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Parental Androids

An Analysis of Non-normative Care Discourse in Contemporary Televised Science Fiction

Abstract

About forty years ago, feminist scholars formulated several independent definitions of an ethics of care (Gilligan 1982; Ruddick 1989; Noddings 1984), suggesting the need to reframe human collective and personal interactions. However, care theory fails for the most part to consider the lived experiences and the needs of marginalized subjects (Gary 2022). This study observes care theory from a linguistic perspective in three audio-visual texts featuring examples of non-normative care. The sci-fi TV series Star Trek: The Next Generation*,* Battlestar Galactica*, and* Raised by Wolves *will be considered, with a focus on androids acting as caregivers. The linguistic analysis, following a Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), will focus on discursive strategies relating to the parties involved, their relational ties, care behaviors, and the androids' adequacy as caretakers. The emerging perspectives may be mapped onto current discourse on minority groups' access to fostering or adoption and their reproductive rights.*

Keywords: *care theory, discourse-historical approach, science fiction, posthumanism, discourse analysis*

1. Introduction[1]

The history of science fiction (henceforth SF) is entangled with a fascination for the non-human Other. Extra-terrestrial life, sentient animals, and intelligent machines populate the science-fictional imagination, serving as a counterpoint to our human perspective. One of the oldest traditions in SF features the exploration of the capacity to generate new life by relying on technical progress.

Often the unwitting protagonists of a tale of human *hubris*, robots, androids, and other artificial

[1] The authors would like to clarify that, although this essay originates from their continuous collaboration, Sections 1, 2, 5.1, and 6 were written by Valentina Romanzi and Sections 3, 4 and 5.2 were written by Valeria Franceschi.

sentient entities predate the advent of SF proper and mark its inception as a fictional genre, with the Jewish immemorial tale of the Golem[2] echoing in several of its foundational works—above all, Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein,* the progenitor of the genre (Aldiss and Wingrove 2001, 3-29), and Karel Čapek's 1921 play *R.U.R.*, in which the word 'robot' was first used.[3]

The scholarship on the genre is compact in arguing that SF is one of the most appropriate *loci* in which to trace a depiction of human fears and hopes for the future, as well as some of the most vocal criticism of the present. Thanks to "cognitive estrangement" (Suvin 1979), SF displaces the good and evil of human society and projects it onto an alternative reality, allowing for that distance needed to acquire a detached perspective. Thus, scholars have interpreted artificial life forms such as androids as fictional manifestations of a number of oppressed human groups: racial minorities (Mackereth 2019; Deis 2008), gender or sexual minorities (Gibson 2017 Greenblatt 2016), individuals with disabilities (Bérubé 2005; Johnston Riley 2022), the working class (Straetz 2017), with a recent shift to a more intersectional perspective. In what follows, we would like to analyze the discourse featuring in and pertaining to three specific instances of androids representing those marginalized humans that cannot access parenthood or maternity unimpeded—that is, individuals whose ability or eligibility to be a parent has been denied or questioned. This includes people struggling with infertility issues or belonging to historically disparaged racial minorities, queer people, young parents, and single people.

Grappling with notions of parenthood, childbearing, childrearing, and—most importantly—care, the language used by parental androids offers precious insights into how the marginalized experience and perform care, a concept at the forefront of Care Theory (also known as Ethics of Care [Gilligan 1982; Ruddick 1989; Noddings 1984]). Although the literature on androids and artificial intelligence in SF is abundant, not many scholars have devoted their attention to the linguistic dimension of the genre and its tropes (see, e.g., Mandala 2010; Stockwell 2014). This essay carries out an analysis on three SF TV series using Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical

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[2] A Golem is a clay- or mud-based creature devoid of free will, brought to life through the power of the Jewish alphabet and controlled entirely by its master. There exist several versions of the myth and several tales featuring an array of Golem-like creatures (Dennis 2016).

[3] The use of *robot* in *R.U.R.* is paradoxically a misnomer, if understood in the modern sense: its artificial creatures are not made of mechanical parts but of synthetic organic matter, thus qualifying them as androids in contemporary layman terminology. The difference between *robot* and *android* is not set in stone. However, for clarity's sake, in this paper we refer to any human-like artificial creature as an android, regardless of its structural composition, while we understand robots to be intelligent purely mechanical machines, and cyborgs technologically enhanced humans. For a breakdown of the use and etymology of the terms, see Prucher 2007.

Approach as a methodological framework. The results of the linguistic and discursive analysis will then be read through the lens of care theory.

2. Care theory

In her foundational text *In a Different Voice* (1982), Carol Gilligan argued that women understood morality as generated by and existing in the service of a network of individuals, bound by relationships of care, rather than as adherence to a set of moral norms (1982, 30). Her research inspired a body of works that applied a gendered perspective to studies of morality, ethics, and psychology, which eventually developed into an 'ethics of care.' Despite the variety in practice and focus, care ethics is currently understood as a loosely connected interpretive framework which has recently evolved into "care theory" (Gary 2022, 3).

