Labyrinths of the Self:
Different Characters, Identical Bodies in Battlestar Galactica

Sérgio Dias Branco
This paper analyses a specific aesthetic feature of Battlestar Galactica (2004-): the actors’ effort to interpret different characters assuming identical bodies that coexist in the fiction. The actors who appear as the cybernetic entities called cylons and James Callis who plays Gaius Baltar incarnate various characters — or versions of them, in Callis’s case — without emphatic physical changes. My aim is to assess the function of this feature within the structure of the series.

Why do we see them as different when they can easily be confused? Because, in some cases, they are presented as psychologically different. We know that the humanoid cylons are versions of specific models. These models can be thought of as templates: they determine the shape of each version, but not who they are or what makes them unique as beings. The characters’ differences are therefore conveyed through performance — that is, through the significant details of their voices, costumes, postures, and gestures.

There are versions of humanoid cylons that the series has no narrative or dramatic interest in differentiating. They share more common traits than differences and at times it is difficult to know if we are seeing the same copy or not. For example, the number five model is known as Aaron Doral (Matthew Bennett) and its copies are distinguished by what they wear — yet the suicide bomber turns to Adama (Edward James Olmos) when he hears: “Doral.” A copy of this model appears later, overseeing the relationship between Boomer (Grace Park) and Helo (Tahmoh Penikett) in Caprica and wearing the same outfit as the first version. We tend to see them as the same character, even if there is a possibility that they are indeed different individuals. Note that these are characters interesting in themselves — for example, Leoben’s (Callum Keith Rennie) religiosity lends him a tranquillity and patience that he sustains even when being beaten or after being murdered several times by Starbuck. We are always unsure if they are the same versions of the model and this unsureness goes hand in hand with the disinterest of the series in asserting their difference. Cases like these are outside the scope of this study, which will focus only on cases in which one actor clearly portrays different characters.
Battlestar Galactica distinguishes the nature and personality of the various copies of number six (Tricia Helfer), for instance. A careful analysis of such distinctions will demonstrate how the series draws attention to a concept of the self that has connections with John Locke’s philosophy — especially his definition of personal identity as consciousness and memory continuity in An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. In fact, the profusion of characters with the same visual and aural appearance may be seen as a labyrinthine representation of the individual and collective self. There are three distinct performative acts at the heart of this labyrinth of relations that contribute to the differentiation of characters with a similar look. Taking into account the realistic dimension of Battlestar Galactica’s universe, these acts will guide my analysis: pretending, imagining, and feeling.

**Pretending**

Humanoid cylons like D’Anna (Lucy Lawless) or Simon (Rick Worthy) pretend as a way to deceive and to go unnoticed. Of course, there is a character that constantly deceives and lies: Gaius Baltar. However, in his case this difference between deception and truth does not put in question the way we look at him through a comparison with an identical counterpart — although as we shall see, this happens with the act of imagining. Another example is the revelation of the four cylons within Galactica’s crew at the end of season three, which simply gave us additional and unexpected information about these characters.

In contrast, in “Lay Down Your Burdens, Part 1” (2.19), Brother Cavil (Dean Stockwell) pretends to be a spiritual counsellor, but he is in fact an atheist. Nevertheless, he conveys conviction through the way he moves his left hand, punctuating sentences and stressing them as directives. He finalises the conversation by drumming on the table.

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with both hands, celebrating his mastery in a sign of vanity. In the next episode, “Lay Down Your Burdens, Part 2” (2.20), Brother Cavil encounters another Cavil. In narrative terms, they are fundamentally the same character, but there is an important aspect: their coexistence in the same scene prompts us to acknowledge their difference. After both characters have spoken, we understand that they have different functions: the Cavil from Caprica is simply the bearer of a message whereas Brother Cavil has infiltrated into the social structure of the fleet. They have a lot in common — for instance, their cynicism easily turns into amorality — but their reunion emphasises something that a single one them cannot get across: the redundancy and triviality of their discourse is underlined when it is repeated and shared by another version. This is exactly what happens when Brother Cavil demonstrates how simple it is for him to complete the other’s speech, with the camera selectively focusing on who is speaking, shifting from the foreground to the background. Accepting Locke’s distinction between consciousness and soul (or thinking substance), we may remark that although they think alike, their personal identity is different because they do not share the same consciousness. Pretending, playing a role, shows their individual awareness and particular responses to specific surroundings.

