Masters of Cyber-Religion:

The Female Body as God’s “Interface” in the TV Series Caprica

Jutta Wimmler
European-University Viadrina

Abstract

The article proposes that the short-lived science fiction series Caprica (2009–2010) espoused a rather atypical ideology that was based on the prominence of women and femininity in the narrative. Through women, the series merged science and religion, body and mind, human and machine and established a moral code based on respect for those usually “othered” in the genre. The narrative accomplished this by consciously employing and then re-arranging western gender stereotypes, which led to the emergence of a specifically feminine approach to science that was, amongst other things, also religious. This combination had subversive potential because of the series’ premise that God actually exists and is actively involved in human/cyborg affairs. Women emerged as points of contact on behalf of this God who pitted them against rationalized and universalized male science.

About the Author:

Jutta Wimmler studied history and religious studies at the University of Graz and received her PhD in history in 2011. She is currently employed at the department of comparative European economic and social history at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), Germany.

Introduction

Scholars have tried to explain the lack of women in the hard sciences and the strong dominance of men in the development of advanced technologies in a number of ways. Missing encouragements and incentives are often held responsible, but the “masculine” nature of the scientific and technological worlds has increasingly been blamed (this debate is outlined in Schiebinger, 2000). Essentially, this argument hinges on the persistence of western gender stereotypes with which men and women are still socialized. Since the Enlightenment, femininity has been associated with body and nature, whereas masculinity has been connected to mind and science (See e.g. Newmark, 2010, p41–55, p43, p50; Reckwitz, 2010, p57–77, p66; McLeod, 1988, p134–55, p134; Connell, 2000, p185; Adam, 1998, p129). Men have been socialized with qualities that accorded with science, such as compartmentalized emotions and an interest in objective and pragmatic truth. Women have been (and often still are) socialized with the opposite: emotion, empathy and subjectivity. Thus, scholars further argue, men find it easier to accommodate to the world of science, where masculine rather than feminine qualities are called for. Women, on the other hand, have needed to “masculinize” themselves in order to succeed in this world: they need to “talk rationally” (Seidler, 1994, p23, p28), be detached and objective – all elements of the culturally established masculine norm. Stereotypical “feminine” qualities, on the other hand, had no place in science.

Televised fiction in Western culture is more than just influenced by these discourses. Effectively, it is part of the discourse: TV series reflect upon these issues, they comment on them and provide their own interpretations. Science fiction in particular has a strong potential for challenging stereotypical cultural perceptions. Especially in the area of popular culture, assessing where a
story lives up to this potential and where it refuses (or fails) to do so helps us to understand the producing culture’s commitment to its established values and perspectives (see esp. Attebery, 2002, p. 4–5).

Scholars hold that the gender stereotypes discussed above responsible for the lack of women authors and characters in science fiction and, more importantly, the “masculine” nature of the genre. Of course science fiction is difficult to define, and scholars have offered varying (often conflicting) definitions (e.g. Johnson-Smith, 2005, p.15–17; Gözen, 2012, p.20; Attebery, 2002, p.2). Most nevertheless agree that science and technology are inherently important in the genre – a fact that discouraged feminine reinterpretations for a rather long time. Although the written medium has produced a great deal of “feminist” science fiction in the past decades, the mainstream science fiction that is the focus of this paper continued to follow old paths. In most popular culture texts (especially film and television), science fiction either constructed women as the “other” or asked them to “masculinize,” keeping gender stereotypes alive longer than other genres. This was largely due to the perceived connection between masculinity and science.

I will propose in this article that the short-lived TV-series Caprica (SyFy, Remi Aubuchon & Ronald D. Moore, 2009–2010) followed its more successful predecessor Battlestar Galactica (SyFy, Ronald D. Moore, 2003–2009) in challenging not only the dominance of men in science, but also the masculinized ideological basis of science itself, and even surpassed its predecessor with this depiction. This was accomplished first of all by connecting “rational” science to “irrational” religion – a contradiction that is eroded in the course of the narrative by employing and re-arranging Western gender stereotypes. In addition, the series’ body politics encourages a feminist reading of female rebellion against patriarchal structures that suggests female superiority in both science and religion. Women thus become active “interfaces” of a (male!) God who is
interested in overturning patriarchy and patriarchy’s variety of scientific progress – reclaiming his own, previously marginalized position in this system in the process. In other words: God allies with women (and is thus, in a way, feminized) in order to question our conventional understanding of science.

Women thus function as an “interface,” by which I mean a point of contact, mediation, and even conflation. I consciously use the term “interface of God” because it immediately evokes the image of advanced technologies and connects this image to its apparent opposite: traditional (and non-technological) religion. I propose that women function as points of contact (“interfaces”) not only between the worlds of science and religion, but also between body and mind, “us” and the “other,” given concrete form by human and machine. In a first step, I will demonstrate how women merge science and religion and thus break down an opposition that is typical for science fiction narratives. The second section will analyze what I call the return of the body to science fiction, which is again accomplished through the alliance between women and religion. I will then take a look at the ethics of cyberspace and assess how femininity mediates morality in this context. Lastly, the differentiation between male and female approaches to technology in the series will be of interest, in particular how female experiences with bodily exploitation inform their relationships with machines. I suggest that women are established as masters of a newly designed “cyber-religion” (as faith held by or connected to artificial intelligence) because culturally established discourses of femininity make them ideal points of contact (or “interfaces”) between several contrary worlds. I argue that gender stereotypes are not simply employed, but re-arranged, thus engaging in current cultural and academic discourses. I follow a methodological approach of discourse analysis by embedding this product of popular culture into its larger historical and contemporary context of Western constructs of gender, science, and religion.
(Ir)rational Science

