

Jean-Paul Martinon, '33, 34, 35... The Life of The Limits,' in Josef Steiff & Tristan Tamplin, eds., *Battlestar Galactica & Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 2008), 249-60, © Open Court, 2008.

Imagine the entire human race reduced to 47,972 souls scattered amongst eighty or so space ships, being forced to jump from one point in space to another every thirty-three minutes because a fleet of vengeful skin-jobs and chrome toasters is pining for their total annihilation. Imagine not the exhaustion, but the strain and the stress such a desperate and dangerous escape would generate. They've already jumped 237 times, spending five days without sleep. They've lost a civilian ship with 1,345 human beings on board. The Viper pilots are on stimulants. The president and her staff are frantically trying to come to terms with the aftermath of an apocalypse. There are rumors that Cylon agents and traitors have infiltrated the fleet and are threatening to jeopardize their only chance for survival. Their future is at risk; their destination uncertain and they have not yet begun to mourn their dead. Imagine running scared for your life for 136 hours in what could be described as sealed air-conditioned Tylium-propelled coffins.

Amidst this horrifying scenario, there is one tiny moment of hope, forty-two minutes to be precise. This small respite begins thirty-three minutes after the 238 jump, when they discover that the Cylons are not re-materializing. This window of opportunity starts like this:

- Felix Gaeta: "Fifteen seconds."
- Saul Tigh: "Maybe this time."
- William Adama: "Dradis?"
- Felix Gaeta: "No enemy contact."
- William Adama: "Keep the clock running."
- Saul Tigh: "What do you think?"
- William Adama: "I think we wait."

Keep the clock running. I think we wait. Ten minutes later the Cylons still haven't

appeared and Adama instructs his son, Lee to set up a combat patrol around the fleet and for the other pilots to land immediately. Perhaps this time they will manage a couple of hours sleep. Perhaps this time, they will be able to take a break and reflect on their newfound homelessness. Thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six, the minutes pass and the Cylons are nowhere to be seen. As the time passes, the fleet enters a period when time becomes again unnoticeable and the future opens up again. Although there is still the possibility of further attacks, the future is no longer barred by another jump, by the need of relocating in another point in space and time, when and where, life will have to be postponed again. The clock is silently running; it no longer announces the threat of judgement day.

This is the premise for the first episode of the first series of *Battlestar Galactica*. A question immediately arises out of this dramatic situation: Beyond the need for peace and renewed opportunities, why the wish for a continuous and unnoticeable time and for an open future? The aim behind this question is to focus on the kind of temporality experienced during an exodus and what this temporality tells us of our earth-bound understanding of time. From the moment of the Cylon attack, the fleet finds itself free from the reassuring recurrence of sunrise and nightfall, from a temporality structured by a measured regularity. Lost in space, the fleet is suddenly forced to reinvent a new spatio-temporal structure. In such darkness, one of the main points of reference the fleet can rely on, is, as we will see, death, the only certainty lying (ahead) in the future. When duration (the length of a day), and evolution (the hope brought on by night) are no longer there, when a planetary morphology no longer provides structure, death, this liminal human event, is one of the few things left that can provide focus and help make sense of space and time. This last-resort focus on death, with its incumbent philosophical sources (eschatology, messianism, destiny, and destination) constitutes the aim of this chapter. It will hopefully reveal the fleet's temporality (and curiously, mankind's in general) as a temporality not of representation ("a horizon," "a dial," for example) but *of the limit*, that is, of the event (the flight towards earth/the defiance of death). Before launching onto this focus on death and all things ending, let us first

expand our understanding of the main temporal characteristic of episode 33: a life lived moment-to-moment, a life always interrupted.

Interrupted Time

The fleet's desire to return to a time of continuity and their wish for an unnoticeable time and an open future obviously stems from their former planetary existence on the Colonies. This former life that knew no interruptions was a life of peace and prosperity, a life regulated by two main temporal characteristics. The first one is that time remained unquestioned, self-evident. Time ticked away and the Colonials had no quarrels with this ticking; they peacefully accepted this mechanical marking, this reassuring monotony. The second temporal characteristic is that the time on the colonies represented a time of historical determination, when human beings felt that they were in charge of their lives, when they dreamed and projected their existence into the future. This lost Colonial life was therefore dominated not by dreaded interruptions, but by a self-determining temporality structured by a slow and repetitive marking.

