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Lectio praecursoria:
(Re)Imagining Humanity in Popular Science Fiction Television

Aino-Kaisa Koistinen

*Aino-Kaisa Koistinen (PhD in spe) defended her doctoral dissertation The Human Question in Science Fiction Television: (Re)Imagining Humanity in *Battlestar Galactica*, *Bionic Woman* and *V* at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland on the 11th of April 2015. This essay is a slightly edited version of the lectio praecursoria given by Koistinen before the defense.*

Keywords: gender, humanity, science fiction television, posthumanism, feminist theory

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According to Brian Attebery, science fiction “can offer important insights into *the limits of the imaginable* and the ways those limits are changing” (15, emphasis added). As science fiction is not tied to representing the world as it is, the genre’s narratives are free to imagine how the world could be (see also Jackson 95, Larbalestier 8). In other words it is, within that genre, possible to imagine cultures and futures that differ from our lived realities but nevertheless comment on the culture within which they are born (see also Larbalestier 8-9). Because of this tendency to imagine different worlds and cultures, science fiction as a genre has proven to be a valid medium for analyzing the connections between representations and their cultural implications (see e.g. Graham, Vint 20).

To put it simply, by representation I refer to how something is portrayed in art or the media. It is a basic notion in cultural studies that representations do not only reflect but also actively comment on and construct the world in which they are created. This connects them to the cultural discussions relevant at the time of their production. It can therefore be said that representation is the meaning-making process through which we assign certain meanings to images, objects, and people and, while doing so, give meaning to the world we live in (see e.g. Graham 20-37, Hall, and Kellner). In the increasingly visualized and globalized world, the impact of popular culture’s representations has become remarkably strong. We encounter representations everywhere: in literature, films, television, and games, for instance. Science fiction, in particular, is a genre that has expanded to different mediums and platforms.

Ever since Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), often considered the first science fiction novel, one of the principal themes of science fiction has been the definitions of humanity, which have often been discussed in relation to aliens or machines.¹ The narratives of the genre have, over and over again, asked what separates us, humans, from non-humans and how can we, as human

¹ On *Frankenstein* see e.g. Aldiss & Wingrove 25-35, also Attebery 12.

beings, live ethically together with the non-humans we share our world with. To put it differently, science fiction has always been interested in asking what I call the human question: who are we and where are we going? Science fiction narratives thus engage in a constant process of producing new notions and definitions of humanity, which I call the process of re-imagination.

These re-imaginings of humanity have produced compelling stories of human encounters with science and technology, which, in turn, have resulted in a strong connection between science fiction and science fact. Works produced within the genre have often influenced the imaginations of scientists, guided them towards discoveries and helped them sell their ideas to the general public (see e.g. Penley). Recently, as J. P. Telotte notes, the Intel Corporation has incorporated science fiction into its “Tomorrow Project” that investigates potential ways of building a better future for the human race. The scientists and technicians are expressly asked to read science fiction and become inspired by the genre’s ideas (186-7). Therefore, there is no denying that science fiction has an impact on how we are able to imagine our human lives and futures.

Asking the Human Question in Popular Science Fiction Television

In the doctoral dissertation examined today, I analyze the representations of humanity by studying popular science fiction television in relation to various theories, concepts and contexts. More specifically, I examine how certain North American science fiction television series negotiate “the limits of the imaginable” in terms of asking the human question.² In other words, I analyze how the boundaries of humanity are drawn in the original and remade, or “re-imagined,” versions of *Battlestar Galactica*, *Bionic Woman* and *V*.³

In the United States, science fiction has been a part of broadcast television from the late 1940s and early 1950s onwards – almost from the beginning of the medium (Johnson-Smith 1, Telotte 21-22). Although the production of science fiction television in the US hit a low point during the 1970s (Booker 67-68), science fiction has remained a significant genre in television production; many science fiction series, such as the various versions of *Star Trek*, have greatly affected popular culture around the world (see e.g. Telotte 1-20).

As Telotte notes, today science fiction television is more popular than ever. There are more science fiction television series available than ever before, and many so-called realistic genres are incorporating elements from science fiction and fantasy. Even reality television has, in a sense, turned to science fiction by producing more and more programs that deal with the wonders of science. It therefore seems that in today’s world permeated by technology science fiction television continues to speak to the viewers in a meaningful way (1-20). Science fiction television has also adapted well to the changes in television as a medium, and its narratives have expanded beyond television to blogs, fan sites, graphic novels and games.⁴

In my dissertation I focus on how gender, “race” and ethnicity – as well as certain human(ist) ideals often used to define humanity against the so-called non-human “others” – are negotiated. The original and re-imagined versions of *Battlestar Galactica*, *Bionic Woman* and *V* all include some sort of alien, machine or cyborg characters. Some of these characters are so human-like in appearance and behavior that they are able to “pass for human.” In the original and re-

² The thesis entitled *The Human Question in Science Fiction Television: (Re)Imagining Humanity in Battlestar Galactica, Bionic Woman and V* consists of three published peer-reviewed articles (Koistinen *Sukupuolijousto*, Koistinen *Passing for Human*, Koistinen *The Machine*), one article submitted to a peer-reviewed journal, and a part consisting of the introduction and conclusions of the study. The *lectio praecursoria* includes some selected excerpts from the thesis.

