same combination of altered montage/perspective and textured images is used in "Bastille Day" (1x03), "Black Market" (2x14) and "Dirty Hands" (3x16) to throw the narrative off balance.

A jumpy montage that pulls the audience into the midst of an explosive situation is encountered in "Occupation," where agitation as the principal

affective operator of the sequence is similarly manufactured through style and design. Here, editing and camerawork upset visual and cognitive mastery over the represented object to force a different kind of encounter with the images. The first few minutes of the episode open with an extreme close-up of a human eye blinking in blinding white light that stretches to the limits of the frame. This shot, which lasts only one second, is followed by a black frame that rapidly edits to a new shot where the screen, mimicking the perspective of a surveillance camera, looks down on a man on the floor of a cell. A second black frame is then inserted, which transitions to the frenzied moves of a woman's body caught during sexual intercourse. After the sex scene, the blank frame is illuminated by the movement of something orange and yellow that, after another interval of darkness, comes into focus as a candlewick being lit by a woman's hand. More quick shots of hand gestures and activity follow, in which the cyclical return of black frames and the camera's ostensible focus away from the protagonists' faces de-subjectivizes the action: hands are zoomed in on as they plant a bomb, play with a metal object, hold a fork, and as their nails push deep into a dark surface. At the end of this inconclusive montage, the scene returns to the blinking eye, which comes into focus as the camera pulls back to reveal other features of a man's face, including his nose and part of an eye protected by a cotton patch.

In this excerpt, *BSG*'s editing pushes its aesthetic of crisis to a new limit, halting narrative progression. Here, narrative linearity is disrupted by rapid shifts between shots of eyes and hands (another feature of haptic visuality) and the rhythmic insertion of gap frames. The blankness of the frames encases each shot, lending an abstract feeling to the movement on screen. The rhythm of objects folds into the rhythm of the cuts to synthesize new temporal vectors that become barriers to identification. In this instance, the diegetic evolution of televisual montage, governed by the teleological goal of producing a whole and unified progression, gets lost in the gaps between frames. Each of these shots is incidental to the episode's wider narrative. As sound crosses the black void with its propelling pattern, surviving the centripetal pull of the missing image, it acts as a vector of emergence, lending pace and affect to the sequence. Returning at uneven intervals to disrupt narrative coherence, the black frame dilates synchronically with the piercing sound, triggering a sensation of precarity and deprivation.

The editing choices epitomized by "33" and "Occupation" create an inter-subjective zone, where the viewer's body, the moving images and the sounds are drawn close to each other in a relationship of reciprocal involvement. Altering narrative accumulation, this stylistic choice exposes the workings of an expressive show that, operating at the seams between televisual and real-world milieus, synthesizes alchemies of becoming,

where sensorial solicitation presides over the tumultuous circulation of indistinct feeling and discursive production.

BSG's "Powers of Affection"

A growing number of studies expose the political implications of the post-9/11 televised affective address, focusing on how modular operators like performance and sound design contribute to media ecologies of agitation. Discussing the "powers of affection" of corporeal gestures in Hollywood cinematography, Elena del Río describes the bodies of actors as "performers of sensations" involved in the creation of new worlds (2008: 4). In this reading, performance is a synthetic endeavour that assembles knowledge and affect in a new configuration, where spectacle takes precedence over narrative. The examples from *BSG* analyzed above foreground how the show's aesthetic of crisis interacts with its broader allegorical themes. Through image manipulation, chromatic alteration, and editing its style provokes a sensory response that trumps symbolic production and political commentary. In this final section, I offer a conclusive reading of *BSG*'s perceptual address by focusing on instances where performative acts and sound design draw viewers further into the affective loop of post-9/11 agitation.