Science fiction has, for the most part, not looked favorably on religion. With its focus on rationality and detached scientific observation that are in many ways the heritage of traditional enlightenment thought, religion as the ultimate in irrationality had no place in their narratives – at least not officially. As products of western culture, religious elements of course crept up frequently in the form of messianic characters, the search for eternal life, apocalyptic scenarios, or simply depictions of religious systems. The genre was thus never detached from the religious heritage of Western thought and culture. However, religious truths – such as prophecies or divinities – could not be accepted and needed to be explained through scientific reason (Mendelsohn 2003, p.264–75, p.264-265, p.269). BSG and Caprica are part of an ongoing change that is happening in this area and will probably influence the genre as a whole. Though it would be a mistake to overemphasize the opposition between science and religion in historic and contemporary contexts, science fiction narratives were built in part on this perceived opposition. So although the genre is infused by religious themes and often advocates the idea of science as a “new” humanist religion, traditional religion and its version of “the truth” have typically been constructed as incompatible with science.

On TV, an illustrative example is Stargate SG-1 (Brad Wright & Jonathan Glassner 1997–2007), in which a group of military officers and scientists battles aliens who have convinced technologically inferior people that they are gods. The series repeatedly establishes that these are “false” gods who had also previously fooled more “primitive” Earth-cultures into believing in their divinity, and whose powers can actually be explained by rational means in more “advanced”
societies (Beeler 2008). *Babylon 5* (J. Michael Straczynski 1993–1998) went in a very similar direction by exposing that superior forces that had presented themselves as angels and demons were in fact simply more evolved species who tried to influence the lives of less evolved ones. The heroes finally unmasked them for what they were and proclaimed that they were no longer needed and should leave the “less evolved” alone. *Babylon 5* is skillfully discussed by Jan Johnson-Smith (2005) and Sherryl Vint (2008).

Narratives that challenged this dichotomy between religion and science always displayed considerable unease with these eroding boundaries and were, most importantly, not appreciated by critics and fans for this transgression. A rare example for this is *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (Rick Berman & Michael Piller 1993–1999), which leaves the question as to whether powerful beings inhabiting a wormhole are gods or simply a different species open to debate – and perhaps leaning to the religious interpretation (Linford, 1999. For the unfavorable reception of the series’ religious aspects see Steinrötter, 2004, p.105). More often, science fiction constructed religion as the natural “other” to reason and science and either “explained it away” or ignored it completely.

Religion was not the only category that was consistently othered in the genre. Women suffered much the same fate. I would argue that this is no coincidence. Just like religion, women were constructed as “irrational” in the modernist view (Merrick, 2003, p.241; Hollinger, 2003, p.126). As Londa Schiebinger has observed, femininity was historically constructed explicitly in opposition to science. Prominent enlightenment thinkers considered everything unscientific as inherently feminine, which included religion (Schiebinger, 2000, p. 101). Of course these were stereotypes that were frequently less than applicable in reality, yet it is these stereotypes that formed the basis of science fiction’s humanist idea of science and scientific progress. As a consequence, the genre was rather late in introducing women to its world, especially in its...
mainstream variety. Even on television, where gender politics were decidedly more progressive than in film, women were asked to assimilate to notions of rational science. They had to “talk rationally” and accept the rules laid out for them by the male world of science at a time when Buffy and Xena imposed their own (female inspired) rules onto TV’s fantasy worlds (Stuller 2010, Inness 2004). In the area of TV we could mention Samantha Carter on Stargate: SG-1 or Captain Janeway on Star Trek: Voyager (Rick Berman, Michael Piller & Jery Taylor, 1995–2001). To be sure, these were wonderful female characters who certainly challenged the traditional perception of the male white middle-class hero. Yet science fiction women were still expected to adapt to the already established male world of science fiction that, it was implied, did not have to change in order to accommodate them (for a “real world” parallel to this, see Inness, 2004, p.13). Thus the humanist and modernist idea of rational, objective, and detached science was never challenged or “feminized”.

The question that interests me is what happens to the traditionally masculine science fiction genre if you re-introduce women – not as the “other” or in an assimilated masculinized form, but as active in-control protagonists that retain traditionally “female” elements and character traits. I propose that the dominance of femininity in the world of Caprica is connected to the re-introduction of religion to the genre and its reconciliation with science. In mainstream science fiction, these two worlds are usually separated, as established by Sofia Sjö in her analysis of female messiah figures, in which she found that science fiction messiahs of any gender are rarely connected to God (2007, p.61; 2010). This is the case, as I argued above, because the world of science fiction is not a religious one, even if religious themes and characters tend to appear. This is where Caprica is different.
Caprica, which aired on the SyFy Channel from 2009 to 2010, was a prequel to the much more successful Battlestar Galactica (BSG) (Ronald D. Moore 2003–2009). BSG described a conflict between humans and Cylons, a robotic species that had been created by humans and had rebelled against their masters. This stereotypical cyborg story was complicated by the fact that the Cylons were religious fundamentalists, or “irrational machines.” While robots and cyborgs, as inherently technological beings, are typically associated with rationality, these particular machines believed they were chosen by an all-powerful God.

