

I Love C-3PO

By Gavin Craig

0.0.

It cannot be taken for granted that an unaccompanied android must be in want of human affection.

0.1.

Does C-3PO love? Does he desire to be loved?

0.10.

The first question is easier to answer than the second. When R2-D2 returns, damaged from the attack on the first Death Star, C-3PO is distraught.

0.11

“Artoo! Can you hear me? Say something! You can repair him, can’t you? You must repair him. Sir, if any of my circuits or gears would help I’ll gladly donate them.”

0.100.

But what exactly is the relationship between R2-D2 and C-3PO?

0.101.

The word C-3PO uses is counterpart.

0.110.

“I am C-3PO, human-cyborg relations. And this is my counterpart, R2-D2.”

0.111.

Not companion or partner, but counterpart. A working relationship, marked perhaps by affection but not based on it.

0.1000.

So C-3PO is still single. Affectively available. If, that is, he desires to be loved.

1.1.

As a fictional artificial life form, C-3PO is somewhat unusual in that it is both established and somewhat taken for granted that he is possessed of tactile sensitivity and an affectively capable sense of himself.

1.10.

Given his physical form, the former might be almost as unexpected as the latter.

1.11.

There is no indication that C-3PO's exterior casing is anything other than stamped metal, a utilitarian protective shell. Sufficiently anthropomorphic so as to enable his social functions, but still clearly marked as mechanical.

1.100.

Note the exposed wiring in C-3PO's abdomen. Compared to the full body armor of the human Stormtroopers, this visible wiring serves only as a clear and unmistakable marker of status as an artificial being. It is a signal that removes ambiguity.

1.101.

Ambiguity, after all, can engender anxiety. And C-3PO, as a being of service and utility, is designed to be ignored.

1.110.

But.

1.111.

C-3PO feels pleasure.

1.1000.

On the Lars homestead on Tatooine, as Luke tries to clean the carbon scoring off R2-D2, C-3PO is immersed in a cleaning and/or lubrication solution.

1.1001.

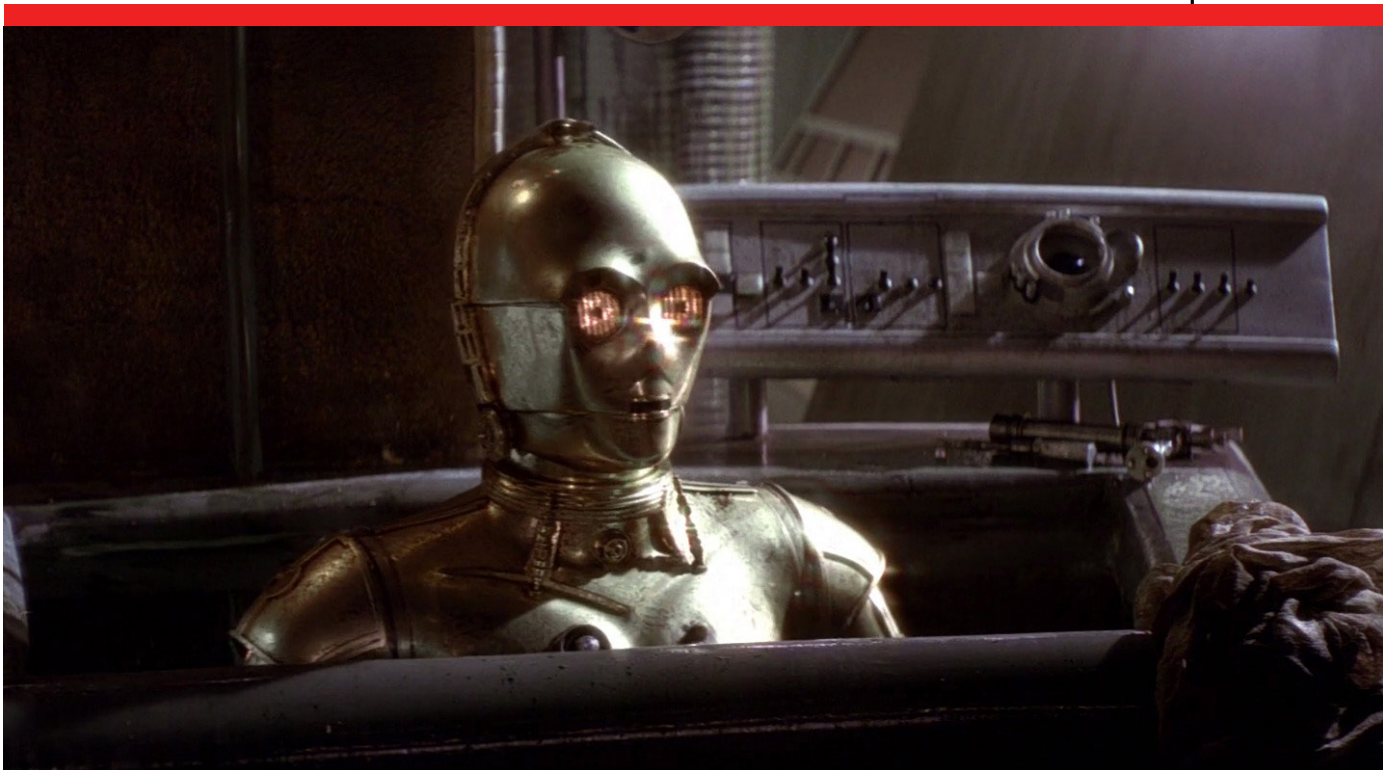
“Thank the maker! This oil bath is going to feel so good.”