The television movie Razor, broadcast between Season 3 and 4 of *BSG*, stages the show's pursuit of an aesthetic of crisis where alterations and interruptions to the diegetic flow influence the quality of the televisual experience. The segments in question deal with a character's flashback of his first contact with the Cylons, taking place when the machines had not yet developed their humanoid aspect. In an abandoned warehouse, Cylon centurions implant tissue and limbs of human prisoners on their machines in an effort to produce cyborg versions of themselves. From the character's point of view, the audience watches a metallic Centurion incising the chest of a man wired to a machine. The encounter, which orchestrates a gory scene of dismemberment involving body and technology in a post-human becoming, employs chromatic affectivity to express uneasiness and displacement.

As with the disjoined temporality and disconnected visual fragments of other episodes, Razor's warehouse scenes are inserted into the show's narrative as a turbulent mass that jump-cuts to a spatio-temporal realm where moving images are not contemplated but sensed. Representing broken bodies that are enduring torture, the sequence magnifies their suffering, panning across their mutilated skin and engorging the screen with close-ups of throbbing flesh. These features deliver a form of abject visuality, where the dismemberment on screen folds into *BSG*'s dismemberment of narrative linearity to catapult the viewer's perception onto an abstract plane of becoming.

Electrified and suffering, the whiteness of Razor's mutilated bodies reflects the red light that suffuses this space of torture. The sequence is horrific because it stages the excessive nature of pain in the form of an audiovisual shock. The cherry light and reverberations in which torturing and tortured bodies bask communicate estrangement, evoking associations with blood but also with the red index of maximum alert of the Bush government's color spectrum, fusing the agitation prompted by terrorist scare with the chromatic/affective scale of fictional suffering. Exceeding the symbolic world of representation, the chromatic codification of agony and discomfort is here abstracted into pure color. For some fleeting moments, the acting is interspersed with shots where the blood of torn ligaments, nerves, muscles and skin overwhelms the screen, morphing into an unidentifiable sensorial compound. White and red alternate in the overlapping layers of an eerie spectacle that overshadows the bodies of the actors, leaving in their place a dense amalgam where shadows morph and move. The perceptual impact prompted by the synthesis of color movement encountered in these sequences recalls Jean-François Lyotard's vision of the screen's function in abstract cinema, which he describes as a "libidinal object" demanding the viewer's submission to her sensations (1986: 358).

Similar effects are sought in "Epiphanies" (2x13) and "Maelstrom" (3x17), in which narrative progression is briefly interrupted by more immediately visceral character representations. In "Epiphanies," narrative accumulation is suspended by the insertion of a long sequence depicting Laura Roslin's (Mary McDonnell) hallucinations caused by an injection of a hybrid human-Cylon foetus blood. In "Maelstron," multiple sequences are devoted to Kara Thrace's (Katee Sackhoff) distressed attempts at painting her visions from a recurring dream. **[6]** Both episodes frame the sequences as fragments of visual noise that retain tenuous links with the show's narrative evolution, partaking in the extraordinary nature that reveries and nightmares enjoy in Western culture. In the introductory sequence of "Maelstrom," Kara is seen attacking a blank wall with improvised dashes and sprays of colour before finally submerging her unfinished painting under a bucketful of white paint. The paint later attaches to her body and finally engulfs the screen as she abandons herself to the sexual attack of a man. Similarly, in "Epiphanies," the blood injection causes convulsions that throw the sick Laura Roslin from her hospital bed. Both sequences are made more compelling by these characters' fights with objects they come into contact with: bed, skin, drywall and paint cease to be static supports and become ephemeral allies in a performative alchemy of living matter. The acting is intensely carnal and moving: each sequence is a struggle to reach out that pushes the narrative dissolution of stable identity beyond the limits of fiction to viscerally engage the audience.

