They Were Created by Man … and They Have a Plan: Subjective and Objective Violence in *Battlestar Galactica* and the War on Terror

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> Since tragedy, comedy, and light comedy fail to please him precisely because of their perfection, he turns to farce. The same phenomenon is repeated in other spheres (Kierkegaard, 1983: 158).

> All this has happened before, and all of it will happen again (*The Book of Pythia* in Johnson, 2008: 181).

Repetition and Farce in the "War on Terror"

Tele-visual cultures have played a significant role in representing the meanings and consequences of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* (BSG) television series has been particularly influential in articulating a critical account of 9/11 and the so-called "War on Terror". The re-imagined BSG regularly attracted over two million viewers each week when it was first aired (Gorman, 2009) and it has been the

impetus for a body of scholarly thought that should perhaps be described as *Battlestar Galactica studies*. More than anything, the re-imagined BSG is *about* 9/11. It is the story of the human race attempting to avoid an apocalypse at the hands of a race of robots called *Cylons*. Humans created Cylons to be a race of slaves, but they were self-aware and rebelled against their human masters. But this is only part of the story. There is a broader story with broader implications that belies both BSG and the "War on Terror". To understand the significance of this broader story I analyze in this paper the re-imagined BSG with the aid of Žižek's theoretical accounts of "subjective" and "objective" violence. When BSG and the "War on Terror" are viewed through this theoretical lens we can better understand the significance and meanings of terrorist violence and maybe even provide a space from which to predict where the next 9/11 will come from. The enduring catch phrase from BSG "All of this has happened before, and all of this will happen again" should be understood alongside Žižek's work on violence. In doing so we may also come to understand that when terrorist violence is allowed to "happen again", it does so first as tragedy, then as farce. The most important thing about the next 9/11 will be that it could have been prevented. This paper is ordered in the following way: first, I outline the theoretical distinctions between subjective and objective violence as found in Žižek's work. Second, I offer an account of the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* television series emphasizing representations of subjective and objective violence. Following this I explore the ways these representations interact with a world that can be indefinitely described as post-9/11. I conclude by arguing that BSG plays an important role in articulating the post-9/11 world. It is a world where the response to 9/11 is making another 9/11 more likely – *the first 9/11 was a tragedy, but the second one will be a farce*. As we wait and worry about the next terrorist disaster, BSG in a post-9/11 world reminds us that the next generation of terrorists will likely emerge from some familiar places and for some clear reasons. When this happens it will be a farce of repetition of the highest order. There is always hope of preventing terrorism but in the "War on Terror" we are bound to cycles of violence that ensure that the next catastrophic act of terrorism is not only a possibility, but a certainty.

Subjective and Objective Violence

Žižek's descriptions of the distinction between "subjective" and "objective" violence is prologued with a joke about a worker who was suspected by managers in his company of stealing from the factory where he worked (Žižek, 2008: 1-13). Each night as the worker

left the factory his wheelbarrow was carefully searched for any evidence that he was stealing. In turned out, however, that what the worker was stealing was wheelbarrows.

Žižek uses this joke to redirect our attention away from the most visible forms of violence that we encounter in contemporary society through the global media and in the everydayness of life. As witnesses of violence we – for very good reasons – focus on the most visible, brutal and vulgar acts. Murders, assaults, rapes, terrorism and war fill media spaces and induce deep anxieties. These, for Žižek, are moments of "subjective" violence. But, as witnesses to subjective violence, we must "learn to step back" and witness the systemic and symbolic "contours" (Žižek, 2008: 1) of the contemporary world, contours that sustain and organize visible and brutal acts of violence.

> we should learn to … disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible 'subjective' violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts. A step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance (Žižek, 2008: 1).

This background violence – or "objective" violence – has two forms. The first is "Symbolic" violence which takes shape through speech acts and forms[1]. The other is "systemic" violence which Žižek (2008: 1) describes as the "the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems". The distinction between subjective and objective violence underpins some of Žižek's earlier theorizing on violence. Of particular note is his description of *repressive desublimation* (Žižek [1994] 2005: 16-17). Through such "desublimation" the mediating force of the ego is stripped of its autonomy leaving the human actor prone to outbursts of aggression and violence. In Žižek's ([1994] 2005: 16) view, whilst it may appear that when this desublimation descends into acts of subjective violence it is doing so at the command of id's impulses, impulses deprived of the mediations of the ego, a closer look reveals that the active force is not the id, but the societal commands of the superego. Stated differently, repressive desublimation is the pathway through which outbursts of subjective violence are revealed to be grounded in the societal conditions that make such outbursts possible. Repressive desublimation is a liberation of sorts, but one forged through a short circuit between the id and the superego that permits surrender to aggressive and violent impulses and temptations (Žižek [1994] 2005: 18; 1999a: 3-6).

Perhaps the most relevant articulation of the distinction between subjective and objective violence is offered by Žižek in *The Parallax View* where he draws attention away from the subjective violence of the "War on Terror" towards the background that made this violence inevitable. Žižek (2006: 368-369) argues in a section exploring the meanings of the torture perpetrated by American soldiers in the notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq:

> *recording* the humiliation with a camera, with the perpetrators *included* in the picture, their faces stupidly smiling alongside the naked and twisted bodies of the prisoners, is an integral part of the process, in stark contrast to the secrecy of Saddam's tortures … to anyone acquainted with the reality of the US way of life, the photos immediately brought to mind the obscene underside of US popular culture … The Abu Ghraib tortures are thus to be located in the series of obscene underground practices that sustain an ideological edifice (emphasis in original).