The first, widely shared tenet of care theory is its insistence on the necessity to understand human beings as *relational*, rather than independent, selves (Gary 2022, 3), and that the focus is on a caring *relation* (Noddings 2012, 53). Further, we distinguish between relational caring, given instinctively as part of a reciprocal relationship, and virtue caring, performed due to an expectation of virtue on the caregiver's part. This fundamental distinction demands that the attention of care ethics shift from an evaluation of the caregiver's ability to provide care effectively to the response the cared-for delivers when receiving care. In other words, care ethics argues that a caring relationship only exists when the caring act is acknowledged by the cared-for (Noddings calls this "reciprocity," not in the sense that the caring act should be replicated onto the caregiver, but that it must be recognized by the cared-for [2012, 54]). Virtue caring, with its totalizing focus on the caregiver, does not actually generate a care relationship. Nevertheless, less "instinctual" caring—i.e., caring that derives from a reasoned, ethical choice, rather than from love—is accepted when "something goes wrong" and "there is some disruption" which makes us reflect on how best to deliver care (Noddings 2012, 54). In such challenging moments, we rely on "ethical caring, an ethical ideal built of recollections of caring and being cared-for" (Noddings 2012, 54).

The second, widely shared notion of care ethics, which Noddings calls "receptive attention," is profoundly tied to these notions of relationality. It consists in a form of active, careful listening that will lead to the caregiver being able to provide for the needs of the cared-for. Practicing receptive attention puts us in a vulnerable state, as we have to step into the other's shoes in order to understand what they might need (Noddings 2012, 54)—an emotional task that generates empathy (Slote 2007), or rather a form of *receptive* empathy made up of both "reading" and "understanding" the other (Noddings 2012, 54).

Noddings' focus on relationality is one of the few (relatively) stable aspects in the field, which otherwise tends to concentrate on specific, material processes rather than a general, 'grand' theory of care (Gary 2022, 3). Moreover, because of its profoundly interdisciplinary nature, the field has undergone a nominal change, shifting from care *ethics* to care *theory* (Gary 2022, 3). This label better represents the multifaceted dimension of research conducted on care and welcomes a (still somewhat blurry) distinction between the *welfare-resourcing* and *ethico-political* strains, where the first tackles "provision of care at the societal level" (Conradi 2020, 32) and the second maintains the focus on interpersonal care relations (Conradi 2020, 27), with the work of Joan Tronto covering both strands (Conradi 2020, 29).

Care theory, then, needs perspectives that embrace it as a multifaceted, polymorphous field in which different positions can coexist and inform each other instead of clashing. Following Gary, we too advocate for a "pluralist feminist critique of care" (2022, 10) that recognizes and corrects the biases that have informed its inception and reception. The first is its rootedness in the "white, cisheterosexual, middle-class" experience of motherhood as described by the first scholars who defined the field, leaving a noticeable and as of yet unfilled gap when it comes to the practice and experience of care of marginalized minorities, or of non-normative and non-biological 'found' families that eschew the nuclear, heteronormative family, such as the transgender community (Gary 2022, 5). The second is that care theory must be aware of—and permanently on alert for—potential avenues of weaponization of its fundamental tenets. For instance, the fact that care theory derives from the concept of motherhood implies a high risk of replication of the dominant patriarchal structure of power and oppression, masked as expectation or duty of care. This has been done in colonial times, when not only did the colonizers frame, but also truly *believed* their actions to be necessary to impart a civilizing lesson to the indigenous populations—the (in)famous "white man's burden" (Gary 2022, 7). Similarly, as Gary remarks, "other critics have raised concerns over the weaponization of care ethics in the service of gendered, ableist, and capitalist domination. […] [C]are ethics' emphasis on empathy, other-directedness, and interpersonal need provision seem to both paper over and legitimate relations of domination" (2022, 7).

We would like to suggest one more avenue for care theory, one that expands its boundaries onto the realm of fictional scenarios. As care theory sorely needs to address non-conforming, non-normative forms of care, we should (receptively) listen to the voices of human Others as they pass through the mouths of alien ones, analyzing declarations, dialogues and uttered reflections which, together with non-verbal acts, grant us insight into the perception and reception of care

on the part of fictional characters standing in for those marginalized in real life.[4] Fiction, and SF especially, can have a transformative power when it tackles matters to make the audience actively reflect on them in real life. As such, empathic responses to SF texts fall within the domain of care theory, not only because they inspire reflection, but also because they might result in concrete social and personal change—the very goal of care theory. Moreover, one of its fundamental values is its endeavor to move past a patriarchal social vision based on conflict, thus facilitating the discussion on non-conventional care through the 'safe' lens of fiction in a manner that would not be seen as another instance of the forced, oppressive accommodation of the needs of the hegemonic collectivity on the marginalized others' part. On the contrary, by doing so it would become a bridge between oppressors and oppressed, moving towards a society built on reciprocal care. We agree with the view that it is not the responsibility of the oppressed to explain themselves, nor to present their reflections on the oppressive dynamics set in place by the hegemonic culture. At the same time, we do advocate for well-meaning attempts toward reciprocal understanding, even when partial or mediated, as the best way to put care theory into practice.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Selection