The series further re-interpreted the traditional trope of out-of-control man-made machines through the reconciliation of the two species. While such stories typically end in the destruction of one of the species (preferably the machines), humans and Cylons decide (admittedly not entirely by choice) to build a new home where they can co-exist. While BSG was originally praised for its progressive gender politics, scholars were less enthused about the last two seasons that, they argued, saw a return to traditional stereotypes of women and femininity, especially by emphasizing motherhood (Jones 2010, p.177; Stoy 2010, p.12-13). I have argued elsewhere for a more differentiated view concerning BSG, suggesting that the triumph of religion over science in the series finale rescued the series’ gender politics.\(^1\) Caprica further explored the creation of the Cylons and how they became sentient – and religious. In its gender politics, the series followed its predecessor in associating women with religion while simultaneously connecting them to computer science and technological genius.

Caprica begins with an act of religious terrorism. A teenage boy blows himself up in a passenger train, killing everyone on it in the name of the terrorist group Soldiers of the One (STO), a monotheist organization attacking the ideologies of a predominantly polytheistic society. Among the victims is his girlfriend Zoe Graystone, also a member of the STO who was completely
unaware of her boyfriend’s intentions and tried strongly to discourage him (without success). Yet despite her death, Zoe Graystone lives on. She had been a computer genius experimenting with artificial intelligence and had created the first self-conscious avatar, a copy of herself. The avatar (referred to in this essay as “Zoe-A”) is left behind in the virtual world in a confused and seemingly innocent state, unsure of her purpose. As a faithful monotheist, Zoe had not created her alter ego for purely scientific reasons, but for highly religious ones. She had been encouraged by an angel sent from God and understands her technological skills as a gift from this God. Zoe created the avatar with a religious purpose in order to “change the world.” With Zoe gone, her plan falls apart and Zoe-A has to fend for herself. The Zoe Graystone avatar was not referred to as Zoe-A in the series; in fact, the boundaries between the two Zoes were altogether fluid. The designation “Zoe-A” is used by fans to help distinguish the characters, for example among users of the fansite battlestarwiki.

Several aspects of this basic premise strike us as atypical in the genre of cyborg science fiction. Firstly, a woman (or more accurately a teenage girl) creates artificial life. Science fiction narratives typically leave the creation of cyborgs, robots, and other artificial intelligence to men, a fact that has been interpreted as male envy of female reproductive powers (Corea and Bradish, 1988; Doane, 1999). According to this interpretation, the men seek to appropriate the reproductive process that is “naturally” monopolized by women. While women create life through their bodies, men create life through their “minds,” namely scientific knowledge. On Caprica, this stereotype is employed through Zoe’s father who seeks to create artificial life, but fails where his daughter succeeds.

However, there are very few examples of women who create artificial life in science fiction, and certainly not positive ones. Typically, female creators are punished and even returned to their role...
as “natural” mothers (e.g. *Eve of Destruction*, Gibbins 1991; analysed by Springer, 1999, p.51). As noted by several scholars, the female cyborg – regardless of her creator’s gender – usually needs to be destroyed (e.g. *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang 1927), while her male counterparts are at times allowed to survive and can even be positive characters (e.g. *Robocop*, Paul Verhoeven 1987; see also Toffoletti, 2007, p.20; Holland, 1995, p.162-163). One could argue that the creating woman who transgressed gender boundaries is punished on *Caprica* as well (she dies in the pilot episode), but it is noteworthy that her creation is allowed to survive and is presented as a positive character, which is far from standard.

Second, we are confronted with a religious character in the creator Zoe Greystone, who is moreover a member of a terrorist organization. Zoe is presented as a true believer, fueled by her disgust with the immorality of the virtual world and inspired by a divine being that in the series’ universe is not imaginary but real. Though the series could easily have constructed Zoe Graystone as a mindless fanatic, it instead portrayed her as a moral character guided by an actually existing divinity. She is contrasted with her boyfriend, who indeed is a fanatic with a rather short-sighted vision, as opposed to Zoe’s elaborate and carefully laid out plans to affect real change in this world. The relationship between Zoe and her boyfriend is in a way paradigmatic for the STO, where female terrorists are in charge and have elaborate plans, while men revel in short-sighted and senseless acts of violence.

More importantly, Zoe is actually guided by God. God gives Zoe “the ability to create life itself” (Lacey in 1.00 Extended Pilot) and thus turns her into his medium and mouthpiece. Religion is thus an issue from the very beginning (as it had been on BSG), and it is immediately associated more strongly with women than with men (again reminiscent of its predecessor). The creation of life as God’s gift to women of course seems rather stereotypical, as does the association of
“irrational” women with “irrational” religion. Yet the series simultaneously connects women and religion with science. Women interface with the rational (science) and the irrational (religion) and thus merge both spheres and break down this perceived opposition. We will see that Zoe is not the only woman to accomplish this in the series.