But alas this time of peace and self-determination is not on the agenda in episode 33. The time in this episode has suddenly been suspended between jumps, between a past that no longer exists and a future barred by Cylon's raiders and base-stars. History has indeed been reduced to a few memories, a few images, and a bank of data (later on enriched with the Pegasus archives). History, this always re-invented repository has evaporated into fragments. Similarly, the future has also been dismembered. It is no longer made up of human beings' visions and hopes. The future belongs to the Cylons, that is, it belongs to death, not as something remote and ordinary, but as an imminent danger. The fleet is stranded in what could be understood as an aporia, that is, they find themselves in a situation that appears to offer no way out: neither in remembrance nor in longing.

The clock is ticking and while the fleet anxiously awaits the dreadful order to complete another jump, it slowly finds itself in a post-apocalyptic scenario that takes them right at

the edge of their existence. It takes them at the edge because in this post-apocalypse, they only have themselves to look after. Their only mission is not to plan a better world, to fight inequality, to give teachers a voice, or to create works of art, but to save their skins. The idea of making babies in order to secure the future does not even figure as part of their daily routine. It comes as an after-thought as the end of the episode clearly shows. The imperative of remaining alive therefore takes over from all other imperatives (social, ethical, political, or otherwise). In this unstable new space disorder, in this aporia, their lives take on an extraordinary morbid connotation. They live sandwiched between two deaths: on one side, the recent death of their worlds, on the other, the prospect of dying in the hands of the Cylons. How is one to qualify this life at the edge, this life confined between endings?

The Bare Life of Eschatology

If one were to use a Judeo-Christian vocabulary, one could say that the fleet's temporal experience in episode 33 is essentially eschatological. Here it is worth making a distinction between the adjective eschatological and the noun eschatology. Eschatology is usually understood as the branch of theology that deals with the end of narratives, the end of the human story as if the end of a saga.ⁱ Unlike nihilism which claims that humanity is headed nowhere, the end for eschatology is always certain but, as we will see, essentially undecided: hell or paradise, earth or death, human or Cylon. The focus in this section is therefore not the end of a narrative that will *reveal* one or the other, but the end as a (continuously undecided) lived experience. Hence the focus on the adjective and not the noun. In other words, the adjective eschatological does not refer here to the biblical *narrative* of a certain end, but to the main structure of *experience* of a people in flight. The eschatological therefore qualifies a *life* whose main ordeal is facing death every second of time. How can one understand this eschatological *life*?

An eschatological *life* is a life entirely structured without future or past, a life where hope and redemption are not so much eliminated, but at least reduced to a minimum. In other words, it is a life governed by a burning existential preoccupation: why is the end (why

are the ends) so *close*? The life of the Colonials is therefore not concerned with recalling or restoring history or planning a promising future, but with this dramatic edge that challenge their existence every thirty-three minutes. The important thing about this strenuous eschatological *life* is that neither the cultural apparatus of mourning (the staging and ritual of death) nor the economic imperative of profit (the prospect of renewed opportunities) can help structure their existence. All is reduced in episode 33 to the blazing actuality of life and death.

One could say, following the arguments of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in relation to those who have lost all reason to live, that their lives have become bare, devoid of the rich tapestry of life with its intricate web of histories and aspirations.ⁱⁱ The questions that dominate their horizon are not concerned with potential or remorse, but with these limits that either cripple them with sorrow or threaten to overtake them. Both the miniseries and episode 33 often refer to these underlining questions: Was the apocalypse the last judgement or is there a life after total annihilation? Will I live to see another world or will I die shredded and scattered across the dark firmament? Again, these questions are not concerned with probabilities (“Can I escape?”) or guilt (“What have we done?”), but with a set of dangerous extremities, (metaphorical and real) that dominates all aspects of existence, from the simple act of shaving (Adama cutting himself) to the operatic fight with the Cylons. As such, their lives become ruled by eschatology, by all things ending and by their own existential relation to these ends that are no longer to come, but simply appear to never let go.