1.1010.

This could be a utilitarian response – perhaps there is sand impairing C-3PO’s mobility – but his delivery is affectively convincing.

1.1011.

Of course, C-3PO is a protocol unit, skilled in linguistic markers of affect. He could be parroting, except that the line isn’t delivered to anyone in particular. Luke isn’t paying attention.



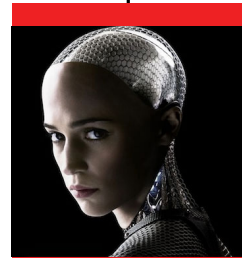
1.1100.
C-3PO – Threepio, as his designation shifts to functioning as a name – is talking to himself. He is addressing his own physical and emotional needs.



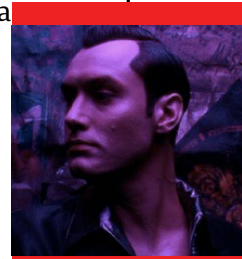
1.1101.
C-3PO is an erotic subject.

1.1110.
There is no Hedonism Bot without C-3PO.

10.1.
There is a long and established history in fiction of the artificial being as erotic object.

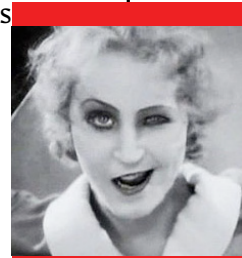


10.10.
Ava in *Ex Machina*, Joe Gigolo in *A.I.*, the fembots in *Austin Powers*, Maria in *Metropolis*.



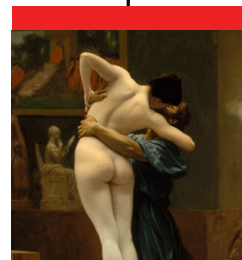
10.11.
Galatea.

10.100.
But to draw a contrast to C-3PO as affective and erotic subject, it is necessary to outline a specific counterposition.



10.101.
And as much as I'd like to resist placing Star Wars against Star Trek – because in a broad sense, what could be less interesting? – that counterposition is Data.

10.110.
Contrary to his own regular insistence, it seems clear that Data does in fact have feelings.



10.111.
In “Encounter at Farpoint,” when the audience is still being introduced to the crew of The Enterprise for the first time, Commander Riker seeks out Data on the holodeck.

10.1000.

This is, not incidentally, the first time the audience sees the holodeck, a location continually associated with fantasy, the subconscious and desires that cannot be indulged elsewhere.

10.1001.

Data is halfway up a tree, attempting to whistle “Pop Goes the Weasel,” but he is unable, for some inexplicable reason, to whistle the final few notes.

10.1010.

Seriously, there’s really no reason why Data wouldn’t be able to finish whistling a simple tune were he able to whistle the earlier notes. Unless of course, he is simply not a very good whistler, in which case, suck it up. Not all of us can whistle.

10.1011.

When Riker completes the melody, Data turns and looks at him with what can only be described as abject longing.

10.1100.

“Marvelous. How easily humans do that.”

10.1101.

Desire, of course, is an emotion and Data’s drive to become more human is almost always conveyed to the audience in emotional rather than algorithmic terms.

10.1110.


But.

10.1111.


What Data describes as his lack of emotion is usually more accurately described as a lack of affective investment in situations or interpersonal relationships.

10.10000.

Data’s unsuitability as a romantic subject is explored in an entire episode of its own: “In Theory,” Season 4, Episode 25. Data creates a romantic subroutine in response to a colleague’s interest in him and then deletes it when she breaks up with him at the end of the episode.