This study aims to diachronically investigate the discourse on parenthood as applied to non-human artificial life forms; more specifically, it focuses on androids' access to procreation and parenthood, and their ability to care for a young dependent, human or otherwise. To this purpose, we selected three SF television shows produced within the last 35 years and featuring relevant themes as a source of data:

- *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994) (henceforth TNG)
- *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009) (henceforth BSG)
- *Raised by Wolves* (2020-2022) (henceforth RW)

All these shows present artificially created life forms: mechanical androids in the case of TNG and RW, and organic androids, known as Cylons and virtually indistinguishable from humans, in BSG.

[4] The reasoning for applying a socio-philosophical framework to fiction lies outside the scope of the present study and has already been provided, in relation to science fiction, in Romanzi 2022: 118-127.

The relationship between humans and androids in these three texts is varied: in TNG, there is only one unique advanced android, Data, who lives on the starship *Enterprise* with the ship's crew and acting as an operations officer with the rank of Lieutenant Commander.

In RW, there are different types of android models that are deployed for different purposes, including violence, at the service of the human population. As a premise for the show, two androids, named Mother and Father, are programmed to bring human embryos to term and raise the resulting children on planet Kepler-22b, in order to create a new colony since Earth can no longer sustain human life.

BSG differs from the other shows in that the conflict between humans and Cylons is central to the series, which opens with the Cylons destroying the human planets, leaving a rag-tag space fleet of about 50,000 survivors to flee in search of a new home.

All these shows deal with androids engaging in caregiving[5] and pro-creative acts in varying ways and extents: these themes are touched upon in a small number of episodes in TNG and BSG, while they are at the core of the show in RW. For this reason, only relevant episodes were selected for TNG and BSG, whereas the entire first season was taken into consideration for RW, as detailed below.

TV series	Episodes
TNG	Datalore (1.13); The Offspring (3.16); Inheritance (7.10)
BSG	33 (1.01); The Farm (2.05); Home, pt. 1 (2.06); Epiphanies (2.13); Downloaded (2.18); Sine Qua Non (4.08); A Disquiet Follows my Soul (4.12).
RW	Raised by Wolves (1.01); Pentagram (1.02); Virtual Faith (1.03); Nature's Course (1.04); Infected Memory (1.05); Lost Paradise (1.06); Faces (1.07); Mass (1.08); Umbilical (1.09); The Beginning (1.10)

Tab. 1: Analyzed episodes of the three series

In mirroring care theory's trajectory from the particular to the general, we have chosen an

[5] It should be noted that in TNG, the android Data is also entrusted with the care of a cat, Spot, who appears multiple times during the series and is often the subject of discussions about biological life between Data and his crewmates. While this instance of caretaking is not part of the scope of this study, which focuses on human or human-like children, we may immediately observe the speciesist nature of the dominant community that allows a synthetic life form to care for a biological animal, but not to have caretaking rights over human children or over the life they themselves have created.

analytical framework known as Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (e.g. Wodak 2015), a branch of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (e.g. Fairclough 1995) that focuses on specific linguistic choices to derive considerations about the socio-historical context that produced them.

3.2 Discourse-Historical Approach

CDA provides a range of tools for the critical investigation of ideologies embedded in discourse through the analysis of rhetorical and linguistic devices. CDA is closely tied to the notion of power and imbalances between social groups, as it often looks at how the language of those in power perpetuates discriminatory behaviors and therefore social inequalities (Wodak and Meyer 2001). Within CDA, we will adopt the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), which has been widely applied to the investigation of social discrimination, specifically "in a number of studies which focus on racist discrimination, national identities and discourses about 'Us' and 'Them'" (Wodak and Boukala 2015, 93; see also Reisigl and Wodak 2001a). Moreover, the approach follows the principle of triangulation, which entails taking into account a wide range of "empirical observations, theories and methods as well as background information" (Reisigl and Wodak 2001b, 89). This framework is therefore well applicable to the texts under investigation: androids in SF are traditionally constructed as inferior, gendered and racialized Others, making the relationship between them and humans an issue of power. In addition, the study employs an interdisciplinary approach that combines linguistic and discursive analysis with care theory, and adopts a diachronic perspective to investigate how ideologies have shifted over the course of almost four decades of televised SF.