Living such extreme eschatological life implies casting aside the artificial edifice of the culture of death (what in philosophy is called the ontic sciences of death) to embrace a purely ontological questioning of death. Death for the Colonials is no longer, at least in episode 33, a question that concerns anthropology, psychology, or culture in general; it concerns existence or Being as such. Once people start disappearing regularly into oblivion within seconds, the only thing that matters is the immediate loneliness of Being facing its inevitable demise: am I next? In this way, metaphorically and culturally, the Colonials are already dead. They have already experienced death, not in person, for

otherwise they would no longer be scared, but as an event that has left them *for dead*. Interestingly, the death they've already experienced is here on an unimaginable scale. This is not the holocaust or a genocide occurring in a little-known country in the developing world. This is the end of twelve entire planets with their oceans, animals, and vegetation. Past this kind of apocalypse, past this kind of death, the only thing that matters is no longer death with its rituals and ceremonies, but how one can cope with this constant reminder of the end, how one can live close to this morbid extremity that haunts and threatens us in our very Being.

In episode 33, this eschatological life past the apocalypse forces them to turn on themselves and transform their bare life into the sole horizon of expectancy. This is a unique and complex situation, which their lives on the Colonies (or on earth) could never have provided with such intensity. In order to understand this transformation of the self into a horizon of expectancy, it is necessary to discard one's usual understanding of the place of the past and that of the future. In Hebrew, for example, the future is not ahead of us and the past is not behind us. With words such as *qadam* and *akhor*, the future is on the contrary behind us and the past is in front of us, there, where one can scrutinize and analyze it.ⁱⁱⁱ This perspective does not simply reverse the horizon of expectancy and loss, it literally brings it down to its most obvious (and yet always uncertain) origin: the human being. The ever-expanding horizon of the future and the always-vanishing ruins of the past are here merged into this lone survivor who, lost in space, fears, anticipates, regrets, and remembers. In this way, the Colonials do not face the future or the past and the past or the future does not surprise or awaken them to reality from behind; they *become* their very own horizon of expectancy and memory, with its surprises and its losses.

On this dramatic re-integrated horizon, the members of the fleet become the sole creators of their past and future. First, they are creating through the work of mourning^{iv} an imaginary past totally unconnected to material remains. Their past is no longer based on evidence, whether this evidence consists of geological strata, archaeological digs, or memento moris. All this has been irradiated and is no longer easily available.

Faced with such loss, the past becomes a fantasy, a dream filled with inaccurate recollections and delusory projections. What else is there to do while awaiting death in the middle of nowhere, but invent a past (retrospective projection)? The past suddenly only exists in their imaginary. Conversely, they are also dreaming of a future totally unconnected to their present existence. They dream of *another* life on a planet that promises them little because they all know it is based on myths and on Adama's power to motivate and regenerate hope: Earth. In both cases, they live a life of fantasy without books, sepulchres, provisions, or projections. Entombed in air-conditioned coffins, they live in an oddly dangerous purgatory that offers them no way out, except a "mythified" past and a fantasy life on another planet. And this affects everyone, even Gaius Baltar who whispers to Number Six that he repents for his sins.

The Messianic Hope of the FTL Jumps

In this manner, halfway between two ends, between a past death and a potential future death in the hands of the Cylons, their existence becomes exacerbated to an unimaginable extent. The only thing that counts is the immediacy of the moment, the imminence of the next move, the uncertainty of the decision-making process. The notion of urgency and immediacy, familiar to conventional suspenseful stories, takes here an unusual metaphoric dimension. The suspense does not only serve the purpose of keeping audiences entertained, it also points to humanity's incessant preoccupation with the sliver of hope that structure our *own* horizon. This sliver of hope, this splinter of chance represents what is usually understood in Judeo-Christian continental philosophy as a messianic opening onto the future, or more precisely, what the French philosopher Jacques Derrida calls the to-come.^v This messianic opening is a fraction of hesitation that cannot be measured, but keeps you enthralled to pursue your action. This fraction represents (if it can represent anything at all) the contradictory pull of promise and danger that structures our (or the fleet's) own "horizontal"^{vi} quandary, the undecidability of what cannot be guessed and/or what is certain to emerge. This has nothing to do with the pleasure of adventure, the lure of heroism, or the thrills of risk-taking. This has to do with the fleet's (and obviously humanity's) obsession with the promise of escape and

the lure of being the potential makers of history. Between jumps, between two deaths, their lives past the apocalypse intensifies not only, as we have seen, their eschatological relation to the two ends that imprison them, but also their messianic fixation with the possibility of escape. In this way, in this aporia, in this sealed environment, the issue is not what will happen next as if the outcome of some predictable causality, but what do we do *now*.