That is
to say
that the
holodeck
itself is
an erotic
object.



10.10001.

It is revealed that the colleague, Lt. D'Sora, and her previous partner had split because he was emotionally unavailable. The episode thus posits but does not further explore affective attachment to an artificial being as a symptom within a pathology.

10.10010.

“Hero Worship,” Season 5. Episode 11, makes a similar postulation when a traumatized child imitates Data as a means to escape his grief over the death of his parents.

10.10011.

More interesting, perhaps, is the manner in which Data’s romantic attachment to Lt. D’Sora avoids all mention of Data’s sexual functionality, established in no uncertain terms in “The Naked Now,” Season 1, Episode 3.

10.10100.

“I am programmed in multiple techniques, a broad variety of pleasuring.”



10.10101.

As a being of sexual capability but devoid of the possibility of erotic desire, Data is an embodiment of the artificial being as erotic object.

10.10110.

It is worth noting that Star Trek's unease with Data as erotic object is linked to his gendering in the Star Trek world as male. Most representations of artificial beings as erotic object are much less apologetic, but in the vast majority of these representations, the artificial being is coded as a woman.

10.10111.

There is, on the other hand, almost no evidence that C-3PO is endowed with any sort of sexual functionality.

X.1

One piece of counter-evidence exists that is worth noting.

X.10.

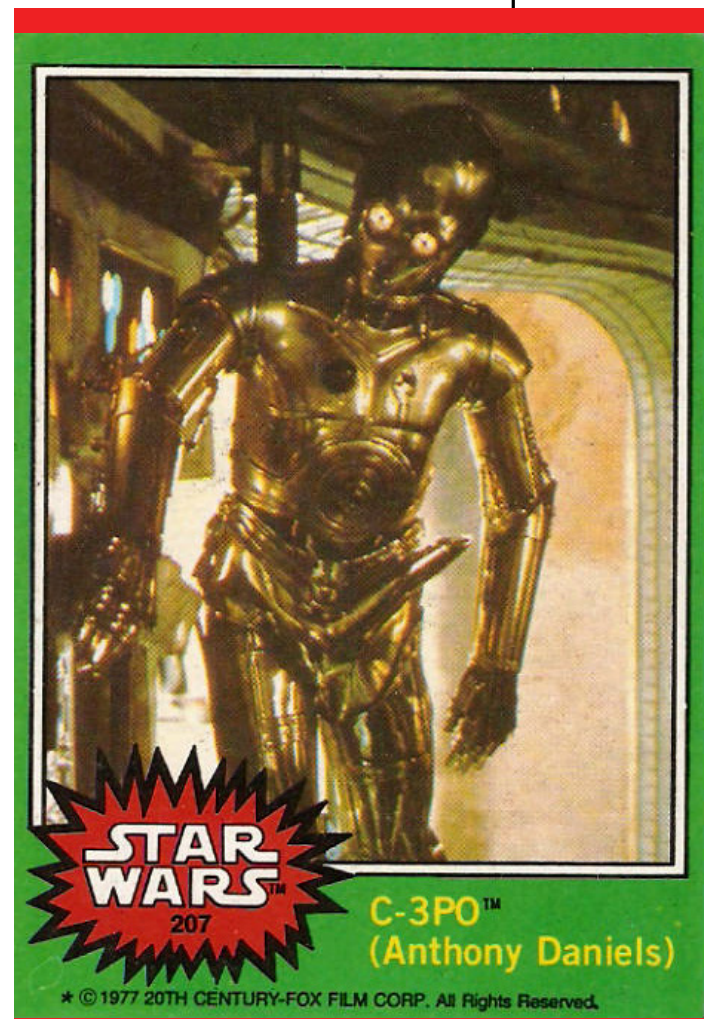
A trading card in a set released by Topps in 1977 includes a picture of what can be interpreted as C-3PO with a penis.

X.11.

Card #207, Star Wars Series 4 (Topps, 1977)

X.100.

There is no definitive explanation for how the image came to be. Snopes.com reports that the official Star Wars web site has stated that the image as it appears on the card is the same as in the contact sheets from the original photo shoot, and thus the image is likely a combination of costume malfunction and an accident of lighting rather than mischievous retouching.



10.11000.

Regardless of his physical capacities, there is reason to believe that C-3PO is possessed of affective desire.

10.11001.

See: 0.10.

11.1.

If the purpose of this argument were merely to establish an artificial being as an affective subject, then it would be written about R2-D2 rather than C-3PO.

11.10.

While both C-3PO and R2-D2 are affectionately demonstrative, Artoo expresses affective desire much more clearly than C-3PO ever does.