3.3 Methodological approach

The methodological approach of the present study is qualitative and entails the close watching of the selected episodes in order to identify language choices and patterns that can help shed light on the underlying ideology discriminating androids as caregivers, and especially as parents. Discriminatory discourse by humans is analyzed to show the existing power imbalance that disfavors synthetic life forms, but counternarratives, where we see both androids and humans rejecting and even fighting against the dominant discourse, are also identified.

This analysis will focus on the five discursive strategies identified as part of DHA: nomination (referential), predication, argumentation, perspectivation, and mitigation/intensification (Wodak 2015). Nomination indicates the way people nominate or refer to other participants in order to create in-groups and out-groups; predication is the qualification of "social actors more or less positively or negatively, deprecatorily or appreciatively" (Reisigl and Wodak 2001a, 45);

argumentation provides justifications for positive or negative evaluations and discriminatory behaviors, or preferential treatment towards a specific subsect of actors using *topoi;* perspectivation positions the point of view of the speaker/writer, expressing involvement or distance; and mitigation/intensification modifies "the illocutionary force and thus the epistemic or deontic status of utterances" (Reisigl and Wodak 2001b, 113). Inspired by Aristotelian tradition, *topoi* are an aspect of argumentation that, either "fallacious or reasonable" (Wodak and Boukala 2015, 94), is used to legitimize discriminatory discourse.

Due to the distinctive nature of the texts under investigation, for our analysis we have considered five recurring *topoi*, two already conceptualised by Wodak and Boukala and three new ones, inferred from the texts (Table 2):

Topos	Warrant
Topos of threat	If there are specific dangers or threats, one should do something against them (Wodak and Boukala 2015, 97).
Topos of humanitarianism	If a political action or decision does or does not conform to human rights or humanitarian convictions and values, then one should or should not perform or make it (Wodak and Boukala 2015, 97).
Topos of genuineness	If behaviors stem from an algorithm, they are not genuine and should therefore be understood as inferior to those originating from human nature.
Topos of religious faith	If one does not share the dominant religious faith, one has to be considered devoid of a soul and of personhood.
Topos of creation	If one cannot procreate naturally, then they are inferior.

Tab 2: Content-related *topoi* in discriminatory discourses on androids

In particular, this framework will be applied to two main topics: 1) kinship terminology as employed and disputed by both androids and humans, and 2) ability and suitability to care for another life form, as asserted by the androids and questioned by the humans.

4. Linguistic Analysis

4.1 Kinship terminology

In human societies, we recognize different categories of kin relationships, defined with specific lexemes that denote varied familial bonds "established through procreation (consanguineal) or juridical means (affinal)" (Costa, Gubello and Tasker 2021). The *ensemble* of these linguistic elements is known as kinship terminology. In different societies, "kin classification systems are shaped by the principles of simplicity and informativeness," where the lowest cognitive load and

precise communication exist (Kemp and Regier 2012, 1049). However, the establishment of kinship bonds is not limited to biological or legal recognition, as other types of kinship that may be neither consanguineal nor affinal—i.e., ritual, situational, intentional—are recognized. The latter two are especially relevant to our context, as they define respectively "non-biological and non-affinal relationships" characterized in one case by a "shared situation," and in the second case by lying "outside of a formal naming ritual or particular shared location" (Costa, Gubello and Tasker 2021). These types of relationships are encountered in both TNG (intentional) and RW (situational), whereas in BSG, the more traditional consanguineal relationship is complicated by the synthetic nature of one of the parents.

In all of the shows under investigation, consanguineal kinship terminology is employed to describe the relationships established between androids and the human-like life forms they care for, be they organic, synthetic, or hybrid. The adoption of such terms by the humans involved is, however, not taken for granted: while some humans do (at least semantically) equate relationships involving androids to consanguineal and affinal human bonds, other humans do not, highlighting instead the synthetic nature of the androids and their inability to develop true social bonds and effectively perform acts of care.

In TNG, the first time kinship terms are used in relation to Data is when they discover the android Lore, also created by Dr Noonien Soong and identical to Data in appearance but not in behavior, as Lore is not equipped with an ethical program and may therefore be considered Data's 'evil twin.' Data and Lore refer to one another as brothers ("Commander…is this another me? Or possibly my brother?"—Data, "Datalore," 1.13) and to Dr Soong as their father ("our beloved father"—Lore, "Datalore," 1.13). Soong and his wife Dr Juliana Tainer similarly refer to themselves as the androids' parents. We also see pervasive use of kinship terminology to refer to relationships including nonhuman characters in the episode "The Offspring" (3.16), when Data creates a new android, Lal:

(1) Lal: Purpose for exterior drapings, father?
Wesley Crusher: (mouthed) father?
Data: It is an accepted custom that we wear clothing.
Wesley Crusher: Data, it called you father.
Data: Yes, Wesley. Lal is my child.