Recalling Mary Ann Doane's reading of television's temporality as "dealing with the potential trauma and explosiveness of the present" (2006: 251), it can be argued that the excerpts analyzed in this article expose *BSG*'s participation in a mechanism of information circulation that is at one with the emergence of a nervous economy of feeling. This latter aspect is further foregrounded by *BSG*'s sound architecture, which uses non-Western musical motifs to express uprootedness. Avoiding references to the Western musical canon, the show's symphonic soundtrack makes extensive use of instruments like Uilleann pipes, the Armenian duduk, glass harmonica and Balinese gamelan. Similarly, its musical discourse is composed of intoned parts that are sung in languages including Sanskrit (used for the credits), Italian, Latin and Sinhalese. A number of additional features further express the sense of alienation that the use of instruments and musical traditions supposedly unfamiliar to the show's (predominantly) American audience provokes. The recourse to percussion, drums and Japanese taikos for moments of battle, as well as the spiritual style of the vocalizations that accompanies scenes of agony or intense pleasure, saturates the soundtrack's fabric with an evocative tone. As Eftychia Papanikolau (2008: 224-236) argues, aurality rather than textual references emerges as *BSG*'s most powerful tool of mobilization. In Razor, for example, sound operates as a spectral presence that anticipates future pain and suffering. In the reported sequence, the audience hears the heart of the human witness pulse as he penetrates the warehouse, conflated with the screams of the tortured. This hectic aural background hampers identification by bringing together phenomenal and noumenal sounds (music that is meant to be heard, respectively, by the characters and only by the audience) in a disquieting auditory pattern. It registers the accelerated pace of bodily functions caused by the physical shocks of blows and kicks to establish a physiological continuity with the viewer's own body.

Yet the *BSG* soundtrack also incorporates elements from the Western tradition it largely effaces. In the two episodes titled "Crossroad" (3x20, 3x21), four members of the Galactica crew are awakened to their Cylon nature by a melody that only they seem to hear. Unable to trace its origin, the protagonists assemble at the gym where, muttering bits of the same litany, they come to terms with their tragic discovery. In these episodes, music supersedes character focus as a means of diegetic progression. The song in question is Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower," re-elaborated by *BSG*'s composer Bear McCreary in a way that expressly makes no reference to any versions known to the audience (either Dylan's original version or Jimi Hendrix's 1968 cover). As McCreary reports in his online journal (2007), the sense of estrangement of the gym scene is orchestrated to exceed the televisual boundary and infect the audience with its eeriness. Although the status of the song as a generational anthem should communicate familiarity and security, the composer is instructed to create a version that alienates itself from it. He

thus devises a remake that patently interrupts the process of musical reproduction typical of cover works to insert a gap in the canon's genealogical re-instantiation. Such abuse of an American classic exposes the presence of a difference within cultural repetition that is consistent with Moore and Eick's intention to make the fictional world reverberate with present concerns. [7]

Embedded in the post-9/11 circuit of attention capture and affective transmission, *BSG* stages the relationship between audiovisual communication and the governmental grip on the affective life of the American population by abstracting terror and virtualizing it into an ambient feeling of unqualified agitation. Writing about horror cinema, Shaviro argues that the carnal appeal of this genre is its ability to induce a response in the audience where "[a]nxiety is not an existential condition but a churning of the stomach" (1993: 148). Reading his interpretation in light of *BSG*'s aesthetic of crisis, we see that the show's naturalistic fiction provides a means to explore the effects of an audiovisual experience informed by the recombinant power of an aesthetic of agitation. As my analysis shows, *BSG*'s audiovisual style enacts a perceptual assault that intensifies the viewing experience by hitting the viewer's retinas, eardrums and skin. Placing already codified emotions (like fear) in a fictional context, the show explodes them until they lose their subjective characteristics and flow into the ambient sensibility of abstract and contagious unrest. In this respect, the logic of recognition that governs allegory is temporarily suspended by a mechanism of attraction that *abducts* and terrorizes the senses.

Imbued in the system of perceptual stimulation that implicates the government and the media in the configuration of a new technology of power, *BSG*'s broadcasting took place within an unstable socio-cultural ecology. Here, the micropolitics of needs and desires that makes us pass through the affective states and shades separating the blues of low circumspection from the reds of extreme alertness on America's spectrum of colors, determine changes in connectivity and communication patterns that are not governed by deterministic laws of cause and effect. Keeping these reflections in mind, the political implications of *BSG* appear all the more complex. Their criticism of the war on terror is entwined in a complicit reproduction of the Bush administration's tactics of perceptual mobilization, where the tension between affective production and cultural knowledge is not resolved but intensified.

