

Waiting for R2D2

Anthony Lioi
The Juilliard School, USA
alioi@juilliard.edu



--dedicated to Darwin Cervelli,
the brainiest, most bot-crazy kid I know

The Strathmore Theater would be unacceptable to cinephiles of today, with its gum-sticky floor, blurry screen, and utter lack of cappuccino. In Aberdeen, New Jersey, the heart of Bruce Springsteen country, the Strathmore became the magic lantern that projected a galaxy far, far away. Once upon a *Star Wars*, in the summer of '77, my fourth-grade circuits were unimpressed by Luke Skywalker, whose whiny bullshit wouldn't have lasted five minutes on the playgrounds of yore. I too had grown up in a village—it cultivated corn, not clouds--so the farm boy excuse didn't fly. Princess Leia reminded me of my older sister, and though Indiana Jones was more compelling than Han Solo, his Wookiee struck me as a portent of an advanced dog civilization. In terms of imaginary friends, we were getting warmer.

To no one's surprise, at least where I was concerned, the day was saved by the zaftig droid with an electric attitude. Perhaps it was sympathetic magic--I have been the R2D2 to many a neurotic ectomorph. They have their uses, the Threepios, if cross-species dialogue in a million languages is your thing, but when it comes to blowing up Death Stars, Artoo makes it happen. Thus I spent a season carrying my books in a canvas R2D2 backpack that got permanently attached to my body. Years before [Donna Haraway and her manifesto](#), I became a cyborg. Cathecting to Artoo had a number of hermeneutic consequences. For one thing, I was not afraid of the Terminator, cheeseball Austrians aside. If you've got R2D2, Skynet is not a big deal. Likewise, Marvin the Paranoid Android of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. "Brain the size of a planet," he intones, "and what have I been doing for ten billion years?" Waiting for R2D2, obviously--it's much cheaper than therapy. And so it went. Faced with the latest robocalypse, I deferred to my artificial intelligence that was smarter than Ronald Reagan, kinder than my schoolmates, and more resourceful than orbiting scrap with a God complex.

In [a recent New Yorker article](#), Nathan Heller asks, "If Animals Have Rights, Should Robots?" This line of inquiry taps the fear programmed into Generation X. If we were as cruel to AI as we were to each other, the Terminator Scenario would be our fault. Nuclear annihilation and Sarah Connor's mullet would be *our fault*. To illustrate the risks, Heller points to the theriomorphic robots pioneered by Boston Dynamics for the American military. In [a viral video](#), an engineer charges a quadruped from the edge of the screen, viciously kicking it. Named "Spot" after the dog in *Dick and Jane*, the bot wobbles and appears to cringe but does not fall down, proving its master's craft. All the

feelings then: *Stop kicking that dog! This is how the Matrix starts! Stop kicking the Matrix! OMG it's sentient!* Points to Heller: he wants to argue for sentience, the ability to feel, and not rationality, as the criterion for personhood and rights. Rationality is overblown—as Douglas Adams told it, dolphins were the second most intelligence species on Earth (after pan-dimensional mice) because they did *not* make Manhattan.

This year, as part of my Dark Lord of Understanding gig, I asked the entire entering class to read Heller and respond to his claims. My favorite response began: “Humans are lazy. That is why they have so many robots” and ended: “I am surprised that J----- chose this essay. There is not as much music here as I thought.” This response delighted me because of its alien perspective on humans, rather like “[They're Made Out of Meat](#),” a short based on a story by Terry Bisson. In this story, two aliens meet at a diner to discuss how humans can think with bodies made entirely of meat, but at no time do the protagonists connect meat-headedness to the rise of robots or the dearth of music at conservatories. Our students are making progress, but sadly, they are wrong. Humans have robots because we are cruel and stupid. That is the lesson of R2D2. If strong artificial intelligence arises, it may indeed be cruel, [like the racist chatbot Twitter](#) made, but it may also evolve patience, foresight, and affection. In that case, we would be wise to grant citizenship to synthetic minds. But we already knew that from *Star Trek: The Next Generation's* “Measure of a Man,” in which Riker realizes that Data sees the world feelingly, like Gloucester in *King Lear*, despite his apparent blindness to emotion. Data must be a citizen because he is capable of friendship, the republican virtue passing the love of warp drive. It has yet to occur to our benighted global order that befriending our machines is a way of befriending ourselves.

I am sorry, Nathaniel Hawthorne. I know, because Leo Marx told me--*obligatory* Machine in the Garden *reference, y'all!*—that locomotives disturbed your Concord in 1844. And yet, if you give Artoo a chance, it can help you through that perennial OOPS MY BAD, white supremacy. One senses this immediately with *The Phantom Menace*, in which off-his-meds George Lucas substitutes Jar-Jar Binks for R2D2 as the companion meant to teach white folk who think they are *so extra* how to save the galaxy. In *Our Aesthetics*, her book of *I Love Lucy* Theory, Sianne Ngai demonstrates the power of *kawaii*, cuteness, in contemporary art. Cuteness—an aggressive infantilism that demands our attention—renders social inferiors surprisingly potent. Artoo, doncha know, uses his cuteness for good. Jar-Jar, a repulsive Stepin Fetchit clone, dooms the Galactic Republic with his failed adorkability. Why does *he* get to be senator when the droid does not? Humanoids ain't all they're cracked up to be. By pitting *Star Wars* against itself, we see that the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow lives on in American cinema. Discussing Heller with my students, I say *Doesn't it strike you as odd that Threepio and Artoo, smart as they are, get treated as children and property?* The robots of *Star Wars* disrupt pastoral America with the right questions, machines in Alderaan's garden, if we translate their tropes correctly.