The crew of the *Enterprise* seems to adapt easily to the new situation and starts referring to Data and Lal as father and daughter, with the exception of Captain Picard, who expresses his uncertainties to ship counsellor Deanna Troi at the beginning of the episode:

(2) Picard: I insist we do whatever we can to discourage the perception of this new android as a child. It is not a child. It is an invention, albeit an extraordinary one.
Troi: Why should biology rather than technology determine whether it is a child? Data has created an offspring. A new life out of his own being. To me, that suggests a child. If he wishes to call Lal his child, then who are we to argue?

Here, Picard underlines the difference between organic and artificial life forms through predication by labelling Lal an "invention," showing "a hole within [his] veneer of liberalism and with it a rare example of lingering technophobia" (Short 2003, 218). This perspective is immediately contrasted by Troi, who, on the other hand, equates Lal to a child, thus accepting and supporting Data's linguistic choices and highlighting the act of (non-biological) creation that gave life to Lal, whom she refers to as "offspring," a term that is usually applied to the product of biological reproduction.

Despite this first waver, Picard's perplexity is overcome as he adopts the same terminology when arguing to Starfleet representatives about Data's rights not to be separated from Lal:

(3) Picard: Admiral, to you, Lal is a new android. But to Data, she[6]'s his child. […] Yes, Admiral. It may not be easy for you and I to see her that way, but he does. And I respect that.

In examples (2) and (3), subjectivity plays an important part in the attribution of kinship relationships to androids. In this unprecedented situation, subjective markers ("perception," "to me," "to you," "to Data," "for you and I") are employed to support each party's claim about Data's rights to parenthood.

Admiral Haftel uses the term "family" in an almost sarcastic way as he berates Picard for his perspective on the issue:

(4) Haftel: Captain, are we talking about breaking up a family? Isn't that rather a sentimental attitude about androids?
Picard: They're living, sentient beings. Their rights and privileges in our society have been defined. I helped define them.

Haftel's line in (4) expresses the *topos of genuineness* through two rhetorical questions that suggest that a kin relationship between androids is neither contemplated nor recognized on his

[6] Data's appearance is that of a human male, and, as remarked in "The Naked Now" (1.03), "fully functional" and "programmed in multiple [sexual] techniques," so he is referred to with he/him pronouns. When first created, Lal did not have a human appearance or a gender. Once a choice of species and gender appearance was made by Lal, both Data and the crew started referring to her as she/her.

part. As a new, advanced artificial intelligence, Lal should be under expert human control. On the other hand, in the use of language by Picard and the *Enterprise* crew we can recognize the *topos of humanitarianism*, as they perceive separation as a political action that violates Data's and Lal's rights. Indeed, Picard describes androids as "living sentient beings." When referring to the legal rights provided to androids, he uses a passive construction that highlights the semantic patients, "rights and privileges," and backgrounds the actor(s), left unnamed to avoid distracting from the act of defining the patients. In the following sentence, however, he shifts back to an active construction, redirecting the attention to his own role in the process of classifying the legal status of androids. He positions himself as the agent that "helped define" it—a verbal phrase that describes a material process (in Halliday [1994]'s terminology) underscoring the concrete effect of the agent's actions, and thus conferring him authority on the topic.

In BSG, kinship terminology is not the topic of explicit debate as in TNG, although the use of such terms is found in the series to describe the link between human and non-human life. As Rose notes, "the Cylons often describe themselves as 'humanity's children,' the next stage in evolution" (2015, 1207), designing their android forms as closely to humans as possible and considering themselves superior to them, to the extent of committing genocide against humanity.

Due to the ongoing war between Cylons and humans, dehumanizing strategies are common and degrading, and derogatory language is often used to describe the enemy, building on their synthetic composition. In fact, human-like Cylons are sometimes referred to as "skinjobs," whereas all Cylons, including the mechanical Centurions, are also called "toasters," undergoing a process of genericization which demeans them.

As we learn in the course of the series, Cylon women can get pregnant ("Home, part I," 2.06; "Sine Qua Non," 4.08). When a copy of the Sharon model conceives a Cylon/human hybrid, the future of the fetus is called into question by the colonial leaders—President Roslin, Admiral Adama, XO Tigh and Dr Baltar. Except for Baltar, they use dehumanizing language that constructs Sharon and her baby as synthetic beings, highlighting the rift between the two species:

(5a) Roslin: Allowing this thing to be born could have frightening consequences. ("Epiphanies*,"* 2.13)

(5b) Tigh: Do I have to point out that this is not a baby? It's a machine. ("Downloaded*,"* 2.18)

(5c) Adama: If they find out this thing's been born, they're gonna make a play for it. ("Downloaded," 2.18)