Return of the Body

Caprica also advocates somewhat atypical body politics – atypical, that is, regarding the conventions of its genre. With “body politics” I mean the issue of regard or disregard for embodied existence. Science fiction is often suspiciously “anti-body,” as the body is seen as inferior to the mind, in need of ultimate control. This position is rooted in western concepts of a dualistic self that is composed of body and “soul.” For some Christian movements (especially Gnostics), the body was seen as the ultimate evil to be combatted by the soul (Rudolph, 1990, p.68-69). The soul, which entered Christian thought through Greek philosophy (Russell, 1999, p.24–5; Bremmer, 1983), was re-designed as the real “self” in posthuman thought as well as science fiction ideology. In a very Gnostic manner, posthumanists adopted the idea that the body holds us back from our own evolution, that we need to move beyond corporeality and its inevitable consequence – death – in order to become immortal. The body (hardware/wetware) needs to be separated from the self (software), so the self can be uploaded into a computer and live there eternally as code (Carter, 2007, p.99–100; Figueroa-Sarriera, 1995, 127–35). The material body thus needs to be discarded. Several science fiction narratives also follow the idea of evolution towards immaterial existence. On TV, Babylon 5 or Stargate: SG-1 are two examples. In contrast, Caprica espouses a pro-body ideology despite its posthuman and
traditional science fiction elements. I propose that this is largely the result of the prominence of women and especially femininity as moral guides and interfaces of God. The series employs the stereotypical association of women with nature/body to construct (and thus re-imagine) posthuman and religious visions that include the body instead of being reduced to the soul/mind/self.

When Zoe dies in the terrorist attack, the avatar (who only has a body in the virtual world, but not in our “real” one) has to come to terms with her own existence without the help of her creator. Her efforts are at first supported by Zoe’s best friend Lacey, but Lacey inadvertently reveals Zoe-A’s existence to Zoe’s father Daniel Graystone, CEO of a large company dealing in robotics and virtual reality. Daniel, grief-stricken over the loss of his daughter, sees a chance of getting her back and forces Zoe-A into a mindless robot-body, thus creating the first self-conscious and sentient machine (or Cylon). Female reproductive power (this time of the artificial variety) is appropriated by a male scientist, and a woman (Zoe-A) is forced to comply with male demands.

The series works with these stereotypical representations subversively by describing them as immoral and unjust. In addition, it uses the stereotype of the victimized woman, but transforms it by suggesting that Zoe-A is only strategically passive. She refuses to comply with her father’s plans by pretending that the process of transferring her consciousness into the robot body has failed and plans her escape from the research lab.

In the visual depiction of Zoe-A, the series shifts between portraying the robot body and Zoe Graystone’s female teenage body. It thus stages the exploitation of the robot body by Daniel and two other male scientists as an exploitation of the female body by men. It also visually connects a
rather masculine-looking war-machine to femininity and thus puts gendered boundaries in question.

The two other scientists besides Daniel who work on the robot are both problematic in their own way. The first scientist (Drew) is quite obviously unlikeable, as he treats the robot violently and abusively. Drew sees the robot purely as machinery – as he puts it, a “tool” – to be handled accordingly. His colleague Philo, however, treats the robot as a work of art, somewhat recognizing that it (or rather, as he puts it, “she”) might be sentient. He feminizes the machine – quite correctly so, as the robot is inhabited by Zoe-A, though he is unaware of this. Drew and Philo seem to share the idea that the machine is to be objectified, but Drew likens it to a tool, while Philo sees himself as a teacher for a being that needs guidance. Maybe this is why he imagines the robot to be feminine – it needs education. Zoe-A is clearly fond of Philo and tries to connect with him in cyberspace, where they develop a close relationship. Yet in the end, Philo also turns on her. When Zoe-A reveals that she is the robot, Philo cannot handle this information and betrays her trust by activating the security alarm. When he realizes that he is not (and in fact, never has been) in control of the machine, he panics. As it turns out, the robot never needed his guidance and could have broken out of the lab at any time. It seems that the feminized machine is only acceptable if she remains under male control, not if she is independent. Both scientists pay for their behavior, though interestingly Philo is punished more severely. While robot Zoe-A only relieves Drew of a few fingers, she (somewhat accidentally) kills Philo during her attempted escape.
Still 1 Objectified Bodies: The experiences of woman and machine merge at the hands of the male scientist Drew (1.02 “Rebirth”). Property of SyFy.

Another intriguing aspect of the “Zoe-A in the robot body” storyline concerns the male scientists’ distress at the fact that she is unique. The robot currently inhabited by Zoe-A is a prototype for a warrior Cylon that is supposed to go into mass production. Yet the original robots (those not infused with an artificial intelligence) are flawed: they are too slow and lack coordination and intuition. Only Cylon Zoe-A functions perfectly. Daniel and his (male) co-workers are highly irritated by the fact that this unit cannot simply be duplicated as would be expected from a scientific point of view. Theoretically, they should be able to transfer the metacognitive processor that makes the robot work to any robot body, but this is not the case. Instead, the processor only works in one specific body. Daniel is surprised to say the least when he states: “[...] it can’t know which [body] it’s in” (1.02 “Rebirth”). Apparently, it – or, better, she – can. The series thus challenges the male scientists’ reasoning, based on a humanist definition of science that holds that natural laws are universal and can be applied to any scientific process, including course the understanding of human and artificial intelligence (Oudshoorn, 1996, p.157–61).