Žižek reflects on how the torture at Abu Ghraib so resembles the initiation ceremonies that take place across education, military and sporting institutions, and in gangs and secret societies throughout the US. These frat-house initiations too take on perverse sexual dimensions. In short, the subjective violence at Abu Ghraib reflects inherent desires and behaviours exhibited in day-to-day US life – the "theatre of cruelty" played out in US pop-culture and everyday life (Žižek 2006: 367).

In the post-9/11 world, the distinction between subjective and objective violence can have significant consequences. 9/11 made it possible for the US government and its military allies to launch wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; locate, torture and charge suspected terrorists[2]; and carry out retributions against those deemed responsible for harboring and aiding terrorism. These are the consequences of identifying subjective violence. Identifying objective violence often means something quite different. These same governments and militaries have little interest in identifying the objective contours of subjective violence. To do so would leave them vulnerable to the same charges that they have leveled at those they deem "terrorists", a phenomenon that Chomsky once described as a "Culture of Terrorism" (Chomsky 1988: 5-7, 11-24). Those who have pointed out that subjective violence does not take place in a vacuum, that there are systemic conditions that form the basis of oppression and exploitation without which subjective violence would not be possible, leave themselves open to charges of being "pro-terrorist", "unpatriotic" and perhaps even "loony leftist", to borrow a few that are thrown around talk-back radio and the *Fox News* channel. In short, identifying objective violence can have consequences. Yet, identifying objective violence may also play an important role in preventing terrorism.

The differences between subjective and objective violence can be accounted for in many ways. For the purposes of this paper, I am most interested in how subjective and objective violence appear as organizing principles for the "War on Terror" and the post-9/11 television series *Battlestar Galactica*. The subjective and objective violence represented in BSG mirrors the subjective and objective violence of the "War on Terror". This is not a coincidence. As Dudley (2009) argues:

> What a shock it was … to see the new series [of BSG] emerge as a deliberate and uncompromising attempt to confront the aftermath of the September 11th attacks and the "war on terror". From its inception as a mini-series in which humanity is all but wiped out in a sneak attack by a seemingly inhuman enemy, to its almost unrelievedly bleak portrait of a civilization trying to retain its fundamental values in the face of an ongoing threat – and often failing spectacularly – "Battlestar Galactica" has acted as nothing less than a kind of immersion therapy for post-9/11 America.

BSG is viewing for the post-9/11 consumer. Perhaps the creators of the show even assume that their audience also witnessed the 9/11 terror attacks live on television. In the next section, I provide a brief and partial outline of BSG's storyline and offer a narrative of violence – a narrative that incorporates representations of subjective and objective violence.

Subjective and Objective Violence in *Battlestar Galactica*, or, You Can't Love a Skin-job

The re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* television series occupies an important space in post-9/11 tele-visual culture. BSG is the story of the human race on the verge of extinction hurtling through space whilst being pursued by a race of human-created machines called *Cylons*. The *Galactica* – initially believed to be the only surviving "battlestar" class starship[3] – leads the civilian fleet of ships towards the mythical human colony called Earth. This program provides the viewer with a rich variety of post-9/11 storylines and metaphors as it "aggressively" engages with "post-9/11 American politics" (Marshall and Potter, 2008: 1). The series began with the ultimate moment of subjective violence – the attempted annihilation of the human species. The human cities – spread across twelve planets, or "twelve colonies" – were destroyed with nuclear weaponry; a realization of the paranoid, Cold War fantasy. The storyline of the first episodes of BSG were focused on the destruction of the wealthiest human city – *Caprica City*, on the *Caprica* colony. This

annihilation was depicted with pristine imagery of the glamorous city being reduced to rubble in moments. In the first movie length episode – often referred to as the mini-series since this was the style in which it was initially aired – BSG delivered plenty of images reminiscent of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing "War on Terror" that has seen the United States military and the militaries of "willing" allies pursue apparent terrorists to some distant corners of the globe. Viewers of BSG witnessed the destruction of human civilization with blows of spectacular violence. The depictions of the tumbling city-scapes should be familiar to global witnesses of 9/11 and terrorism. These images show the viewer that remembering 9/11 is an important context for watching BSG.

Fear and Racism in the Human Fleet

Much has been documented of the post-9/11 political tactic of manipulating fears of terrorism or, perhaps more precisely, fears of another 9/11 (see Faludi, 2008; Miller, 2007; Mueller, 2006; Jhally and Earp, 2004). In their fearful responses to 9/11 some witnesses – whether they witnessed 9/11 via the news media or on the streets of New York City or Washington DC, or perhaps in a field in Pennsylvania – became "Stricken with fear and panic" and some "began to limit their travel, … distrust others, and … surrender their freedoms willingly" (Ott, 2008: 13). In many respects, this was not particular surprising. Terrorism is designed to spread fear and anxiety in a targeted audience. It is designed to have a lot of people watching, not just a lot of people dead (Jenkins, 1987: 581-589). Ott believes that BSG provides witnesses with some of the "symbolic resources" necessary to come to terms with the coordinates of the post-9/11 world through the deliberate evocation of the "Sept. 11 horrors" (Ott, 2008: 14; Martel, 2003). In this way, the dramatization of terror themes in BSG – and other post-9/11 screen culture – provides a way of coming to terms with the horror of witnessing terrorism and of being a terrorists' target audience. As Ott (2008: 17) argues:

> To understand the unique symbolic equipment that *BSG* affords for living in a post-9/11 world, it is vital first to establish the allegorical nature of the show. *BSG* begins with a surprise Cylon attack on the Twelve Colonies, which catches the Colonial government and fleet flatfooted. Like the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Cylon attack … is organized by a group of "monotheistic religious zealots" (read: Islamic fundamentalists) and executed with the aid of "sleeper agents inside human society" (read: terrorists inside the U.S.).