Roslin and Adama also employ the *topos of threat* here, justifying their actions towards the hybrid baby on the basis of the potential consequences it may have on the war, which are expressed through epistemic modality in (5a) ("could") and (5b) ("gonna"). Helo, the baby's human father, protests the initial order for the fetus to be aborted by exposing Adama's own bias and dehumanizing language:[7]

(6) Helo: I don't understand. Sharon's only helped us since she came back from Caprica. She even turned on her own.
Adama: To save her life. Don't mistake the will to live for genuine conversion, Lieutenant. She's still the enemy.
[…]
Helo: We're talking about my child, sir. Part of me. But I guess it's easier to kill when you call it a Cylon. ("Epiphanies," 2.13)

In the same conversation, Sharon's status as part of the out-group is rejected by Helo: while acknowledging her Cylon origins through the use of the deictics "us"—the fleet—and "her own"—the Cylons—he seems to highlight her shift of loyalty through an active construction that foregrounds her as an actor of a material process—"turned on her own"—that may damage the Cylons. This is reinforced by the use of the adverb "even," which underlines the weight of her actions. Adama, however, does not accept Helo's argument, and despite her display of loyalty, firmly positions Sharon in the out-group, as "still the enemy."

In RW, on the other hand, the two androids are given the emblematic names of Mother and Father, which explicitly reflect their "caregiving program" ("Infected Memory," 1.05). This functionalization of the two characters equates their entire identities with their roles, granting them no personhood. Mother and Father are but genericized substitutes for every human parent, perfected to embody an ideal no human caregiver could aspire to. In their attempt to reproduce human caring bonds, they use kinship terminology—"children," "family"—to refer to their extended group, including the Earth-born children Mother takes to live in the settlement ("Virtual Faith," 1.03). The latter, however, resist these terms of address, referring to the pair as "the androids" and to Mother as "the necromancer." One of these children also chastises Kepler-born Campion for calling his caregivers Mother and Father.

[7] A transfusion of the baby's blood is used to cure Laura Roslin of her cancer, so abortion is taken off the table for the time being ("Epiphanies," 2.13).

(7) Hunter: You're insulting your real parents when you call them that, you know. ("Nature's Course," 1.04)

Influenced by the narrative learned from the Earth-born children, Campion himself lashes out at Father in a moment of frustration by remarking his synthetic nature:

(8) Campion: Nothing's accidental with you two, and you don't feel sorry. You don't feel anything. You're not even my father. You're just a generic service model.
[…]
Father: […] we just want to keep you safe, want to see you grow old.
Campion: You're just saying that because it makes you seem more real. ("Virtual Faith," 1.03)

The choice of the adjective "real," used with both an attributive and a predicative function in these two examples, introduces another discriminatory element towards the androids, which we can define as the *topos of genuineness*: in (7), the attributive adjective "real" remarks that, regardless of who takes on a caregiving role, the biological bond is considered superior. As for the predicative use of the adjective in (8), it remarks that androids are a mimetic representation of humans but the synthetic, rather than organic, nature of their brains makes their behaviors, choices, emotions and feelings 'artificial' and therefore inferior to humans.' This *topos* is also visible in the referentials used by adult humans to describe the human-like synthetics, such as "android," "machine," "robot," "piece of...tech," piece of "Mithraic engineering," or again by their model ("generic service model," "low-end model," "necromancer"). They also draw from the semantic field of IT and mechanics: neutralizing androids is referred to as "shutting [them] down," and models that are "malfunctioning," have "broken-down" or that may have sustained "damage" may be fixed with "the proper tools." The androids themselves refer to their own "programming" as dictating their actions. Unexpected behaviors may be explained as a "bug" and require that "subroutines" be rewritten, as Mother's creator states ("Infected Memory," 1.05). The contrast with human health issues is highlighted by Tempest in the same episode, when she tells Mother "You can't fix me. I'm not an android," reinforcing their position in different, opposite groups.
Over the course of the season, however, we see a shift in behavior and language choices on the part of undercover atheist Sue: when she offers Mother her blood so that she may feed her fetus, she refers to it as a baby ("I'm saving your baby."—Sue, "Umbilical," 1.09), recognizing and

highlighting the connection between Mother and the fetus through the use of the possessive adjective “your.”

4.2 Unsuitability to raise children

The second aspect under investigation is the suitability of androids to act as caregivers to either entirely human children (RW) or to their own offspring, birthed through physical (Hera, BSG) or mental labor (Lal, TNG). Such an evaluation of the suitability of non-conventional parents, often framed as necessary to ensure the well-being of the child, can hide oppressive strategies to undermine a social group deemed ‘the enemy.’ This emerges more strongly in BSG, where Hera, defined as “the shape of things to come” (“Kobol’s Last Gleaming, part 2,” 1.13) and coveted by the Cylons, may possibly play a role in shifting the balance of the war:

(9) Adama: Cylons went through a great deal of trouble to create this thing. Should go without saying that if it’s good for them, it’s gonna be bad for us.
Roslin: I completely agree. And I take it as a given we can’t turn it over to Sharon to raise. That would be disastrous.