Londa Schiebinger has suggested that modernist thinkers thought of women as unfit for science because they constructed them to be incapable of grasping this universal dimension (Schiebinger,
Caprica uses this stereotype and transforms this former “weakness” into strength (and truth). The stereotype of women who cannot universalize is turned around into the notion that men cannot refrain from universalizing. The creator Zoe Graystone, on the other hand, understands the futility of universalizing and the potential of acknowledging diversity. While Zoe-A might have started out as a copy, Zoe always intended her to be more than that: to be unique. After all, she was a “gift of God” with a divine purpose. Meanwhile, her father Daniel is focused on the assumption that creating artificial life is essentially an exercise in copying – and thus in universalizing. The series presents a more dynamic attitude towards technology that is connected to a changing relationship between the scientific and religious spheres, mediated through femininity. Science and God are no longer opposites, but complement each other: God advocates uniqueness in his world and its scientific rules, and he does so through women. Both creator and machine are deeply religious and build their scientific decisions on their faith.

Artificial life is not only predicated on uniqueness in the world of Caprica, but also connected to the body as a source of knowledge. The idea that body and mind are opposites has greatly influenced how the process of producing knowledge (scientific or otherwise) is understood in the Western world. As Alison Adam remarks, knowledge is constructed as a product of the mind, not the body. This idea is a fundamental precondition for the ideology of certain posthumanist circles: the mind can be separated from the body, because the body is nothing more than a vessel – it cannot “think” or produce valuable knowledge (Adam, 1998, p.130–3). In contrast, Adam (and other pro-body thinkers) proposes that the body is essential for thinking and thus for knowledge production. Additionally, experientialist positions hold that bodily experiences influence thought processes – without the body, the constructed knowledge would, at the very least, be of a rather different nature (if at all possible). These positions represent challenges to the
humanist model of science – challenges that are also taken on in *Caprica*. The bodily experiences of Zoe-A (in particular while inhabiting the robot-body) strongly inform her decisions and actions. Zoe-A’s experience of being exploited and objectified (both in a strongly corporeal manner) are at the heart not only of her rebellion against patriarchy, but also of her empathy for technology. For her father Daniel, the body does not have as much meaning – he wants to get his daughter back and the robot body is the only thing available to do that. He initially does not consider whether Zoe-A feels comfortable with that body and how it might affect her – a body is a body.

Even more striking is the robot body’s reaction to being infused with artificial intelligence, as illustrated in the storyline of Zoe’s best friend Lacey. Lacey ends up in an STO training camp with a robot army that the terrorist organization had procured illegally. Daniel’s military robot is finally replicated successfully after Zoe-A manages to escape the prototype body and return to cyberspace. Her presence in the prototype changed the robot body significantly: the body has learned certain things from her presence – it produced knowledge that was then transferred to the other robot bodies in the process of replication. Amongst other things, the body learned that Lacey is their “friend.” The robot bodies then form a personal attachment to Lacey, which she will ultimately use to overthrow the monotheist leadership and become their new religious leader.

On *Caprica*, bodies can produce knowledge after all. In combination with religion, the body reclaims its value, and this is accomplished through female characters as interfaces between body and mind. On *Caprica*, women are not one or the other – they are both. Another case in point for this (almost) body over mind approach is the return of Zoe-A from virtual space to the real world in the series finale – AI returns from the posthuman dream of digital cyber-life to a flesh-and-bone body. Before it does so, however, it spends quite some time in the virtual world.
The Ethics of Virtual Spaces

In her analysis of cyberpunk science fiction, Jiré Emine Gözen proposed that classic science fiction was built on what she called the genre’s humanist article of faith: conventional science fiction confines scientific development through a moral barrier that cannot be crossed without severe punishments (Gözen, 2012, p.114–5). Reason and morals thus ultimately limit technological possibilities. As Mary Shelley’s 1818 story of Dr. Frankenstein’s monstrous creation influenced science fiction’s cyborg stories quite strongly, this limit has also been called the “Frankenstein barrier” (Gözen, p.115). Cyberpunk novels from the 1980s (epitomized by Gibson’s 1984 novel Neuromancer), frequently called the expression of postmodernity, attacked this conception (Gözen, 2012, p.279–95; Butler, 2003, p.141). They rejected the idea that a moral or rational barrier confines technological development and that these developments would not change the nature of the human being (Gözen, 2012, p.115-116). While cyberpunk certainly influenced the genre as a whole, its challenge to the integrity of the human being was never fully adopted by the mainstream. More importantly, this short-lived movement was no less male than the predecessors it sought to outshine – and no more religious. There are of course some excellent examples of feminist science fiction, including pieces that could be described as cyberpunk. Once again, however, these works are not mainstream, neither in science fiction nor within cyberpunk itself. Cyberpunk might have been less humanist than traditional science fiction, but it was just as rational as it was masculine.

I argue that Caprica enlists cyberpunk criticism of this perceived barrier by proposing that there are no limits to technological developments, but also advocates the idea that there should be. The
series curiously constructs this comment on the Frankenstein barrier by enlisting the help of femininity and religion, thus also deconstructing cyberpunk.

These issues are explored with the so-called “v-world” as a platform where artificial realities manifest themselves. V-world or cyberspace can be accessed through the holoband that was invented by Daniel Graystone. The holoband not only provides access to games in cyberspace that can be bought legally (with security procedures and parental control in place), but also to the hacked worlds if you know your way around these safety measures. In the hacked worlds, teens and adults visit clubs where people host orgies, kill each other for fun, and play high-stake games that involve taking drugs to increase alertness. The hacked worlds of v-world literally break down boundaries (in the form of security measures and by making the virtual experience feel highly realistic) and illustrate that morals do not guide technological advance – quite the contrary.