This emphasis on immediacy, that is, on the hesitation between promise and danger is never more clearly exposed than with the metaphor of the FTL jumps. There is no point to question here the temporal dimension of the Faster Than Light jumps. We all know that the term "FTL" used to describe the spaceships supposedly subluminal move from one point in space to another is used mistakenly as the ships technically do not move faster than light, but rather instantaneously relocate themselves to a new position in space without a change in speed. In other words, they don't zoom around at a speed close or comparable to that of light, they simply teleport themselves from a to b. Now what does this instantaneity mean? What does it mean for a Cylon Raider, a Colonial Raptor or forty thousand people to find themselves in one space-time and then suddenly teleport themselves to another space-time (without ageing or any unpleasant side effects)?

If one discards the scientific improbability of these teleportations and the producers' reliance on an absurd fantasy to create a coherent plot, one is then left with the metaphoric dimension of these self-generated jumps. The jumps stand precisely as a metaphor for this tiny sliver of hope, this glimpse of chance the fleet pursues in their unusually enclosed and exacerbated life at the edge of existence. The jumps indeed emphasise not the present as if this was a coherent space of experience, but both the recurrent advent of something new *and* the pursuit of an uncertain future. In other words, on the tight squeeze of their "horizontal" limits, the FTL jumps represent at once their vulnerability and power: that of either provoking an advent that will lead to their salvation or their death *or* that of allowing the unknown to take hold of their lives. In this way, the FTL jumps do not open the future, that is, something distant or remote that one

can imagine or work towards, but what comes unexpectedly and/or is provoked in order to change the course of history.

This is made very clear in the storylines of the series. In most episodes, a pilot knows the coordinates of where he or she is jumping to, and yet, the calculations are never guaranteed. A pilot is in fact never sure of its exact destination: a mountain as in Lay Down Your Burden in Series 2 or more generally a quadrant of space infested with Cylons. An FTL jump therefore reveals that, in such a desperate situation, the fleet's sole concern is always focused on what comes next and what has the potential to disturb the fragile and claustrophobic enclosure that appears to dominate their "horizontal" existence.

Speed and Destination

Hence the series' odd obsession with speed. It is odd, because in a time of FTL jumps, the "gang" instead of just jumping at the first sign of Cylons, still feels the need to chase them in conventional fighter jets, speeding across the skies only to return safely back to the Battlestar for a last-minute saving jump. This conventional emphasis on speed provides them (and the creators of the series) with a way not only of creating suspense, but of exacerbating the extremity of their characters' "horizontal" existence. The issue here is not only the more they speed in space, the more they encounter danger and the more it is entertaining, but the more they speed, the more it opens up possibilities, thus creating situations that otherwise would not have been possible. This obsession with speed is therefore crucial, even if they have the technology to avoid it.

With speed, the fleet finds itself engaged on a scenario that can only accelerate in tempo. The fleet is effectively living in the throes of what is coming, enjoying and loathing at the same time the impossibility of slowing down. They (and we) enjoy it because speed generates an addiction: that of always seeking the next thrill. They (and we) loathe it because speed never allows a moment's respite, the luxury of reflection and contemplation. The important aspect of this increased tempo is that there is no

outside, no side-jump, no escape from this ever-increasing pace. The faster the Viper goes, the less it is manoeuvrable. With speed, the fleet therefore finds itself thrust on an increasingly narrow band, never able to take a break and observe the unfolding drama (as a contrast, think of the stunned face of Lee Adama contemplating the space war unfolding before him when he is suddenly left free-floating in space at the start of Resurrection Ship Part 2). So while the FTL jumps open the future by relying on the advent or the setting-off of the unknown, speed, by contrast, narrows down the perspectives and the points of view offered by time and space, forcing them to focus exclusively on the sole and narrow pursuit of increased possibilities.