Ott adds that BSG provides viewers with a "vivid depiction" of 9/11 and helps witnesses understand a society at war. What is clear in Ott's account is that the allegory of 9/11 in BSG represents something significant about the American capacity for symbolic efficiency and for fetishising their disavowals (see Žižek, 1999: 322-323; Andrejevic, no date; Howie, 2009a).

This capacity for symbolic efficiency and the associated capacity for disavowal are well illustrated through the idea seemingly adopted by several authors in the BSG studies canon that fear of 9/11 somehow equates with fear of a human apocalypse (Ott, 2008; Johnson-Lewis, 2008; Pinedo, 2008). This equating should make most people cringe. This dilemma of 9/11's equivalency to other disasters sometimes plays itself out in counterterrorism forums and conferences as well. I have had many discussions with people who claim that 9/11 is the worst terrorist attack of all time. I do not necessarily dispute such a claim, but I often remind these people that in terms of casualties, destruction and long-term potential for annihilation of a group of people 9/11 pales in comparison to the victimization of Jews by the Nazis before and during World War II, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, atrocities in Northern Africa, and the decimation of East Timor to name an horrendous few. Indeed, it should be considered a deep insult (to the victims of all terror and war) to equate 9/11 with these scandalous genocides. In symbolic terms however, this equivalence relies on something other than a numbers game. Importantly, 9/11 was viewed live and direct from NYC and Washington DC. In this way, it shares more with the initial scenes of devastation in BSG than other more devastating acts of war or terror. BSG may be a kind of symbolic manifestation of what was witnessed on 9/11 – this might be how some, if not many, people in the US understood 9/11's violence; *as a catastrophe, as a cataclysmic event, as an apocalypse*. I must confess to also being prone to hyperbole on the night of 9/11. I remember running to my parents' bedroom (I was 21, an undergraduate student, and lived in the family home at the time) and declaring in my most dramatic prose that America was under attack, live on television; *do you want to see?* These exaggerations represent a deep malaise that is present in terrorism and 9/11 research and theory. When terrorism occurs in the global south, the third world, and the underprivileged world it is viewed by Western governments, the media, policing organizations and academics as routine and a matter of course. But when it occurs in the global north, in wealthy metropoles such as New York, London and Madrid, the violence is treated as deeply abhorrent, as though all people must observe the

sanctity of the violent act. This represents something close to what Žižek has described as "divine violence" (Žižek, 2008: 151-152). But in this instance, Žižek's description should be inverted, for it is not the divinity of the terrorists' violence that should be at stake, but the divinity of the supposedly holy and just reprisals that the US and its willing allies have carried out in 9/11's name. But here also lies the absurdity of the "War on Terror". Attacking the emotion "terror" with guns and bombs is something bordering on pathological.

9/11 sparked hyperbolic reactions in many witnesses. This reaction combined shock and horror with a certain compulsion to watch, even with a sick kind of excitement that was akin to rubber-necking at a car accident or stopping to capture a street fight with a mobile phone camera. This rubber-necking took on a global dimension courtesy of the global news media, and hyperbole was perhaps ensured. This is, at least partly, what Žižek was describing when he argued that 9/11 was "*jouissance* at its purest" (Žižek, 2002: 12). In a way, we *enjoyed* witnessing the destruction of a power that had reached an obscene level. We enjoyed seeing the bully get their comeuppance. This idea is powerfully dramatized in the recent reality television program *Bully Beatdown* where bullies are identified and offered money to step into a ring with a professional fighter. Their resulting demise at the hands of a superior fighter is praised as a type of natural justice.[4]

This hyperbole should not, however, undermine the ability of BSG to shed light on some of the darker aspects of the response to 9/11. Among the post-9/11 fears that BSG reanimates is the fear of an enemy that looks like us, *an enemy that hides in plain sight*. As Melançon explains (2008: 211), "Shortly after the initial Cylon attack, the Fleet leadership learns that certain Cylon models look like humans. Five words are uttered in horror: "They look like us now"". The following dialogue is from episode two of season one. The dialogue is between two lovers, colonial fleet pilot "Boomer" and crew chief "Tyrol". Boomer discovers that several bombs have been removed from the armory. She finds one in her duffel bag but she does not remember how it got there and she fears that others will assume that she is a Cylon sleeper agent if she reports it:

> *Boomer*: I took the one detonator from the duffel, replaced it, and then went back to my quarters.
> *Tyrol*: Well, ah … you know what? You know what? It's not your fault. Someone's obviously setting you up to take the fall for something, that's what it is. I mean, you wake up somewhere, you don't know how you got there or anything. You're drugged

or manipulated. Or who knows what, something.
Boomer: What do we do? 'Cause if I report what's happened, they're gonna think I'm a Cylon agent.
Tyrol: No, they're not; no, they're not. No, no, no, why would they think that? That's crazy.
Boomer: People are getting crazy, okay? You've heard the rumours: Cylons who look like humans, sleeper agents hiding in the fleet (Grabiak and Moore, 2004).