Zoe and Lacey originally visited the hacked worlds to be part of this scene, but became disenchanted with its “sins.” Zoe-A is born into this world and taught to resent its sinfulness. After Zoe-A leaves the robot body behind, she returns to v-world as an avatar. There she encounters various violations of the body that – though the body is “only” virtual – she regards as immoral. Zoe-A decides to “cleanse” v-world by attacking places of “sin” and expelling unwanted players. After a while, she realizes that she can do much more than that: she can destroy the existing code and expel everyone from it before re-creating v-world from scratch.

This process of re-appropriation and re-creation can be read as an act of female rebellion against male structures of violence and power, especially since Zoe-A is pitted against Daniel, who had written the code she now destabilizes and re-writes. For the most part of the series, Daniel is presented as authoritative and even patriarchal, though Caprica works with such categories in a
sophisticated way. In effect, the struggle between him and Zoe-A and the two types of science
they represent is transferred from the real world to cyberspace—again, Daniel tries to find Zoe-A
to submit her to his will, as he had previously done in the research lab. Again, she refuses and
this time, she ultimately convinces him that he cannot defeat her. He also acknowledges that her
code is superior to his, “closer to what the Gods did in the old creation myths” (1.17 “Here Be
Dragons”).

On Caprica, the female re-appropriation of virtual reality eventually leads to changes concerning
the very foundations of cyberspace. Zoe-A’s virtual space differs from Daniel’s because she
acknowledges diversity and strives to create it. Male virtual space had been predicated on
sameness. Zoe-A remarks to Philo: “I mean, look at that tree. It’s exactly identical to that one
over there.” When Philo responds that it would be difficult to program a million different trees,
Zoe-A educates him: “That’s just it. That’s not the way to do it.” Instead, she proposes that a
corresponding algorithm could be written, “[...] and pow! An infinite variety of tree-like trees”
(1.07 “The Imperfections of Memory”). Zoe-A understands how to write code that takes
uniqueness into account. With this knowledge, she opposes the rationale of “universal” science
and re-builds v-world on this basis. Daniel is later amazed by these “tree-like trees” and the
diversity of their “leaf-like leaves” that he was unable to construct.

Yet feminized space is not automatically “ethical” space. Zoe/Zoe-A’s technology can also be
misused for immoral purposes. The series explores this issue through the character of Clarice
Willow, who is pitted against the two Zoes as a villain. Clarice is the leader of several STO-cells
and had recruited students for her organization in order to train them as terrorists. She attempts to
use Zoe’s technology to create a virtual heaven in the name of the monotheist religion. This
virtual heaven would “remove the need for faith” as the chosen believers would be uploaded into
the program as avatars and then be able to create their own personal heaven (1.10 “Unvanquished”). The “original” body would die in order for the avatar to emerge in virtual heaven – again in an embodied form, though these bodies are strictly speaking “only” virtual ones. The heaven imagined by Clarice is thoroughly Christian in its insistence on embodied resurrection. This is not a typically posthuman “spiritual” life after death where the self disintegrates into the code or becomes otherwise disembodied. Instead, heaven is populated by bodies.

While there are of course (male) posthuman thinkers who would not dismiss the idea of virtual bodily existence, the possibility that the body is part of a person’s identity (and thus removing a person from their body would change their identity) is usually not considered. I would suggest that belief in a dichotomy between body and mind is a major premise for this type of thinking (e.g. Moravec, 1988, p.116-122) and that this separation can be considered as a significant aspect of the conventional masculine ideal. Since femininity has traditionally been associated with the body, “femininized” science can easily include a denial of this premise. I do not mean to suggest that women cannot or do not believe in this dichotomy or that men generally can and do – biological gender is not the issue here. “Feminized” science could be described as a kind of thinking that opposes the traditional ideology of science, which – as we have seen – is strongly connected to ideals of masculinity. So in terms of gender stereotypes, I argue that Caprica presents us with a sort of “feminized” virtual space through its insistence on bodily existence. However, this space is not necessarily ethically “good” space.

Clarice’s plans for virtual heaven are met with accusations of blasphemy by several religious leaders and even followers. Clarice’s motives are in question, as she effectively tries to turn herself into a religious figure, a sort of messiah, through a type of technology that was never hers.
to begin with. In the end, Zoe-A will destroy Clarice’s virtual heaven because she regards it as immoral. Clarice is very clearly a villain – but one that differs fundamentally from, for example, the major villain of the predecessor BSG. While BSG had constructed its villain as a male atheist Cylon (Cavil), Clarice is a believer who actually has an important positive role to play in God’s plan. While BSG’s male evil is eventually destroyed, Clarice’s final showdown with Zoe-A does not result in her destruction. Quite to the contrary, the final episode’s extended flash forward shows Clarice preaching to the Cylons in a church-like structure and mediating God’s word to them (1.18 “Apotheosis”). She re-affirms their sentience and their status as God’s creation and, in a way, liberates their mind from blind servitude. She thus becomes a necessary interface between God and the Cylons.

Though Clarice’s personal motives are always in question, the differences from the atheist Cavil are quite striking. Clarice seems to have been reformed through Zoe and Lacey, to whose authority she is now submitted. The female heroes do not destroy their enemy, but educate and integrate her into their own structures. I would thus argue that she, too, becomes an interface of God. Though Clarice exhibits many character traits that could be described as masculine rather than feminine (appropriating female reproductive technology, violent behavior, etc.), she is effectively re-feminized in the course of the narrative.²
The series is thus ambivalent about the Frankenstein barrier, most likely because there is another player in the mix: God. On the one hand, v-world proves that such a barrier does not actually exist. Technology is not bound by universal human morals but can be used and misused in various ways, be it the “sins” of the hacked worlds or the blasphemy of virtual heaven. The barrier is effectively re-established by God through a female cyborg, not human reason or morals. Artificial intelligence (created by God through a woman) re-establishes a barrier that had been broken down by humans.