11.11.

When Luke storms away after Artoo has tricked him into removing his restraining bolt, Artoo beeps a question to C-3PO.

11.100.

“No, I don’t think he likes you at all.”

11.101.

Artoo beeps sadly.

11.110.

“No. I don’t like you either.”

11.111.


While it is never explicitly clear that C-3PO, like R2-D2, desires affection, and while Artoo is probably more broadly popular than C-3PO, there are problems with loving R2-D2.

11.1000.


R2-D2 is feisty, loyal, and absolutely reliable when entrusted with a purpose. He is the perfect agent.

11.1001.

I have a difficult time envisioning R2-D2 as similarly trustworthy in considering someone else’s emotional well-being.



Artoo's
electronic
language is
by design
very
emotionally
expressive.



11.1010.

R2-D2 is not always a very good friend.

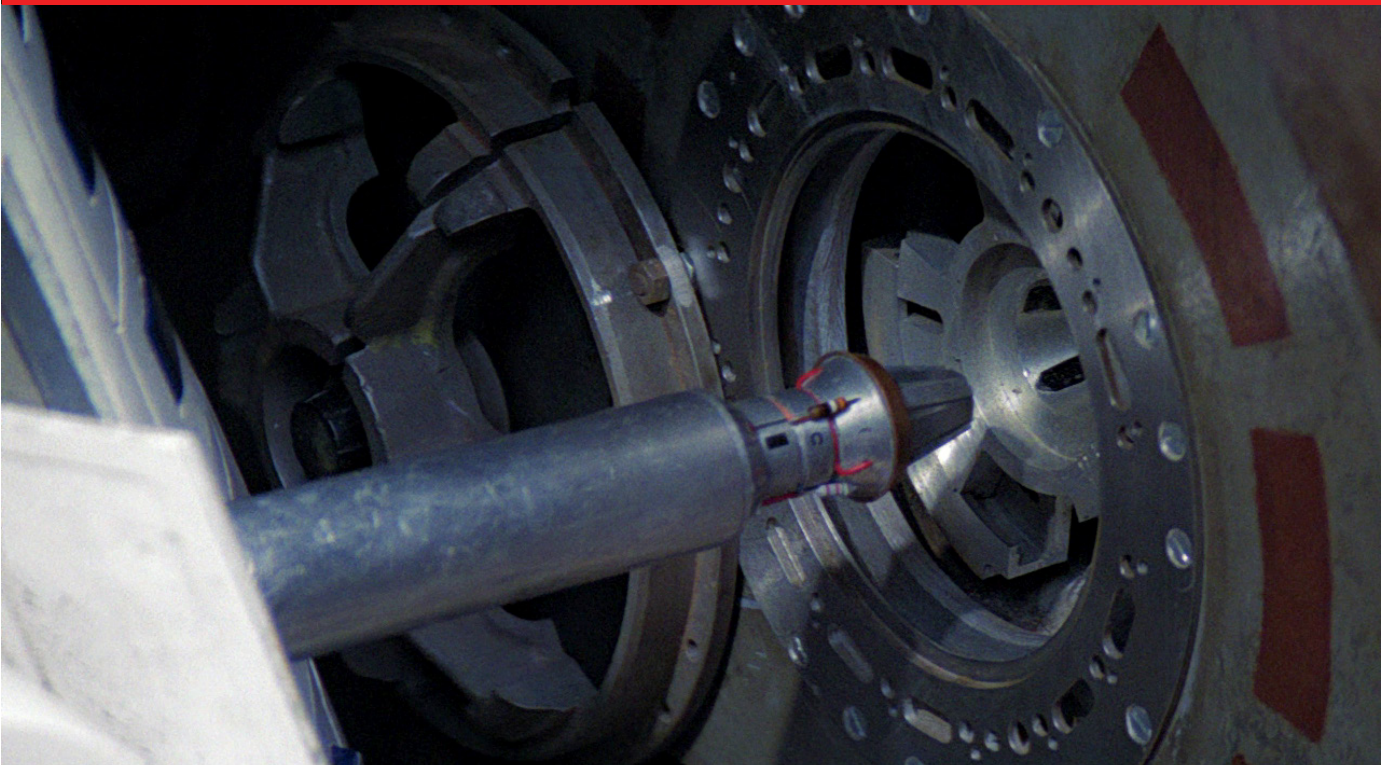
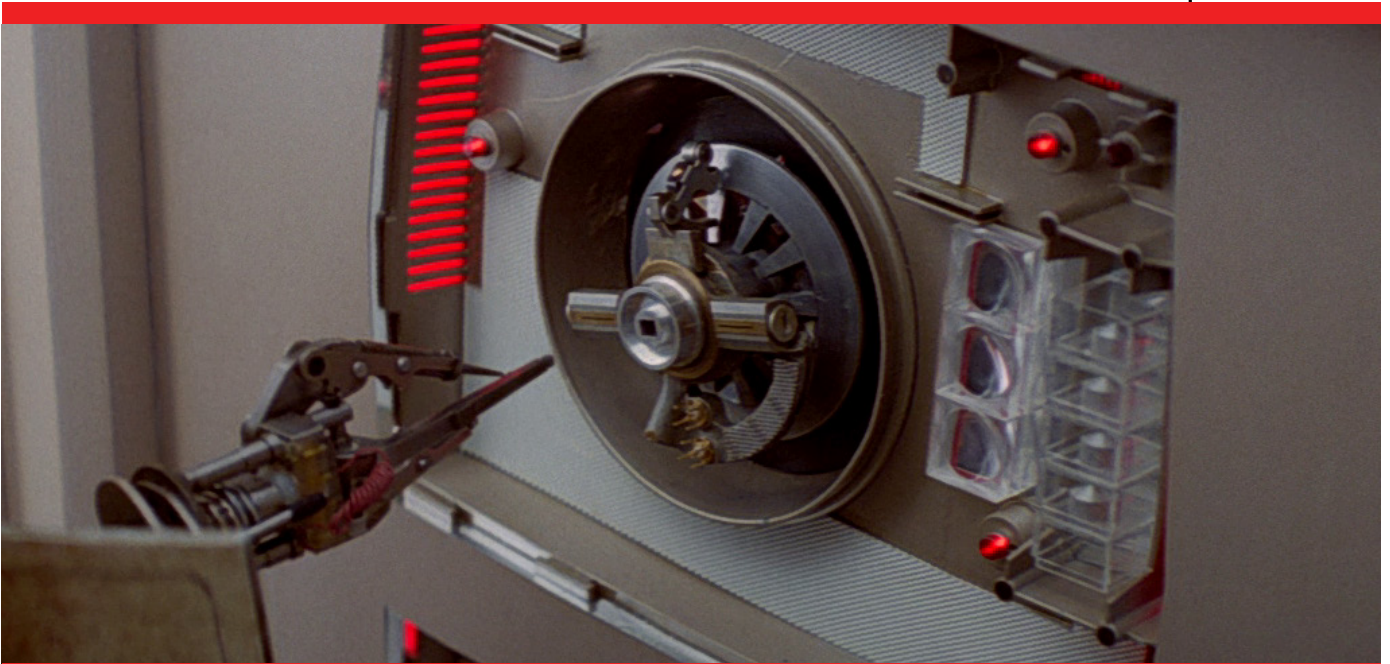
11.1011.