³ The re-imagined series include *Battlestar Galactica* (including the miniseries, US/Canada 2003, and the series US/UK 2004–2009), *Bionic Woman* (US 2007), and *V* (US 2009–2011). Their original counterparts are *Battlestar Galactica* (US 1979–1979) and *Galactica 1980* (US 1980), *The Bionic Woman* (US 1976–1978) and *V* (also known as *V: The Original Mini Series*, USA 1983), *V: The Final Battle* (US 1984), and *V* (also known as *V: The Series*, US 1984–1985).

⁴ On how science fiction has both adapted and contributed to the changes in television as a medium see Telotte 1-20, 179-188, also Geraghty 118-126, Johnson-Smith 71-73, and Tryon.

imagined *Battlestar Galactica*, machines called Cylons attack the human race. In the original version the Cylons are mostly robotic in appearance, but in the re-imagined series there are both human-like and robotic Cylons. In both versions of *V*, aliens called the Visitors attack the human race. The Visitors are lizard-like creatures disguised in a human-like skin. In the original and the re-imagined *Bionic Woman* a human woman is turned into a half-machine cyborg by inserting technological components called bionics into her body, thereby compromising her bodily integrity. It therefore becomes relevant to study how humanity is reflected and constructed against – or alongside with – representations of the non-human.

The re-imaginings of *Battlestar Galactica*, *Bionic Woman* and *V* have all tended to be studied separately from their original versions. My analysis therefore approaches them from a fresh angle, producing new knowledge of them and the cultural, historical, and industrial conditions of their production and reception. With the exception of the new version of *Battlestar Galactica* and the original *Bionic Woman*, the series have also attracted little scholarly attention. I examine the series in dialogue with feminist and posthumanist theories and situate them in the context of specific cultural-historical phenomena. The questions asked are: What kind of norms, conditions, and ideals emerge as “human,” or humane, in these series? What kind of bodies are represented as human and non-human, and how are these representations involved in the construction of cultural-historical, political and ethical understandings and interpretations of humanity? What kinds of developments or changes of the norms and conditions (or boundaries) of humanity are found when the re-imagined series are compared to the original versions?

During the research process, it was discovered that in order to fit the category of human, the characters in the series have to fulfill certain norms and conditions. Firstly, their bodies have to appear human, which mostly means inhabiting a recognizably gendered body with a white skin. Secondly, these characters must engage in “human,” or humane, behavior and have certain capacities that are considered human. This highlights the norms and conditions of humanity and the humanist ideals that shape the very understandings of recognizable humanity. In my analysis, human behavior and human capacities are found to be slightly different in each series. They nevertheless include heterosexuality, the capacity to feel love and pain, individuality, rationality, and certain ethical and moral acts, such as acting compassionately towards others.

It was also found that comparing the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica*, *Bionic Woman* and *V* to their original counterparts highlights certain changes in the norms and conditions of how we are expected to live as gendered human beings. These changes become especially prominent in representations of female gender. The original series feature some active and independent female characters. *The Bionic Woman*, influenced by the rise of second wave feminism and the women’s liberation movement, is even centered on an active female protagonist.⁵ In the new versions of the series there are even more active and independent female characters and more women are seen in positions of power. The re-imagined versions thus resonate with the fact that since the 1970s and 1980s, when the original series were produced, women have increasingly integrated into society and political decision-making – which is, then, also discussed in the media.

In addition to the changes in how gender is represented there are differences in the ways humanity is defined against the non-human in the original and the re-imagined series. The original series tend to revolve around Cold War anxieties – themes of control, paranoia, and the threat of war – by projecting them onto the non-human, alien others. In the original versions of *Battlestar Galactica* and *V*, humans are attacked by deceitful and evil aliens or machines that are represented as an outside threat, creating allusions to the communist threat and the Cold War.⁶ The original *Bionic Woman* includes controllable female robots that are contrasted against the independent

⁵ On women’s liberation, genre television, and *The Bionic Woman* see e.g. Levine, 93-94, Sharp, and White.

⁶ On the original *Battlestar Galactica* and the Cold War see also Muir, *An Analytical Guide*; Muir, *SALTed Popcorn*; on the original *V* and the Cold War (and/or totalitarianism), see Booker, 91-93, and Johnson-Smith, 121.

bionic woman. In my analysis I interpret these controllable robots as a comment on the threat that communism was seen to pose to American individualist ideals during the Cold War.⁷ Each of the original series, however, also include scenes where the dichotomy of human and non-human becomes less clear, and the ethical and moral basis of certain human actions is questioned. The original *V*, for instance, positions its narrative of alien invasion in complex cultural discussions concerning the Second World War and the persecution of Jews, and its narrative resonates with cultural issues such as immigration, the ethics of torture, and the discussions on human rights in the 1980s. The original versions of *Battlestar Galactica*, *Bionic Woman* and *V* therefore not only articulate American individualist ideals of the Cold War or the Communist threat but engage in complex negotiations of the human question, contributing to our cultural understandings of ethical humanity.