Overall, the three temporal characteristics that structure the fleet's experience (the obsession with endings, the uncertain openings provided by the FTL jumps, and the good old reliance on speed) therefore expose the fleet's life as a life *of the limits*. This life is not *at the end* as if on its last leg, but a life of what is *always furthest*. This extreme life is obviously the life of the exodus, the most excessive life the human race can assume, a life with no anchor or historical ties, no sign posts or promised land, no geographical or theoretical horizon and no sweeping God-like panoramas. Perhaps this goes some way to explain the ships' mysterious gravity, yet another of the producers' absurd fantasies. Because the fleet *is* the horizon, because they no longer rely on a planet's gravity, their "horizontal" gravity gives them not only a sense of balance, but also—extraordinarily—ceilings and floors as if these architectural features still have meaning in deep space. And on this balanced self-generated but always shifting plane, their only task is to dream both the past and the future and to focus exclusively on what they provoke or on what comes unexpectedly. (Interestingly for us, this narrow focus also implies a disregard for the environmental disaster they leave behind: blown up ships, rubbish, corpses, radiation signatures). In this way, they live a life *of the edge*, between prior-lives and after-lives, speeding recklessly between one time-space jump and another.

Where does all this lead? Episode 33 clearly shows that the outcome of such a life will always be undecidable, even past the 137th hour when the Cylons fail to materialise and

even when they will reach the fabled Earth. On the one hand, the Colonials are at the mercy of the Cylons. They, and only they have a plan. As such, they stand not so much for an all-knowing God (they are far too irrational and hesitant for that), but as destiny's hand. This is the fatalistic aspect of the show, which always returns with predictable certainty in the mouth of Number Six ("God is watching out for you Gaius"). On the other, there is humanity's ability to reproduce. The humans might not have a plan, their existence might be reduced to its barest form, but they can always give birth and, in doing so, they can always give themselves the chance that another generation *will* have a plan—hence Roslyn's smile at the news that a baby was born at the end of the episode. This is the contingent aspect of the show, which bizarrely Gaius often incarnates ("The universe is a vast and complex system, coincidental serendipitous events are bound to occur!"). Overall, what episode 33 clearly shows in advance of all subsequent episodes is that the fleet will never be able to decide between the two: fatality/contingency, human/Cylon, future/past. Not even after some sleep, after the clock resumes its course, or when the future opens up again and the thick fabric of language regains its central and magisterial role of providing new ways of organising their past and articulating their future. Even then, they will still be unable to decide between the dualisms that structure their liminal existence. What marks human temporality is therefore the undecidability of the past and future—an undecidability that is always structured by the promise and/or the danger of the advent of something new. And the only thing that saves us, as always, in this "in-between" is our imagination and our infinite inventiveness.

ⁱ For this interpretation, see Jo Storm's chapter, "Apocalypse, Now?" in *Frak You! The Ultimate Unauthorized Guide to Battlestar Galactica* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2007), pp. 11-8.

ⁱⁱ See Giorgio Agamben, "The Muselmann," in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), pp. 41-86 and Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz and The Reawakening: Two Memoirs*, translated by Stuart Woolf (New York: Summit Books, 1986).

ⁱⁱⁱ For this specific Hebraic reversal see Claude Tresmontant, *Le Christ Hebreu* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992), p. 108. See also Gerard Bensussan, *Le temps messianique, temps historique et temps vécu* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2001), pp. 41-43.

^{iv} See for example, Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, several translators, edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

^v See for example, Jacques Derrida, "The Last of the Rogues States: The 'Democracy to Come,' Opening in Two Turns," in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103: 2/3, Spring/Summer 2004, pp. 323-41.

^{vi} The expression "horizontal" is not mine. I borrow it from Martin Heidegger's work. "Horizontal" refers to an existential horizon that cannot be understood as a matter of persistent self-sameness or as an enduring presence, but as the shifting possibilities of a structural variation. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper Collins, 1962), pp. 171-172 and John Sallis, *Delimitations: Phenomenology and the End of Metaphysics*, 2d ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 17.