**Imagining**

Some characters sometimes imagine and inhabit an alternative world. In season three, Caprica-Six reveals that cylons project an environment of their choice that substitutes the physical world for their senses. Baltar’s virtual Six and Six’s virtual Baltar seem to be a product of a connection born after the devastating attack on the colonies in which Caprica-Six dies for the first time protecting Baltar. These virtual beings are not figments of their imagination: that much is proven by virtual Six’s tangibility. The same cannot be said about the moments in which Baltar is with Six in his destroyed house,
which appears intact. In “The Hand of God” (1.10), there is a scene like this, inserted even before the festive music from the previous scene has ceased. Consequently, the scene is not marked as narratively distinct. It deals with Baltar’s guilt for the role that he played in the attack and the meaning that religion can be forced to provide. We do not see Baltar dreaming, but the setting alone tells us that this is imagined. Like virtual Six and virtual Baltar, this Six and this Baltar highlight aspects of the original Caprica-Six and Baltar. She gently fondles his hair, touches his skin, and savours every word that comes out of her mouth, calling attention to her seductive nature. In his first pose, he is relaxed and unworried, lying on the lounger, his right leg flexed, smoking a cigarette, in contrast with the seriousness of the subject. He assumes a second position in the end, with his harms open too close to the torso — a ludicrous, contrived posture, accentuated by the open and thin bathrobe and, in addition, by the last shot when he looks up. His posture and gestures spotlight his narcissism. The series uses these imagined figures to show the essences that the real Caprica-Six and Baltar conceal: her meaningless persuasion and his ridiculous irresponsibility. These are figures that appear more than once and that may be interpreted as projecting the persons who have imagined them. For Locke, a person is an intelligent thinking being that can know itself as itself as the same thinking thing in different times and places. Caprica-Six, despite being a cylon, fits this description.

Feeling

There are characters who show their feelings and, in doing this, define their individuality within a group. The cases of the model eight Boomer and Athena and of Caprica-Six are exemplary. Examining a scene between the two Sharons and Caprica-Six from “Rapture” (3.12) is revealing. One thing that distinguishes the models six and eight is that they are emotional. It is no surprise then that they frequently ally — for example,
to save Anders (Michael Trucco). These models and their different versions are also unlike humanoid cylonike Aaron because they have been changed by their personal history. According to Locke, identity is ever changing: the self is a self-aware, self-reflective consciousness in a body. Cylon minds may not be originally empty, like the blank slates that Locke believes that human minds initially are, but they are shaped by experience, by sensation and reflection. Likewise, the meaning of the scene where Athena and Caprica-Six Boomer discover Hera, Athena and Helo's baby, in Boomer's care, depends on the knowledge of what happened before. Athena has a skirt whereas Boomer wears trousers. Boomer lacks Athena's easiness of movement. She speaks against cylon and human coexistence and dismisses Athena's worries about Hera's health without conviction, with her arms locked on her belly. Then she abandons this rigidity to become nervous and skittish when she realises the inimitable relation that Athena has with her daughter. Boomer is constantly shot alone and her solitude is underlined when Athena and Caprica-Six converse. Finally, she threatens to break the baby's neck. Athena balances her emotions in contrast with Boomer's escalation: Athena's tense face and voice express a deep concern while she tries to reason with Boomer using the calming movements of her right hand. Caprica-Six is responsive to Athena's affection and reacts violently, killing Boomer. Caprica-Six's reaction may also have to do with her culpability. She probably remembers killing a baby in Caprica without thinking twice, just before the destructive strike on the Twelve Colonies.

**Conclusion: Self**

This paper has reclaimed the aesthetic significance of performance in *Battlestar Galactica*, considering its sensory, formal, and expressive properties. Paying close attention to detail, the previous analysis has stressed how the characters' actions — pretending, imagining, and feeling — embody their identity. Lockean philosophy estab-
lishes this connection between agency and identity. So even though we are seeing the same bodies, they are different characters. The personal differences between them are investigated in the series as much as the continuity of each self. Even when the characters are imagined or resurrected, they have the *same memory*. We are encouraged to take every image and every gesture as pieces that compose a maze of identity. Our attention to their difference is demanded exactly because their identical bodies dispute that their personal identity can be conveyed by their appearance alone.