The series insists on the privileged position of cyborgs more than humans: cyborgs save humans from their own moral degradation. Humans are punished for their immoral approach to technology, which suggests the existence of the Frankenstein barrier. However, they are punished by God through morally superior cyborgs, thereby challenging the humanist/ modernist basis of the barrier: Technological progress is not bound by human reason and morals, but by God. Again, unlike most cyborg-science fiction, the cyborg is both morally superior and ultimately triumphant: she does not need to be destroyed, but is God’s interface and mouthpiece. The human
(Clarice, Daniel) needs to be confined by the cyborg (Zoe-A). This brings us to our last area of interest, the moral approach to technology.

**Respecting Technology**

*Caprica* differs from most other cyborg stories because it mediates the machine’s side of the story more than the human’s. In the first episodes in particular, the camera is frequently put in the position of robot Zoe-A and thus lets the viewer experience the objectifying gaze of the scientists and their actions against her body. The series urges us to take the position of the oppressed, of those that are disregarded and even abused. In particular, respect regarding body, religion, technology, and femininity are at issue. The viewers are encouraged to empathize with the Cylons and to regard their eventual uprising against humanity as justified. The series proposes that technology – like religion – needs to be respected, and mediates this message through female bodies.

Traditional conceptions of gender build on the body/mind distinction that is also strongly drawn on in science. These stereotypes construct masculinity (like science) as rational, detached, and intellectual, acting as an observer of, but not necessarily a participant in, nature. Stereotypical femininity is its opposite: irrational, attached (emotional) and carnal – the *object* of scientific inquiry – she is nature, and thus body as opposed to mind. Yet on *Caprica*, the irrational, emotional, and carnal female becomes the scientific agent as opposed to the observed. If she is observed (as was the case with Zoe-A in the robot body), she emerges as the protagonist while the male scientists are put in the position of villains. Other than that, women create and use technology without making the same mistake as the men in regarding it as a pure object to be
instrumentalized. The series suggests that women and machines share this experience of exploitation, which changes their approach to technology: they refuse to do the same to their own technological creations. While the typical scientist does not know what it is like to be the object of scientific study, *Caprica’s* female scientists do.

Several scholars and especially feminist critics have suggested that science is built on the objectification of the non-human, that is, the idea that the world consists of resources to be exploited and used as tools in favor of the privileged human subject (Lykke, 1996, p.14). On *Caprica*, Zoe’s father Daniel Graystone embodies this stereotypically masculine approach to technology and nature, which is to objectify, control, and exploit. In a somewhat desperate attempt to regain control over his company, he parades Zoe-A in her robot body in front of the board of directors and advertises her as the prototype for a mechanical slave race: “[…] *this Cylon will become a tireless worker, who won’t need to be paid. It won’t retire or get sick, it won’t have rights or objections, or complaints*” (1.05 “There Is Another Sky). The narrative has Zoe-A educate her father and eventually bring him to understand that his initial approach to technology is wrong. Zoe-A empathizes with the objectified machine because she *is* her.

The self-aware female machine as a liberator of artificial sentience has also been the subject of feminist science fiction novels, for example Amy Thomson’s *Virtual Girl* (1993). Thomson’s mechanical protagonist steps up against the exploitation of self-aware machines because she is one herself: she knows what it is like to be enslaved and exploited. In Thomson’s vision, however, the female machine is still created by a man. Indeed, this is the premise of the book: the virtual girl needs to emancipate herself from her creator, the woman needs to break free of male control (Lykke, 1996, p.24–6). On *Caprica*, artificial life is created by a woman *in order* to take control: it is her purpose, not an unintended side-effect.
Of course science fiction has frequently warned that the exploitative masculine approach to technology can be dangerous, especially through cyborg-stories: our control over technology might not be as strong as we believe and human-made machines may develop a life of their own and turn against us. This was (and is) a much exploited plot of Hollywood films set in post-apocalyptic worlds where humans have to fight their creations and ultimately destroy them. If our “tools” fail to comply with our wishes, we need to rid ourselves of their presence. It becomes an “us vs. them” situation.

On Caprica, the plot is slightly different. Again, I would argue, the presence not only of women but of femininity in science makes the difference. Though the viewer knows that the growing self-awareness of the Cylons will eventually lead to a classical mechanic rebellion against humanity, this process is aided by female characters and (it would seem) God. Caprica is a prequel series to BSG, so the eventual outcome of the story is already known: humans and Cylons will reconcile and begin a new life in co-existence. The “us vs. them” situation is resolved in favor of a more peaceful solution. Neither species has to be destroyed in order for the other to survive. It could be argued that the stereotype associating women with peace and men with war is employed in order to attack conventions of the science fiction genre: the women advocate reconciliation instead of destruction, which makes for a rather untypical cyborg story. Thus a science fiction stereotype is undermined through a gender stereotype.