There are three issues that I want to highlight from this dialogue. The first is that Boomer did turn out to be a sleeper agent, but she did not know it in this scene. Viewers later learn that it was part of her programming to awaken at designated times to unconsciously attempt acts of terror and espionage. She ultimately uses the bombs to tear open a section of *Galactica*'s hull and releases most of the fleet's water supply into space. The second issue is that the fact she is a Cylon was not the security flaw in the human fleet that allowed Boomer to succeed in her unconscious plan. The security flaw rested in the fear and intolerance of the human fleet. Boomer had lived and loved amongst humans, and this was where her conscious allegiances lay, even if her programming made her, from time to time, act out against this allegiance. Boomer wanted to report the missing bombs, but her fear of racial categorization and persecution prevented this. Lastly, much can be learned from Tyrol's response to her fears – *you're* not the Cylon agent. *You* have been set up. Someone else is the Cylon agent! For Tyrol, a Cylon agent must exist (and he was right), but it must be someone other than his lover (on this point he was wrong).[5] Some hidden foreign agent must be to blame, but surely not someone I love and trust despite the evidence to the contrary!

Fears such as these could be witnessed throughout the human fleet despite no official acknowledgements from the government and the military that humanoid Cylons existed. Eventually Boomer's programming once again kicked in and she unconsciously attempted, but failed, to murder Commander Adama, the much-loved human military leader. Boomer was later murdered whilst in custody for this crime by Tyrol's flight-deck assistant, Cally. In a twist of fate (and of course, screen writing), Cally and Tyrol fell in love, were married and had a child. When Tyrol also became aware that he was unconsciously a Cylon, he feared greatly for his relationship with Cally and their child. He was fairly certain that she would not understand that he was not an evil and mindless machine. Moreover, viewers come to learn that Tyrol, unlike Boomer, was not a dangerous sleeper

agent waiting to be awakened to carry out acts of terror against the human fleet. He was, rather, one of the mysterious "final five" who wanted little more than peace with humanity. Tyrol's fears of being categorized and persecuted by Cally were realized in episode three of season four, "The Ties That Bind". In scenes from this episode viewers witness Cally learn that her husband is a Cylon and that their child, Nicky, is half-Cylon. Cally encountered her husband in the quarters they shared soon after learning he was a Cylon:

> *Tyrol*: I know it's been a rough couple of weeks. I know what you're thinking. It's not true.
> *Cally*: It isn't?
> [As he speaks, Cally sees flashbacks of their life together]
> *Tyrol*: No. I'm not having an affair. I figured it out. I know what's important. You're important. Nicky's important. We're important. Us. That's really what it's all about, isn't it? Family, a future. Building that future together. I promise you from now on I will be here for us. The three of us. Maybe the four of us. You know, maybe someday we, we'll have another baby. What do you think? Another baby? A brother, a sister for little Nick? What do you think, buddy? Hey? Would you like a little brother or sister?
> [Cally, armed with a large wrench, beats Tyrol mercilessly, grabs Nicky, and leaves her husband for dead] (Taylor and Nankin, 2008).

Here we witness the problem at the heart of the Cylon dilemma. Through the terror that the humans experience, many become unable to fathom the idea of a Cylon that might be their husband or wife, their son or daughter, their friends and family. Cally's terror becomes a metaphor for the dilemma of post-9/11 racism and discrimination as it is represented in BSG. She is the embodiment of the inevitable and often nonsensical manifestations of post-terror fear. The object of her fear was forced into stability. She doubted her love for her husband. She did not doubt her belief that all Cylons were evil. When Cally learned that her husband and child were Cylons, she did not become aware that some Cylons were not monsters. She forced herself to become aware of something quite different – that she must change how she feels about her husband and child to accommodate her beliefs that every Cylon is a monster. This is something akin to a fundamental attribution error as it is sometimes called in psychological studies. When this error is made it is assumed that somebody exhibiting a negative trait is characterized by that trait. But if we were to ourselves exhibit that trait, we would assume that it was an uncharacteristic aberration and not indicative of our character. In short, we assume the worst of others, but the best of ourselves. As such, Cally readjusted her perspective – instead of remembering all of those loving moments she spent with her family, she chose to re-remember – *re-imagine* – those

moments and re-interpret their meaning. These loving moments became part of a large-scale Cylon plot to annihilate humanity.

Cally's shifting perspective is not unlike the shift that occurred after 9/11 when racism and discrimination directed against people perceived to be Muslims was common. Post-9/11 racism and discrimination may be viewed as a type of impotent acting out in search of the security that can be found in uniting against a universally feared and hated enemy. The Cylons play the rhetorical role of Muslims post-9/11. I do not mean to equate Muslims with a race of robots – I hope my words have not been taken on such a vulgar level. Rather I suggest that Muslims, like Cylons, are convenient scapegoats for other malaise within some societies. When the leadership of the Colonial Fleet finally discloses that there are Cylons that look human there was a predictable outcry: "Why were we not told" immediately? (Melançon, 2008: 215). The reason for this should be fairly clear in the post-9/11 world:

> The stated justification of the Fleet leadership for classifying the fact that some Cylons now look like humans is that they do not want to see neighbour turn against neighbour, create witch hunts, and see the social fabric ripped apart by paranoia … the Fleet must be protected *from itself* (emphasis in original) (Melançon, 2008: 215-216).

