

The use of cinema-like sound in battlestar galactica essay examples

[Media](#), [Television](#)



Ever since the innovation of television as a means to bring motion picture content to homes, the use of sound in television has been markedly different from that of film. " The role that sound plays in TV is extremely important it engages the look and the glance rather than the gaze, and thus has a different relation to voyeurism from cinema's" (Ellis 128). In effect, television has a much greater emphasis on sound than cinema does, because the ability to refocus attention from a television show (as opposed to film, where one is confined in a dark theater watching only that) means that more of the story must be communicated through sound: " Sound is something which is added to the image, but nevertheless subordinate to it - it acts, paradoxically, as a 'silent' support" (Weis and Belton 54). However, in the past few decades, with the advent of home video and greater ease of television production, television has gained a greater ability to be cinematic in its scope - to that end, it is increasingly focusing more on the gaze than ever before. One show to particularly innovate television's use of sound, and its shift toward a more cinematic bent, is the 2000s-era science fiction drama *Battlestar Galactica*, a re-imagining of a campy 1970s *Star Wars* homage into a gritty, dark and emotionally affecting Bush-era treatise on the War on Terror, the post-9/11 world, and the nature of humanity and faith, among other things. The use of sound in *Battlestar Galactica* is a particularly strong example of television shying further and further away from the glance and more toward the gaze.

With regards to television, Ellis states that " Sound carries the fiction or the documentary; the image has a more illustrative function Sound tends to anchor meaning on TV, where the image tends to anchor it with cinema"

(Ellis 129). While this is true of many films, *Battlestar Galactica*'s focus is equally on the sound and the image. Part space opera, part political drama, part ensemble character study, *Battlestar Galactica* tells the tale of a group of nearly 50, 000 survivors of a surprise attack on their far-off colony worlds by former robot servants called Cylons; these survivors escape in a small ragtag fleet of ships, which then work the rest of the series to evade the pursuing Cylon forces and find a new home. The show itself is filmed in an alternating mix of cinema-verite documentary footage and highly presentational, Malick-like moments during times when the show's spiritual focus is emphasized. Dialogue is conversational, often muted; lines are not quite captured in time, in keeping with the documentary look of much of the series. The patently silly premise is treated with grave seriousness and a cinematic flair for truth in both sound and image.

In *Battlestar Galactica*, a rich soundscape is used to convey the inner workings of the titular ship, an old war-horse whose bowels are reminiscent of a large submarine. Parts and cogs clank and clatter within the ship, which ominously hums during tense, quiet dialogue scenes. The scanning equipment and refreshingly analog communications equipment (Edward James Olmos' Commander Adama communicates to other ships primarily through a corded telephone turned upside down) indicate without fully conveying the meaning of what is going on, the sound design used to accentuate the image onscreen. One of the more innovative uses of sound in the show is how it treats sound in space; while they do not often go completely toward realism, the sound presented in space battles and so on is muffled - gun blasts and explosions have a delay and a hollowness to them

that at least indicates the actual lack of sound in space (as well as grant the image of these battles greater importance than is normal in television).

Battlestar Galactica is intensely cinematic, focusing much more on the image than Ellis' focus on the sound-centric elements of TV: " When compared to cinema, TV demonstrates a displacement from the invocatory drive of schopophilia (looking) to the closest related of the invocatory drives, that of hearing" (Ellis 137). While this limitation is still there in Battlestar Galactica, due to the serialized nature of the show and the ability for audiences to look away, there is a great deal of visual language being communicated in the show as well, which is equally necessary for reception of meaning.

Contrasted with the shaky-cam immediacy of normal scenes aboard the fleet is the use of presentational, dreamlike imagery that is not overtured immensely with sound (though it is sometimes emphasized by Bear McCreary's unique, world music-inspired score). These include many actual dreams that paranoid conspirator Gaius Baltar (James Callis) has about his fantasy woman, a Cylon spy with whom he carried on a sexual relationship, and who may be projecting dreamlike fantasies into his brain. Other characters have image-heavy dreams as well: one pilot imagines himself floating in water while ejected into space, while the chief mechanic dreams about throwing himself off the hanger deck to kill himself. Visual metaphors are used in equal measure with sound to convey meaning for characters; Adama's silent trashing of his room with white paint late in the series shows his despair at the worsening condition of his ship, while Roslin (Mary McDonnell), the leader of humanity, keeps a running tally on a whiteboard of how many human beings are left to keep hope alive. Several kinds of

religious and mythological imagery are used to link these humans with greater religious and spiritual importance, including an opera house where Baltar imagines "the shape of things to come" and a map to Earth being found in a cave full of statues of Greek gods and goddesses. All of these symbols and more cannot be conveyed through music and sound alone; a greater emphasis on the cinematic, the image-based, is used in the show to convey these meanings.

The use of sound in *Battlestar Galactica* can be compared quite closely to the sound in a comparable science fiction film: Ridley Scott's 1982 sci-noir *Blade Runner*. A vibrant soundscape was created for *Blade Runner* by sound editor Peter Pennell in order to create a meld of contemporary and futuristic sounds for the vehicles and weapons in the film. The buzz of the spinners as they fly through the landscape, as well as the boom of Deckard's gun when it fires (particularly during the 'retirement' of Zhora) are at times both familiar and alien, a certain hollow tinniness to them making them feel less than real, and yet strangely futuristic and grounded. At the same time, the deliberate removal of sound effects is used intentionally to emphasize certain scenes. The retirement of Zhora, for instance, features no sound during the slow-motion sequence of her running through the glass panes, all but the sound of Deckard's gun. This accentuates the brutality of what Deckard is doing to Zhora, who merely wanted to survive. All of these techniques and more are used to examine and convey meaning in *Battlestar Galactica* through sound and image in equal measure.

Battlestar Galactica's sound design defies television conventions, in step with television's greater focus on narrative consistency through image,

turning the glance into gaze regardless of the limitations of television. Ellis argues that these limitations include a loss of intimacy in the viewer's attention; as the viewer has a lesser obligation to focus on what is going on visually on the screen, thus explaining television's greater emphasis on sound: " The cost of this intimacy is that the voyeuristic mode cannot operate as intensely as in cinema the broadcast TV viewer's look is not a controlling look in the same sense as that which operates in cinema" (Ellis 138). However, this voyeuristic mode is demanded by the creators of *Battlestar Galactica* just as much as in films like *Blade Runner*; in order to convey the heightened sci-fi and presentational elements of the work, the sound is used to merely accentuate what is happening on screen. Though it uses innovative techniques to do so, the sound in this show is meant to be consistent with the show's gritty-yet-fantastical cinematography and production design, all of which are purposeful and demand the audience's attention. To that end, shows like *Battlestar Galactica* represent a new wave in television filmmaking, where just as much is demanded of the audience in terms of attention, leaving the sound in a much more supplementary position than it has been before when compared to film.

Works Cited

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