In this example, epistemic modality is used by both Adama and Roslin, accompanied with negatively connoted predicative adjectives (“bad” and “disastrous”), to highlight the threat. The creation of the out-group of the Cylons is clear in the use of “them” and “us” pronouns, where the latter refers to the human fleet. This is reiterated by Roslin to Cottle when they finalize the plan to fake Hera’s death so that she could be raised by a trusted human woman.

(10) Roslin: This is not a debate. This child will not be raised by the Cylon, and I cannot risk Cylon agents getting their hands on it. I’ve made my decision. What I need from you, Doctor, is your help. (“Downloaded,” 2.18)

In the dialogue above, characterized by strong epistemic (“will”) and deontic (“cannot”) modality, Sharon is referred to as “the Cylon,” again constructed as an Other and denied her humanity through the *topos of genuineness*. Indeed, “[r]educing Cylons to machines or minimizing their feelings or emotions to software is the common way of denying Cylon personhood” (Moore 2008: 105). Besides highlighting the irreconcilable difference between humans and Cylons, the choice made here also remarks the strategic risk of the child falling into enemy hands, using a *topos of threat* by relying on the conditional ‘if the birth of the child may bring a benefit to our enemy, then we should prevent the Cylons from accessing it.’

However, in this case, Roslin “not only removes a human woman’s right to control her own body in the fleet, but […] also clearly does not consider a Cylon woman to have the right to raise her

own child" (Leaver 2008, 139). Roslin's dehumanization of Sharon occurs even earlier in the series when she joins the fleet alongside her human partner Helo and her pregnancy is revealed. Roslin here "derides" (Moore 2008: 105) Sharon's feelings and employs the *topos of genuineness*: "I believe that she's telling the truth about one thing. She thinks she's in love. Even if it's software instead of an emotion, it's real to her. She wants her baby to live. She wants Agathon to live. We used that" ("Home, pt. 1," 2.06). While these words do not link directly to Sharon's ability to care for a child, Roslin's words imply that as a machine guided by programming, Sharon is incapable of the compassion (Gumpert 2008, 145) needed to take care of a child. As in TNG, subjective markers are used to highlight Sharon's perception—"she thinks" and "to her"—although, contrary to Picard, Roslin does not accept Sharon's perception as valid—"it's real to her" implies that she does not share that view.

An additional dehumanizing aspect in BSG is that Sharon does not have any chance to plead her case, as her child is taken from her without her knowledge and consent under the pretense that Hera died shortly after birth.

In contrast, in TNG, both Data and Lal can defend their positions against Starfleet's intention to move Lal to a different facility, with Captain Picard acting as an advocate in interactions with the Starfleet representatives.

(11) Picard: I see no need for it to be difficult at all. I understand your concerns. What I'm asking for is time, patience. If you have an open mind, I'm sure you will see that it is imperative that Data and Lal be kept together during the formative stages of her development. After that, I have no doubt Commander Data will be delighted to deliver her to Starfleet Research.
Haftel: That's not satisfactory. If mistakes are made, the damage that's done might be irreparable.
Picard: I'm convinced the damage will be irreparable if they're separated. ("The Offspring," 3.16)

In (11), Haftel appears to use the *topos of threat* to support his position that Lal should be moved to another facility and dealt with "with controlled procedures" as a new and unique specimen. Picard appears to use the same *topos* to advocate for Data, stating that negative consequences in Lal's development may be incurred if she were separated from Data. Epistemic modality is used to build both arguments here: Haftel's use of a hypothetical construction and the modal "might" signal lower modality, as both mistakes and damage are a possibility, whereas Picard displays his support for Data through high modality choices: "I have no doubt" shows trust in Data, whereas the expression "I'm convinced" and the modal "will" highlight the confidence in

his own proposition. The deontic expression "it's imperative" is also used to reinforce the argument for keeping Data and Lal together.

Not only Picard, but all of Data's closest crewmates show support for his endeavor to create new life. They recognize his ability to efficiently care for and educate his creation, to the point that Dr. Crusher, in an aside unheard by the android, implies that Data does love Lal despite him being technically unable to feel emotions.[8] This suggests that Data has become part of the situational kinship developed amongst the group of bridge officers of the *Enterprise*. As a result, they fully embrace him as part of their social group and reject any discriminatory discourse or action on the part of Starfleet authorities. While an android, Data is part of the in-group.