This is a familiar tale. According to Freyd (2002: 5-8), anger directed at people perceived to be Muslim has been demonstrated on many occasions following 9/11. A Lebanese man who had run the arts centre at the World Trade Center was heckled as he was searching for survivors. A Wyoming mother and her children were chased from a "Wal-Mart" because they appeared Muslim. A mosque in Texas was firebombed. An Egyptian worker won a payout for discrimination after being fired from a restaurant because his manager believed that having someone who appeared Muslim as a staff member would be bad for business (Freyd, 2002: 5; Sixel, 2004). In research that I conducted in organizations in Melbourne, Australia discrimination, racism and anti-Muslim sentiments had arisen as a result of 9/11 and the ongoing terror war (Howie, 2009b). I could go on and on but my point is clear – 9/11 cleared a path for racism and discrimination to be directed against groups of people that were deemed to be responsible. This is also an account of repressive desublimation at work. In the face of trauma, some witnesses of terror found themselves unable to mediate their aggressive impulses. The post-9/11 world was a liberated space where some chose to indulge their racist desires in a more socially permissible atmosphere. In this

atmosphere the idea of a Muslim who was not a monster became problematic for some people (see also Pipes 2009).

A significant feature of post-terrorism discrimination and racism is the connections between language, aggression and violence. This is acknowledged in Ott's (2008) and Johnson-Lewis' (2008) analyses of BSG. As Ott argues, many despicable acts begin with the naming of the "Other" and the dehumanization that forges the Others' *Otherness*:

> if one does not see an enemy as human, then one does not feel compelled to treat "it" humanely … The repeated references to Cylons as "machines", as well as the more derogatory use of the terms "toasters" and "skin jobs" function rhetorically to justify violence against all Cylons. In addition to degrading the Cylons, such language homogenizes them, reinforcing the prevailing perception that they are all the same and can thus be treated as one, nameless, faceless enemy (Ott, 2008: 17).

Ott argues that terms such as "extremists", "fundamentalists", "terrorists", and the "Axis of Evil" all perform a similar rhetorical role in the demonizing of Muslims after 9/11. The context of these words and phrases is George W. Bush's unfortunate post-9/11 declaration that you are either with us, or you are with the terrorists. Johnson-Lewis (2008: 30) argues that Bush's words forge "terrorists" as an "undifferentiated mass" and that "It helps if terrorists are not actually people; it makes them much easier to kill". I am sure what Johnson-Lewis means is "not actually people" like us; people in the same way that *we* are people. This de-humanization was again demonstrated by Cally. The following dialogue takes place immediately after she mercilessly beat her husband and fled with their child. She ran into a spacecraft launching bay pursued by another humanoid Cylon, Tory:

> *Tory*: Cally!
> *Cally*: Stay the frak away from me! I know what you are. I know what all of you are. How could you?
> *Tory*: We don't even know what we are.
> *Cally*: I heard you. You're Cylons! A bunch of frakkin' skinjobs!
> *Tory*: I wish it were that simple.
> *Cally, turning the key and closing the airlock behind Tory*: I told you to stay away from me. Guess you better hope there's a spare body waiting for you!
> *Tory, holding her arms open wide*: You want to kill me? Go ahead. Don't do this to yourself or to your child, to Nicky.
> *Cally*: Get the frak away! You're not getting your hands on my son! Not you, not Galen [Tyrol]! He frakkin' used me!
> *Tory*: He didn't know [he was a Cylon]! None of us did! We didn't find out until we entered that Nebula.
> *Cally*: Oh, shut the frak up, traitor! Frak!

> *Tory*: All we know is that we're Cylons. But in every other way, we're still the same people.
> *Cally*: You're frakkin' machines!
> *Tory, looking at her hands*: I don't know. But I do know that we're not evil. We're not inhuman. And we're just as scared and confused as you are.
> *Cally*: I can't live like this! It's a frakkin' nightmare!
> *Tory, nearly weeping*: You don't want to do this, Cally. He's your son! (Taylor and Nankin, 2008).

Again, viewers witness Cally's racist attitudes at work as she considers whether she should kill herself and her child. This is also another example of repressive desublimation at work. Cally believed that Cylons had no right to live – for Cally, killing Boomer was not killing at all. Cally was charged for her crime and received a few weeks imprisonment. In this instance Cally was considering whether infanticide was a legitimate course of action – the fact that her child was half human was seemingly irrelevant since Nicky was also half Cylon. Quite literally her hatred for Cylons outweighed her love of humanity. Her child's humanity is re-imagined as a non-humanity and she was willing to engage in suicidal violence if it meant ridding the world of another Cylon. In the figure of Cally, we see the ultimate mindless racism – a racism that would see her condemn herself to death as punishment for her love of a Cylon. Cally's repressive desublimation is reminiscent of a skit performed by American comedian Dave Chappelle in which viewers see and hear the cautionary tale of a blind African-American man who was raised as a white supremacist. Upon learning that he was black he promptly left his wife because she was a "nigger lover" (Norman 2004: unpaginated).