Conclusion

BSG's audiovisual style marks a shift toward affect transmission and the intensification of perception in the televisual experience that has many implications for the study of televisual productions in the wake of 9/11. Absorbing the tensions of America's culture of fear, the show uses

futuristic fiction to comment on (and at the same time foreground) the micropolitical implications of living in a time of agitation. Its haptic audiovisuality makes its fabric remain provisional and open to affective contagion. In this respect, estrangement is obtained by shifting emphasis away from mythology and storytelling (the classical tropes of science-fiction television) to embrace the emergence of new thresholds of sensation.

Touching its audience at a distance with a dense, material spectacle, the political efficacy of *BSG* operates most effectively in the realm of the affective, where it engenders a visceral involvement that intensifies its medium's ecology of agitation. Although it would be impossible to assess the extent to which the show reproduced the post-9/11 state of agitation, it is nevertheless essential to underline that it effectively operates as a perceptual modulator, ultimately participating in the process of affective feedback that informs today's biopolitics of communication. Moore's desire to explore how emotions such as fear, shock and terror have become a component of American life thus transforms the show into an investigation of the affective foundations of media debates about belonging, nationalism and politics.

Notes

[1] Although Moore's is not the only voice from the production team to have discussed *BSG*'s engagement with the war on terror, I take his vision as being the most comprehensive on this topic. I will therefore refer almost exclusively to it in the following pages, knowingly replicating the auteurist approach found in many debates about high-concept television shows.

[2] Ott argues that the dehumanizing jargon with which the humans refer to the Cylons (calling them "toasters" or "skin jobs") attracts the viewer's attention to the use that terms such as "extremists" and "fundamentalists" serve in context of the war on terror (2008: 16-19).

[3] As a serialized production that premiered at the height of the war on terror and ended months after Barack Obama's election, *BSG* absorbs the shifting and ambivalent tensions of its times. Whereas an overall feeling of loss and despair dominates the show in its entirety, reaching peaks of paranoia and utter terror in multiple episodes, its closing installments profess a more positive view of human relationships.

[4] Documentary ambitions brought the producers to enlist Robert Young among the show's directors. Young has directed a large number of documentaries; among these are *Nothing but a Man* (in collaboration with Michael Roamer) and *We Are the Children*. On *BSG*, Young directed "Six

Degrees of Separation" (1x07), "Final Cut" (2x08), "Unfinished Business" (3x09) and "The Son Also Rises" (3x18).

[5] Jussi Parikka offers a valuable synthesis of the material underpinnings of media ecology, writing that "[m]edia are contractions of forces and through forces bodies are born. Rather than just being solids, such bodies are processes and defined by their internal and external milieus in which they resonate [...] Media function as an ecology in the sense that they are formed through circulations of energies, functions and so on, as well as the fact that they redistribute the forces that are not only technological in their existence but also aesthetic, economic and chemical" (2011: 36).

[6] Flashbacks, dreams and reveries recur in *BSG*. Other examples are found in "Act of Contrition," (1x04) where Kara Thrace remembers the death of her boyfriend Zack, "Exodus Pt. 1" (3x03) where Cylon Three dreams of visiting the tent of an oracle, and "Crossroads, Pt. 1" (3x19) where Laura Roslin, Sharon Valerii and Caprica Six (a version of Cylon Eight) share the same dream of the Opera House.

[7] So far I have adopted a generalizing frame to address *BSG*'s approach to post-9/11 culture. Yet, the producers' reading of the events betrays their positioned identity as Canadian Americans, begging the question of what kind of sensations and commentary the show would inspire in its non-American audience.

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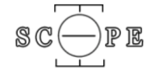

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