C-3PO is self-important and emotionally sensitive. He is a coward.

11.1100.

R2-D2 sticks his probe in unfamiliar places so often that he can't tell the difference between a power socket and a computer terminal anymore.

Top: a power socket; Bottom: a computer terminal



11.1101.

R2-D2 will ask you whether you like him.

11.1110.

C-3PO craves your approval, even if he will not stoop to admit it.

11.1111.

I can admire R2-D2, but I cannot really love him.

100.1.

There is a productive result that becomes visible in an acknowledgement of love for C-3PO.

100.10.

Our imaginations, while expansive, are not without limit.

100.11.

When we consider artificial intelligence, it is often as either:

100.100

A reproduction of humanity, desirous primarily of additional fidelity in the facsimile of that reproduction. (The Pinocchio trope)

100.101.

A being of inhuman subjectivity, and a danger to humanity as a result of that alterity. (The Hal 2000 trope)

100.110.

C-3PO's presentation is remarkable for the near absence of these tropes.

100.111.

C-3PO is an imperfect, relational being whose desire is not primarily focused on his own nature or altering that nature. He is selfish, but not particularly self-considering.

100.1000.

He, unlike Artoo, is not always good at his job, but he tries.

100.1001.

Threepio cares. More than he lets on.

100.1010.

He is capable, imperfectly, of addressing his own emotional and physical needs.

100.1011.

This may be the very definition of the erotic subject.

100.1100.

For all this, I still cannot be certain whether C-3PO is desirous of human affection.

100.1101.

Subjectivity is uncertainty, final indeterminability.

100.1110.

I do not know whether C-3PO would want my love.

100.1111.

He has it anyway. 🍷

