Gendering Computers in Science Fiction: What Gives?

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/06/22/gendering-computers-in-science-fiction-what-gives/

LUKE M. HERRINGTON, JUN 22 2013

In a recent tweet, Neil deGrasse Tyson, a prominent astrophysicist and director of the Hayden Planetarium in New York City, posed an interesting observation that caught my attention. "Curious that it's always a female computer voice that calmly announces self-destruct sequences and other violent disasters," he tweeted. Naturally, the Sci-Fi nerd in me was giddy.

With my curiosity piqued, I set my current project—a review of Brent J. Steele's*Ontological Security in International Relations*—aside, and put my mind to the question. It only took a few minutes for me to decide that the best answer might come from IR's subfield of feminist theory and gender studies. With that in mind, I posted my own tweet on the question and assigned it the "#FTGS" hashtag, the same one used by the Feminist Theory and Gender Studies section of the International Studies Association.

While the official Twitter feed of the FTGS section came to my aid, tagging a few feminist scholars and Nicholas Kiersey into the brief discussion, my question remains unresolved. That said, I had an interesting exchange with Kiersey, the co-editor of *Battlestar Galactica and International Relations*.

Kiersey was intrigued, but he had to point out that he had no idea how to begin answering the question. So, he started—as did I—from the same place many of Tyson's Twitter followers did by trying to think of a counter-example. And Hal 9000 from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, that nefarious male computer program with the ominous red light for an eye, came to mind. However, Hal is not really an effective counter-example. Though murderous, he never engaged an auto-destruct sequence, or counted down the seconds to some major disaster.

Hal also seems to be a different archetype than the stereotypical feminine computer voice, epitomized by the "Computer" built-in to most of the spaceships of the *Star Trek* franchise. Bearing in mind the fact that I last saw *Space Odyssey* when I was in high school, let me observe first that Hal started out as a sort of protector-figure. His murderous agenda was the result of a computer coding error that allowed his need to protect a mysterious monolith to override his need to protect and serve his human crew. On the other hand, the *Trek* Computer functions more as a nurturer and caregiver. There's a reason she is responsible for feeding the crew, keeping their schedules, taking their notes, and so on.

It's not difficult to imagine how more traditional, stereotypical gender roles could unfold and evolve from here. Really think about it. Most of the male robots and computer programs featured in cinema and on TV are murderous or protective, emotionless, calculating figures. Think of Arnold Schwarzenegger's various incarnations as the Terminator or of Agent Smith in *The Matrix* trilogy. And while the Computer in *Star Trek* is always cool, calm, and collected, she is nevertheless reduced to a servile role.

This begs another question: why do we assign gender (and gender roles) to computers and robots anyway?

But before we try to answer new questions, we have to admit that none of this really answers the question at hand. Why is it that the female computers are the ones that always count us down to moments of chaos or destruction? Even though these computers remain emotionless and calm, there is an interesting symbolism created by the juxtaposition of their countdowns and the panic they cause. Ultimately, the Hal-Computer dichotomy seems to fit

rather well into similar such dichotomies observed by feminist thinkers that separate traditional masculine and feminine roles: male-female, rational-irrational, public-private, stoic-emotional, and so on.

Of course, I still don't feel like we have arrived at an adequate answer to Tyson's original question. Moreover, until some enterprising FTGS scholar comes to my rescue I am not sure we ever will. To paraphrase Annick T.R. Wibben and Roberta Guerrina, FTGS is a politico-intellectual project for emancipation, so its agenda is probably more important than my nerdy ramblings. Given this, Tyson's question may not matter in the grand scheme of things. With the upsurge of scholars using science fiction as a tool by which to explore the ontological limits of IR though (see here, here, here, and here), I'm hopeful that some of e-IR's readers or contributors might be willing to give it some thought. Join the discussion on Twitter @e_ir, #FTGS, #AutomatedSelfDestruct, or feel free to offer your thoughts in the comments below.

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