The Background

What is partially hidden amongst the accounts I have provided of outbursts of subjective violence in both BSG and the "War on Terror" – outbursts that have resulted in racial discrimination and fear of the Other – is the contours that sustain this violence. For Žižek, objective violence is the symbolic and systemic violence that forms the background for spectacular and dramatic outbursts of subjective violence like terrorism, war and violent crime (Žižek 2008: 1; 2006: 364-375). Analysis of violence in tele-visual culture has, perhaps for very good reasons, focused on representations of subjective violence and the subjective consequences of that violence for audiences of witnesses. Here I want to buck this trend and reflexively explore BSG with a focus on the backgrounded, objective and

visually benign systemic violence. If viewers of BSG were to focus on the background story they would witness Caprica City before it was destroyed – a decadent city characterized by ridiculous wealth, a wealth viewers come to learn is forged at the expense of cultural citizens that occupy working class roles, largely with multi-ethnic backgrounds[6]. The correlations with New York City should be obvious. NYC is a city of the elite and was the first target on 9/11. It is an epicentre for wealth and affluence, culture and hegemony. Much like Caprica City, it is home to the affluent and worker, but also the poor, the unemployed, the drug addict, and the terrorist. Caprica City seems to have been modeled on New York City. Viewers of BSG are provided with many opportunities to admire Caprica City in the opening credits as the camera moves over the waters of a sun-kissed bay to capture a huge city littered with skyscrapers that seem to be erected directly on the coast line. The glamorous penthouse offices above, the sprawling masses below. One is struck by how reminiscent these scenes are of the morning of 9/11 – the sparkling sunlight and glistening water broken first by the cityscape on land, and then the smoke in the sky as it billowed from the Twin Towers. This similarity was also observed by Greene (2006: 8):

> the *Battlestar* series … never lets us forget the context of that devastation – the first shot in the credits every week is from the mini-series: an aerial shot flying into the Caprica skyline, much like the view that the terrorists would have had flying into lower Manhattan on 9/11. Whatever they may have meant before, after 9/11 images that simulate flying towards skyscrapers now connect us to that lonesome day.

When Caprica City is reduced to rubble, the human denizens fled into space, a territory that they had no claim to. They were forced to shed their elite status and become members of the cultural underclass and what Georgio Agamben has described as *homo sacer* – people without a place or society, people who are not truly people (Agamben, 1998). It is homo sacer's place to toil and do little more than survive. With this shift the humans turned on each other and used violence whenever possible. On the fleeing human ships, societal structures re-established the comforting social norms of elitism and the underprivileged. Prostitution became common place and thugs and gangsters took control in some unpoliced segments of the fleet. This is the context in which we should also understand another enduring slogan from BSG – "All this has happened before, and all of it will happen again". The importance of this phrase in BSG has been explored by several authors in the *Battlestar Galactica studies* canon (Casey, 2008; Johnson, 2008; Pinedo, 2008).

As Casey (2008) points out, BSG has literally happened before. The original BSG "happened" in 1978 and was quickly followed by the rather lame *Galactica 1980* (Casey, 2008: 237) that deployed a storyline that is considered by some fans to be non-canonical. It has since happened again in a post-9/11 world. In this world it has taken on different meanings, dimensions and consequences. But the phrase "All this has happened before, and all of it will happen again" has a far more important purpose in BSG. This purpose speaks to an inevitability that is inherent in the show's storyline and the storyline of the "War on Terror". It is an inevitability that does not fully play itself out until the re-imagined series concludes (sort of) after four seasons. This inevitability involves cycles of violence. These cycles of violence recreate past sins and past errors and ensure that the next moment of spectacular blowback is never far away (Pinedo, 2008). The inevitability and predictability of these cycles of violence ensures that when violence and horror occurs it will repeat *the first time as a tragedy, but the second time as farce* (Žižek, 2009). This was the impetus behind the speech made by Commander Adama at the decommissioning ceremony for the *Galactica* shortly before the Cylons commenced the human apocalypse. This speech is one of the first scenes in the re-imagined BSG:

> The cost of wearing the uniform can be high, but [long pause]. Sometimes it's too high. You know, when we fought the Cylons we did it to save ourselves from extinction. But we never answered the question 'Why?' Why are we as a people worth saving? We still commit murder because of greed, spite, jealousy. *And we still visit all of our sins upon our children*. We refuse to accept responsibility for anything we have done. Like we did with the Cylons. We decided to play God. Create life. When that life turned against us we comforted ourselves in the knowledge that it really wasn't our fault. Not really. You cannot play God then wash your hands of the things that you've created. Sooner or later the day comes when you can't hide from the things than you've done anymore (my emphasis. Moore and James, 2004).