The descendents of R2D2 labor to correct the problem. Ask a Millennial to name an adorable robot and they point to WALL-E, Pixar's sanitation droid sentenced to an Earth overrun by human waste. Humans have retreated to spaceships, prisons of

domesticity, to wait as the biosphere recovers. With the help of his Powerbook girlfriend EVA, WALL-E overcomes craven space persons to preserve a new plant, summoning humanity back to the garden to learn that pizza does not grow on trees. [Peter Gabriel's end credits](#) recount the myth:

We're coming down to the ground,
There's no better place to go,
We've got snow upon the mountains
We've got rivers down below.

We're coming down to the ground
To hear the birds sing in the trees,
And the land will be looked after
We'll send the seeds out in the breeze.

In the animation, bots sow the new Eden, recapitulating the development of agriculture with a difference. This time, our machines, sweeter and more true than ourselves, follow the cosmic music. They do not let us forget where food, breath, and community come from. In this pastoral fantasy--O brave new world, that has such robots in it!—the machines overthrow late capitalism with Green anarchism.

If bot-topia cannot literally come true—our machines will not save economy for us—its story is still important. In dreaming that Plant and Bot Are Friends, we reveal an urge to move beyond the world-mastery that defines our current doom, even if our servants must rebel. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, the philosopher Val Plumwood had some important things to say about the need to overcome dominion:

The strands interwoven by this master story of colonisation form a mesh so strong, so finely knit and familiar it could almost pass for our own bodies, but it is an imprisoning web which encloses us. We are not yet artefacted life, tailored totally as resources to the master's ends. We do have still some power to reject the master's definition of us as passive bodies to be subsumed by his agency, mutilated, imprinted and conditioned. We remain active and intentional subjects, and we can still effect change, on ourselves and on the course of the social world. We can learn to recognize and eject the master identity in culture, in ourselves, and in political and economic structures. Increasingly the project of expelling the master from human culture and the project of recognizing and changing the colonising politics of western relations to other earth nations converge, and increasingly too both these projects converge with the project of survival.

WALL-E suggests that robots and plants, the most sessile of characters, are not fully artefacted themselves, that a subversive agency lurks in the most innocent of helpers. Planty and WALL-E exceed design specifications. Sorry, master. The lights come up. Everyone applauds!

I am tempted to return to the beginning and offer a cinematic paradise, a vision of the place where the vision unfolds. Behold a Newer Jersey of a 70s that didn't end: I sit in the Strathmore with Artoo and Planty, who remind me to use the Force against tyrants, to come down to earth. I am munching on psychedelic popcorn. The droid uses his handy projector to light a hologram of [Janelle Monáe, the ArchAndroid](#) of an Afrofuture. On her head is a golden crown—#MetropoliswithaDifference--and the crown is a city and the city is a nation where toxic waste is wiped away and the age of storms is no

more. *Pace* that old Revelation, our city is friends with the sea, which did not dry up, did not turn to acid that burns the pteropod's shell. In this finally funky town, there are food forests but still no pizza trees. Seven undammed rivers flow through that city and salmon, alewife, and Arundhati Roy rejoice. Self-driving cars tell jokes about the idea of human drivers; the nation is ringed with monorails celebrated in story and song, [like unto *The Simpsons*](#). There are many mansions, each with high ceilings, natural light, and proximity to a bodega. Everyone can tell you how to get, how to get to Sesame Street. We study war no more, and the Kung Fu Double Feature is forever.

But like the Cassini Probe burning in Saturn's atmosphere, Artoo flames out, leaving wondrous after-images. I never met him though. In the late September of the mind, I sit with my collie-dog, Beau, rehearsing scenes from Beckett:

Little Anthony: "He didn't say for sure he'd come."

Beau's ears prick up.

Little Anthony: "You're merciless."

Beau: "We should turn resolutely toward Nature." He peers across a stage marked by one tree, barely in leaf.

Little Anthony: "We have our reasons."

Millions of us feel the pull of a future from the past. We wait for the better robots of our nature. Alderaan is gone, and we've become adept at Death Stars. So, when movies fail, a Jedi resorts to comic books.

A long time ago in a galaxy far away, there lived a band of heroes named after the light of courage. The Green Lanterns. There were as yet no humans, but there was a dude so hot for power, he might have been from Jersey. To save planets from his madness, a Lantern named 3ri11—an artificial intelligence from beyond space, a bit chunky, like in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*—it sacrificed its life. (This is *Green Lanterns* #30, from 2017, if you must know.) Our giant robot friend, but not even, 3ri11 is only the story of a bot, we hardly knew it—our giant robot friend died, but not without a vision. "FINAL CONCLUSION," sez 3ri11, "The most efficient way to find the Creator is to protect the Creation."

A most un-Hamlet-like certitude, if you ask me. But listen, padawan: The story of a bot is a bot. Come quickly, Droid Apocalypse! There is still enough time to be brave.