Besides Zoe-A, other women also mediate respect for technology. Zoe’s best friend Lacy Rand develops a connection with the robotic Cylon race as a consequence of her relationship with Zoe-A. Lacey, who is sent off to an STO training camp (not entirely by choice) eventually uses this connection to overthrow the STO leadership. She then becomes the new “mother” or monotheist religious leader. Her approach to the Cylons is different than that of the male characters, who
treat them strictly as weapons (tools). Lacey establishes a personal contact that is not the result of programming but of mutual appreciation. When Lacey commands the Cylons, she looks at them directly and actually speaks to them instead of simply commanding (1.16 “The Heavens Will Rise”). Since the Cylons are not programmed to take orders from her, Lacey’s control over them seems completely irrational. Rightly so – it is based on personal feelings. There is a kind of kinship between women and machines on Caprica. The machines let themselves be commanded (and instructed) by women and refuse to take orders from the men despite their programming. Losing control over the man-made machines that seem to display irrational behaviour is a highly frightening prospect for the male leaders of the terrorist camps, and they try to have Lacey killed because of it. Women and machines have a privileged relationship in the series, connected to a God that both woman and machine worship and who actually guides them – a relationship that the male characters often find frightening and difficult to understand.

Throughout this article, I have suggested that Caprica puts an intriguing twist on the cyborg-story by employing typical Western gender stereotypes in a subversive manner that invokes and challenges these stereotypes at the same time. In doing so, the series attacks several modernist dichotomies: women are both irrational (religious) and rational (scientific), they are connected to both body and mind, and are simultaneously the “us” (human) and the “other” (machine). Women are interfaces of a God who wants these boundaries to break down. They master a type of religion that is closely connected to advanced technologies and especially artificial intelligence. Caprica continues the trend of the female-dominated television series that now even conquers the most masculine of genres. This is not to say that the series is not academically “problematic” at certain times: some stereotypes remain unchallenged and certain inconsistencies

can be found (as is typical for the narrative logic of television series and its circumstances of production). Yet *Caprica* offers intriguing challenges and twists to conventional understandings of science with their depiction of gender and religion that reflect fissures in contemporary cultural discourses. The link between science fiction’s favorite “others” – religion and femininity – is maintained in order to challenge the humanist basis of science fiction. Of course fans and critics tend to find the return of religion much more disconcerting than the prominence of women. This is probably the case because women have been fighting this battle much longer. While women are by now an integral part of most science fiction, religion has only recently started to show its face. Whether this is only the beginning of “religious science fiction” remains to be seen.

Like many colleagues who study Western popular culture, I maintain that the series’ contributions to current discourses on gender, technology, and religion are not purely academic. Popular culture often balances intellectual and public debates that viewers can be expected to care about and find engaging. The series walks a fine line between embracing gender stereotypes and traditional science fiction tropes and deconstructing them, attacking many of the humanist values cherished by science fiction fans and scholars alike. It also refuses to let go of its religious convictions, which had already alienated many viewers of BSG’s finale. Critics and fans were distressed by the existence of God in a science fiction narrative, which might be a reason for *Caprica*’s lack of success and the series’ cancellation after one season. This discomfort with a breakdown of so many boundaries is certainly intriguing and should receive closer attention. Engaging with popular culture texts within the framework of discourse analysis can help us assess Western ideologies and values, and contribute to an understanding of changes in the modernist world view – and the resistance they meet.
Bibliography


**Series, Episodes, and Movies Quoted**


**BATTLESTAR GALACTICA** [SyFy, Ronald D. Moore, 2003–2009]
CAPRICA [SyFy, Remi Aubuchon & Ronald D. Moore, 2009–2010]

1.00 *Extended Pilot* [W: Remi Aubuchon & Ronald D. Moore, D: Jeffrey Reiner; straight-to-DVD 2009]

1.02 *Rebirth* [W: Mark Verheiden, D: Jonas Pate, Jan 29 2010]

1.05 *There is Another Sky* [W: Kath Lingenfelter, D: Michael Nankin, Feb 26 2010]

1.07 *The Imperfections of Memory* [W: Matthew B. Roberts, D: Wayne Rose, Mar 12 2010]

1.10 *Unvanquished* [W: Ryan Mottesheard, D: Eric Stoltz, Oct 5 2010]

1.16 *The Heavens Will Rise* [W: Michael Taylor, D: Michael Nankin, Nov 16 2010]

1.17 *Here be Dragons* [W: Patrick Massett & John Zinman, D: Michael Nankin, Nov 23 2010]

1.18 *Apotheosis* [W: Kevin Murphy & Jane Espenson, D: Jonas Pate, Nov 30 2010]

EVE OF DESTRUCTION [Gibbins 1991]

METROPOLIS [Fritz Lang 1927]

ROBOCOP [Paul Verhoeven 1987]


STAR TREK: DEEP SPACE NINE [Rick Berman & Michael Piller 1993–1999]

STAR TREK: VOYAGER [UPN, Rick Berman, Michael Piller & Jeri Taylor 1995–2001]

---

Endnotes

---

1 I advanced this argument in my MA-thesis. A greatly extended version of this thesis is currently under review for publication. In the meantime, the thesis entitled “Ladies in Charge”: The Gender of Religion and Technology in the
TV-Series Battlestar Galactica and Caprica can be accessed online through the library catalogue of the Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, at http://media.obvsg.at/p-AC09563743-2001.

2 My thanks to our editor Alexander Ornella for pointing this out. I had previously argued that BSG tended to either re-feminize masculinized women or punish them (see Wimmler, Ladies in Charge), but had not realized that this case could also be made for Clarice.