This is a particularly suggestive speech and one that has clear links to the post-9/11 world. Chomsky (2001) was quick to point out in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 that the hijackers and architects of 9/11 were products of training programs run by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and other allied intelligence agencies in the 1980s. The CIA is said to have played a significant role in "recruiting, training, and arming the most extreme Islamic fundamentalists it could find to fight a "Holy War" against the Russian invaders of Afghanistan" (Chomsky, 2001: 18). The Afghan war against the Soviets fostered and hardened a fighting force from which it is generally believed Al-Qaeda emerged. This force then went looking for other fights and found them in Chechnya, Bosnia and Western China

and later in Northern Africa, Washington DC and New York City. Chomsky argues that the CIA's support of Islamic fundamentalism was played down and in some cases totally denied after 9/11. Indeed, I have heard Bill O'Reilly suggest that no support was ever provided, accusing the son of a 9/11 victim of engaging in radical left-wing rhetoric when he suggested that the 9/11 hijackers were products of US support of Islamic fundamentalism (O'Reilly in Greenwald, 2004). In fact, it is a matter of public record that the US government was still contributing funds to the Taliban regime throughout 2001 up until at least August 2 in part as reward for the "elimination of opium" cultivation in Afghanistan (Sheer, 2008: 12-13). Yet, all one has to do is invoke pre-9/11 tele-visual culture to shed light on the American attitude towards the Afghan Mujahideen in the 1980s. Some are quick to forget that in the 1988 film *Rambo III* the US are actively supporting Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan in their war against the Russian invaders. One impassioned speech by the American Colonel Trautman, Rambo's commander from a earlier film, reminds his Russian captors that the Mujahideen are "freedom fighters" who would "rather die than be slaves to an invading army. You can't defeat a people like that" (Stallone and Lettich, 1988). If only the US government had heeded Trautman's warning.

First as Tragedy …

The debate over whether the US did or did not support Islamic extremism in the 1980s, a debate that could sometimes be heard on post-9/11 talk-back radio (in Australia and the US) and on some television news networks, misses the point. At that time, supporting the Mujahideen was likely the correct strategic decision. Surely we are sophisticated enough to know that 9/11 does not automatically make every decision made before 9/11 an error? Regardless, the US support of Islamic fundamentalism in the 1980s is surely an example of *visiting all of our sins upon our children.* Stated differently 9/11 did not happen in an ahistorical vacuum. There were systematic and structural forces – a particular brand of US democracy, the fighting of a proxy war against the other Cold War superpower, a militarised everyday culture, Reganomics, a particular attitude towards the world, and a host of other objectively violent features – that formed the background for the subjectivity of US and Soviet led violence in many parts of the world. These conditions, along with many others, contributed to the hypersubjective violence that the world witnessed in real-time on 9/11. Or, as Žižek (in Trotsky 2007: xvi) puts it, "while democracy can more or less eliminate constituted violence, it still has to rely continuously on constitutive violence". The

phrase "*All of this has happened before, and all of it will happen again*" becomes a little clearer. The violence perpetrated by the US and its willing allies may break up terrorist strong holds and places where terrorists move freely but the side-effect is that bombed foreign cities become the next breeding grounds and training camps for generations of terrorism to come. In short, fighting the "War on Terror" – which has regularly involved fighting terror with terror[7] – may do plenty to ensure that another 9/11 will occur.

Žižek (2009: 4; 2008: 20-21) believes that it is fear that keeps humanity grounded in perpetual repetitions of trauma and tragedy. Žižek (2009: 3) reminds us that "Twelve years prior to 9/11 … the Berlin Wall fell" and that this fall was supposed to usher in a new era of prosperity and human unity. 9/11 has ushered in a new era of walls, but not only walls that are erected around large geographical regions. Rather, post-9/11 walls also surround gated communities and provide an illusory security to the planet's most wealthy inhabitants. Within these communities, a new class is emerging of people who "dine privately, shop privately, view art privately, everything is private, private, private" (Vencat and Brownell in Žižek, 2009: 4). But what links this new class is fear; "*fear of external social life itself*" (my emphasis) (Žižek, 2009: 4). Ironically, the acts of terror on 9/11 have imposed a terror from within, a terror that the wealthiest endure as a form of blowback for their affluence, as though they secretly agree with Ward Churchill's assessment of the wealthy professionals and business people who perished in the Twin Towers as "little Eichmanns" (Churchill, 2003: unpaginated). These gated classes were perhaps equally "too busy braying, incessantly and self-importantly, into their cell phones, arranging power lunches and stock transactions, each of which translated, conveniently out of sight, mind and smelling distance, into the starved and rotting flesh of infants" as they too hide out in the "sterile sanctuary" of the high-rises of the world's major cities (Churchill, 2003: unpaginated). This class distinction is most apparent for Žižek (2009: 5) in São Paulo, Brazil – a city with "250 heliports" and some of the most dangerous city streets in the world.

The farcical responses to 9/11 involved the erecting of walls wherever they would stand. These walls work to reinforce the inequality, hegemony and cultural domination that were the seeds of 9/11. The reproduction of this same inequality in Iraq and Afghanistan – or in the human fleet – will likely see history repeat. Whilst I cannot tell you where the next 9/11 will occur I can tell you that the next generation of terrorists will likely emerge in response to the protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have defined the first decade of the 21st century.

Conclusion: Should We Care About the Tyrant's Bloody Robes?

