

[published at <http://popvultures.com/2008/08/07/more-great-tv-women-battlestar-galactica/>]

On Tuesday, Marcia posted about the lack of strong female characters in movies, especially compared to the abundance of strong women on television. She listed a few women as an example: “Buffy, Scully, Bones, Betty Suarez, Roslin and Starbuck,” and later Xena. Did anybody else notice how many of those women were in science fiction shows? Poor science fiction has a similar image problem to that of television: It’s thought of as a waste of time, and nobody thinks there’s much art in the genre.

Science fiction is a *wonderland* for strong female characters. Setting a story in the future, or on another planet, gives a creator of science fiction the license to ignore current gender roles without any female character having to think about it, or stand out for their unfeminine behavior. You can even see this in movies: The two strongest women in movies that I can think of are Ellen Ripley from the *Aliens* franchise, and Sarah Connor from *Terminator 2* (I specify because she’s a wimp in *Terminator*). Both of those are science fiction movies. Ripley is possibly the most well drawn female action hero ever to be seen in a movie (that didn’t originate as a television show, with all of the history of a TV series, like *Serenity*)—she is tough as nails (without caring about breaking them), she’s fiercely smart, and she’s in a position of power that isn’t “Mother.” Granted, it’s not like there are many other female action heroes with which to compare Ripley, but she’s pretty fantastic.

Ripley also goes back for the cat. This could be seen as a feminine weakness, but I see it as a note of grace brought to the action hero role by putting a female character into it. Going back for the cat is a crucial part of Ripley’s character, a representation of that layer of her multilayered character that is uniquely female.

Like Marcia said, though, when it comes to character, television does it way better. There are plenty of awesome female characters on television these days (or in the recent past, when 75% of them were created by Joss Whedon), and one of the best examples that is still on today is *Battlestar Galactica*.

BSG treats gender as if it informs but never defines a character. In *BSG*, women are aggressive soldiers, icy presidents, and violent revolutionaries at the same time they are caring mothers, manipulative seductresses, and neglected wives. They also use the same bathrooms as the men. I am often surprised when the show messes with my own gender expectations—like when I look back at how I thought President Roslin was trying to save the fleet just after the Cylons first attacked out of pure compassion when really, she was playing a numbers game and saving the human race came far above saving individuals in her estimation.

“Saving the cat” is such a crucial part of having strong, heroic female characters. It’s obvious from day one that the women of *Battlestar Galactica* never exist as a pure object of conflict between two men, a simple moral compass, or in any other way as secondary to the men of the

cast, so why don't we take a look at how some of the women of *BSG* bring their ovaries to the role without ever becoming caricatures of what it means to be a woman.

Boomer/Athena/Eights

The Eights come closest in the series to having a fatal flaw that is stereotypically feminine: They base most of their behavior in their emotions, specifically in their love for individuals. Athena proves herself to be a little higher minded than that when she tries to commit herself to duty as a soldier and honor above all else, but even then she ends up shooting Natalie when she's simply afraid of having her child stolen. That is a betrayal of duty, her superior officers, and potentially the human race, all because her worry for her daughter overrides everything else. Athena also left her birth race and served in the human military purely out of love for Helo rather than any strong conviction about the rightness of either side. It seems likely that Boomer sided against the rest of the Eights out of love for Cavil just as much as her feelings of isolation in the fleet (because she initially thought she was human). I'm not going to argue whether this love of the individual above all else is good or bad, but it does seem like a particularly feminine trait for someone who is also a soldier.

Because I keep setting up cage-matches in my head, I have to ask: Who would win in a fight between an Eight and Ripley? I'm afraid that Ripley would kick an Eight's ass, unless Ripley happened to threaten the Eight's baby or boyfriend.

Caprica Six/Natalie/Other Sixes

At first, it seems like the Sixes aren't too far off from the Eights in their basic motivation. Caprica Six, especially, seems obsessed with her love for Baltar. It turns out that the Sixes are driven more by social concerns than anything else, which you can see as early as when Caprica Six snaps a baby's neck, with tears in her eyes, just before the coming nuclear holocaust. She already understands the wrongness of the Cylons' plan, and it doesn't take long before she's spreading the word about that among her race and trying to find common ground with the humans. This switch—from a focus on love to a larger focus—is one of the ways the Sixes mess with our gender expectations. This is not to say that fomenting social dissent is a particularly gendered activity, but the way we were misguided as to her basic nature at first says something about the Six's overt sexuality and our assumptions about a woman who looks like that. These are assumptions that the *BSG* creators seem to share, given how Gina (the first truly revolutionary Six) and Natalie (the leader of one side of the Cylon civil war) are transformed into comparatively modest brunettes.

In a Ripley/Six showdown, who would win? The Six, sort of. She would've set up a bomb beforehand, but she'd also sacrifice herself to take Ripley out.

President Roslin

Roslin is the trickiest female on BSG, as far as her gender goes. She starts out with the label of “little schoolteacher” (she’s the Secretary of Education who is suddenly promoted to President) and with the act of saving the lives of thousands of people by insisting that they flee rather than stay and fight. As I mentioned earlier, we expect a “little schoolteacher” to do something like that out of compassion more than out of practicality, but she fools us. As time passes it becomes clear that her first act might have been more about simple numbers and the chance of the survival of the human race. President Airlock is ruthless, and she and Adama switch roles as time goes on, until Adama is the one letting people he loves (such as Starbuck) get away with things they perhaps shouldn’t, while Roslin would shoot Starbuck just to make sure they all stay safe. She is almost the opposite of the Eights in that she’s lost her affection for the individual in order, she thinks, to keep the human race alive.

Ripley and Roslin wouldn’t fight. They’d have tea, and it would end with Ripley joining Roslin’s side. Winner: the President.

Kara “Starbuck” Thrace

When we first see the exquisitely hot Kara Thrace, she’s chomping on a cigar, drinking liquor, and playing cards with other soldiers. She ends up in a fight with her XO and is thrown into the brig. If you had the presence of mind to think about it—I didn’t, I was too busy being awed—you might’ve thought that Starbuck was just a male character with boobs.

Kara’s femininity shows up in her history, when she lets Zak Adama get his pilot’s license even though he failed his flight test, a display of tenderness that I can’t imagine seeing in the current-day Starbuck. She’s also a highly sexualized character—a typical way to weaken a woman on television or in movies by pandering to male fantasies—but she’s sexual in a very dominant, dismissive way, which turns our expectations around.

Who would win if Starbuck and Ripley got in a fight? Starbuck—while she’s got a feminine side, she would never go back for a cat.