The re-imagined series tend to discuss the human question in even more complex ways, creating connections to various cultural discussions. I elaborate how the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* and *V* comment on issues such as terrorism, violence, torture, and hate speech by aligning non-human characters with the threat of terrorism and the “enemies” in the War on Terror. Unlike in their original versions, the aliens or machines have, in the new versions, already infiltrated human societies – yet another allusion to the threat of terrorist infiltration. In both re-imagined series, however, the terrorist threat becomes a more complicated question as the series include scenes where both human and non-human characters engage in acts that are considered humane or inhumane. Thus, the distinction between “us” and “them,” humans and their non-human enemies, becomes problematic. This problem is explored in dramatic, violent encounters and scenes of torture between humans and non-humans.

I argue that the “others” that can pass for human beings invite the viewers to consider how enemies are defined and recognized during war. As Judith Butler argues, in war, enemies are considered different from “us,” even non-human (*Precarious Life, Frames of War*), but if the enemies are revealed to be just like us – or quite similar to us – how can we, then, define the enemy? Can our actions in war be based on our alleged difference from the enemy? In the context of war and violence these series thus challenge the viewer to consider how, during war, individuals are divided into those considered worthy of life and those that are not.⁸

The re-imagined *Bionic Woman* explores questions of control and surveillance more directly than the original version, posing questions as to what happens to the conditions of human life, such as freedom, individuality, and gender, when a human being is technologically altered. As our cultures are more and more permeated and defined by technology, these questions are timely and relevant. By subjecting the bionic woman to continuous technological control and surveillance, the re-imagined series asks whether it is ethical to assume control of certain individuals only because they are considered somehow different or non-human. In my analysis, I connect this to the political atmosphere of the War on Terror in the United States. I therefore conclude that all of the re-imagined versions negotiate concerns relevant to the post-9/11 culture, which makes them important speculative narratives that say something about our time.

Encountering “Otherness”

As the binary opposition between humans and non-humans becomes unstable, gender and other differences located in the body are also brought into question.⁹ This can have crucial consequences on how we treat the subjects and objects we consider somehow strange, different and “other.” I

⁷ On how cyborg narratives were used to comment on questions of individualism and the Communist threat in the 1970s, see Booker, 39-40.

⁸ On war and “livability” (who is considered worthy of life) see Butler, *Precarious Life*, and *Frames of War*.

⁹ On the formation of “non-human otherness” see e.g. Butler, *Undoing Gender* 1-4, and Wolfe 6-8.

draw connections between the original and re-imagined versions of *Battlestar Galactica*, *Bionic Woman* and *V* and a broad range of contemporary cultural discussions about how we encounter difference or “otherness” in our everyday lives. For instance, the negotiations of encountering difference create a link between these series and feminist and posthumanist discussions concerned with meeting “others” in an ethical way. The so-called others can, for example, be members of other cultures or non-human species.¹⁰ These questions are currently relevant and timely as they are brought to the foreground by the rising global tides of xenophobia, immigration, climate change, extinction of species, environmental catastrophes, wars (and new technologically operated warfare), cloning, and the patenting of life (such as animals and plants).

The fact that the re-imagined series are even more conscious of the ways they (re)negotiate the definitions of human/non-human highlights these cultural concerns. I thus suggest that the investigations of the human question in the re-imagined series are telling of contemporary anxieties considering the definitions of humanity, such as the “crisis of humanism.”¹¹ In various fields of study scholars have begun to turn their attention away from the human question to the question of the non-human, and have started to question the humanist ideals that place humans above other, non-human species (Åsberg 7-10). As the definitions of humanity have become more and more unstable in natural sciences as well as in philosophical debates, these science fiction series tap into some very relevant anxieties.

To conclude, it is clear that science fiction is a genre uniquely suited to deal with the anxieties surrounding the human question. Science fiction’s new worlds and futures help us understand our humanity and our relations to those we prefer to keep outside the category of “human.” It is, perhaps, science fiction literature that has been able to really imagine new understandings of humanity – or, re-imagine humanity. However, the impact of television narratives, particularly as they are able to reach a broad range of audiences, should not be overlooked. I argue that science fiction television, today more popular than ever before, is a vital part of popular culture and contributes to our shared cultural (re)imaginings of the human question.

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¹⁰ On these “others” see Ahmed, Åsberg, Butler, *Precarious Life*, and *Frames of War*, and Haraway.

¹¹ On the crisis of humanism see Badmington, and Braidotti.

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