I want to conclude with somewhat of a non-sequitur and a thought about *The Bourne Trilogy* films that star Matt Damon as a CIA trained killing machine, and how the films fit with what is at stake in this paper (Liman and Greengrass, 2002-2007). The *Bourne* films tap into something dramatic about American culture – the capacity of the liberal-left to dwell in conspiratorial fantasies. The stories of Jason Bourne depict a patriot, a man wanting only to make his beloved country safe and secure. But his desire is made impossible by the systemic conditions inherent in the US spy services, conditions that do little other than turn this patriot into an assassin who would kill anyone who does not share the CIA's limited worldview. For the leftist-liberal, these films represent moments of *jouissance*. Do you think the CIA does not wield this kind of power? Are you so naïve as to believe that this does not really happen? Of course it does. *It must* given the America that Jason Bourne serves.

The impact of these films is two-fold. First the viewer is reminded of the obscene subjective violence that the US wages around the globe in its theatres of the "War on Terror". Second, viewers are told to believe that there is a horrendous systemic, structural and objective violence that underpins this subjective violence and that this objective violence goes to the heart of what it means to be an American – *only a true patriot is willing to sacrifice what is needed*. Or, as the movies' crescendo reminds us, "Look what they make you give". For the oppressed and the victims of US-led wars the propaganda is doubled. The subjective violence of US war efforts is combined with Hollywood depictions of objective violence (depicted in many other films such as *A Few Good Men*, *Enemy of the State*, and particularly the *X Files* television series and movies) to depict the US as the ultimate global evil. Can there be any doubt that would-be terrorists are being forged every day, some in the theatres of the US "War on Terror", but perhaps also many others who are in the theatres of post-9/11 screen culture?

The re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* seems designed to make the post-9/11 viewer consider when we should cry for the "tyrant's bloody robe" (Žižek, 2008: 3). This was the function of the post-9/11 cry, why do people hate America? But one does not need to hate America to understand the violent contours that made 9/11 possible. Indeed, the connections between the US funding and training of people who would later turn the gun on their trainers are fairly clear – and the US trained these people well in the tactics of terror. The 9/11 terrorists targeted sites of financial and military hegemony. The success of

these attacks was *terror* at its purest. It is here that the suggestion of some canonical terror studies scholars that terrorism is random and arbitrary violence is revealed for its absurdity. The economic nerve-centre and the military brain are hardly random or incidental targets. Moreover, the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania was thought in some circles to be heading to the White House. The 9/11 attacks were far more precise than some of the US smart bombs deployed during post-9/11 wars (Jenkins, 2009: unpaginated).

In both the short and long term it seems that fighting terror with terror is likely to create more terror. The recent attempt to detonate an underwear bomb on a flight between Amsterdam and Detroit is significant evidence of that. It is incredible that whilst fighting terror with bombs and guns in Afghanistan and Iraq is showing some results (see Kilcullen 2009), security at Western airports remains so vulnerable to innovative individuals determined to carry out an act of terrorism (Associated Press, 2009). More incredibly, this attempted attack has led to cries for the profiling of potential terrorists – a further escalation of the systemic, objective violence, a violence that forms the contours of outbursts of subjective violence. Subjective and objective violence seem to feed on each other and the phrase "*All of this has happened before, and all of it will happen again"* is perhaps the best explanation of "progress" in the "war on terror" – it is a progress towards repetition. If true progress is to be made then a "fully co-opted acting out" will not suffice (Žižek, 2010: 327). What is needed is a "*passage à l'acte*" – a way of thinking that deletes the symbolic link, suspends symbolic efficiency and allows for a new symbolic agreement, one that will not ensure cycles of violence (emphasis in original. Žižek, 2010: 326). Yet, the *passage à l'acte* brings irony since "Our predicament is that the only alternatives appear to be violent outbursts". Terror to fight terror. Perhaps the US government does not get the credit it deserves.

[1]   Interestingly, Žižek further distinguishes symbolic violence along the lines of the subjective/objective distinction. There are language acts that are direct violent outburst such as discrimination and verbal abuse, but there are also structural features of language that impose more subtle, objective language violence. A word like "terrorism" is a particularly tendentious example of this. The word "terrorism" has a meaning buried deep behind its negative connotations and its elitist assumptions (ie: the US State Department describes those who oppose the USA as "terrorists", but when the US military drops bombs on Baghdad in an operation called "Shock and Awe" it is, somehow, not "officially" terrorism).

[2]   Despite the perpetrators of suicide terrorism dying in the act, the shock of this type of subjective violence somehow provides a license to blame someone else.

[3]   It is later revealed that another battlestar has survived – the *Pegasus* – commanded by the ruthless Admiral Cain.

[4]   See http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1405819/, retrieved on December 11, 2009.

[5]   In a final irony, Tyrol also turns out to be a Cylon sleeper agent. But, like Boomer, he identifies with his humanity and indeed, as the viewer later learns, Tyrol is one of the "Final Five" – an original model of humanoid Cylons that had long desired lasting peace between Cylons and humans.

[6]   A fact not fully accounted for until the release of the *Caprica* (2009) mini-series.

[7]   This was dramatically depicted in season three of BSG when the human fleet finds home on a planet that they dub New Caprica. It is a desolate place that can, nonetheless, sustain human life. However, the Cylons discover their location and the humans are forced to live under their occupation in a tense Faustian Pact entered into by the new human president Gaius Baltar. With a strong sense of irony, the writers and producers depict this occupation of New Caprica complete with human terrorists and heart-wrenching tales of their suffering that work to legitimise their otherwise abhorrent violence. See Pinedo, 2008; Dinello, 2008 and Peters, 2008 and their discussions of "Battlestar Iraqtica".

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