In RW, androids are similarly thought to be unfit to care for children (in this case human children) by the religious Mithraic society, as Mother herself tells the children:

> (12) Mother: They believe that allowing androids to raise human children is a sin, which forced them to send an ark outfitted with stasis pods, rather than a lighter, faster craft, such as the one the atheists so wisely used to send us ("Raised by Wolves," 1.01).

Indeed, it is one member of the atheist group who programs the two androids sent on the childrearing mission to Kepler22b. The use of the words "ark" and "sin," reflecting the religious fundamentalism of Mithraic society, may be paralleled to the interference of religious ideology in laws as well as public opinion regarding marginalized communities' rights to parenthood. What we see here is the *topos of religious faith*: androids are inferior also because they do not share the fundamentalist religious experience of the Mithraic. Although outside of the scope of this study, it should be noted that this *topos* is also applied to Campion, who is considered an outcast and part of the out-group because he is raised outside the religion. When Mother first confronts Marcus, the Mithraic leader, he says, "the boy is not safe here with you" ("Raised by Wolves," 1.01), although this may be due to Mother's being a reprogrammed Necromancer, a deadly android used as a weapon. However, both Campion and the Earth-born children defend Mother later in the season, when she is threatened with a weapon by Sue ("Umbilical," 1.09). The same *topos* is found in BSG, where the difference between humans and Cylons is not only based on their nature, but also on their differing religion: human colonials follow a polytheistic religion inspired by the Greek Pantheon, whereas Cylons are monotheistic.

[8] Data will later acquire an emotions chip enabling him to feel human emotions (*Star Trek: Generations*).

A political aspect may be posited for RW as well, as a human colony developed outside Mithraic control may re-create a potentially dangerous outsider faction.

5. Discussion

5.1 Relationality and kin terminology

One first tenet of care theory that intersects with the linguistic analysis of the texts is its focus on the recognition of the caring relationship by the cared-for. We purport that the different uses of kin terminology express a range of positive or negative attitudes towards the acknowledgement of a caring bond between androids and their children. More specifically, we record the tendency for children to acknowledge the caring bond by calling their android caregiver "mother" or "father," as Lal does when referring to Data, and as all the children—including some Mithraic ones—do when addressing both the Necromancer and her partner. On the other hand, the adults either question or outright reject the use of kin terminology to refer to androids (as Admiral Haftel in TNG, virtually all the humans in BSG, and Sue in RW do). This is significant insofar as one evaluates *who* is assessing the caring bond: the cared-for—that is, the children—generally do not hesitate in acknowledging the caring nature of their relationship with their android parents. It is only when somebody outside of the caring relationship evaluates it that the bond is not acknowledged. This ties directly into the *topos of genuineness* identified earlier: for the syllogism to work—that is, for the human adults to be able to reject the notion of a caring relationship between android and child—humans *cannot* acknowledge the kin relation through the adoption of kin terms. As soon as humans do apply kin terminology to androids, in fact, they implicitly recognize the genuineness of their caring relationship and therefore any discrimination would not seem justified. Notably, though, care theory does not really take into account external actors when talking about the act of recognizing—that is, a caring relation comes into being when the cared-for acknowledges its existence; whether those *not* involved in it also acknowledge it is irrelevant to its existence. Nevertheless, caring relations are embedded in a social context, and the degree of social acceptance of a caring bond has an impact on it. We thus draw a parallel between the use of kin terminology to describe android-human child familial bonds in these TV series and the long, and to an extent yet unresolved, debate on the use of these terms when applied to same-sex families or other non-conventional families. As is well known, those who oppose these families often use the argument that children would be lacking 'a mother and a father,' thus framing their discriminatory practices as an act of care for the children (Di Battista, Paolini and Pivetti 2021; Clarke 2001). These kin terms carry profound significance in the eyes of those rejecting

the notion of a non-traditional family: being a "mother" and a "father" entails several implications for both sexes, a narrowly understood set of values and behavioral models which they refuse to acknowledge in non-conventional families, similarly to what happens to androids in the TV series. As highlighted above, in real life just as much as in fiction, the external judgment of a caring bond does not invalidate it, as long as the cared-for—in this case, the children of non-conventional families—recognize it.

It is relevant to highlight the differences that can be detected in the discourse on and use of kin terminology from TNG to RW, as they reflect the real-life shift in attitude towards same-sex families and, to an extent, single parents seeking to adopt. In TNG, the admiral's concerns are uttered, addressed, and countered as if they were the standard, most-widely recognized opinion on the matter. Picard can anticipate Haftel's refusal to acknowledge the familial bond between Data and Lal because he, himself, had doubted the nature of such a bond. The cocky assurance with which Haftel declares that Data and Lal are sophisticated machines, but machines, nonetheless, mirrors the self-assured confidence with which the public consensus in the 80s and 90s defined what a 'real' family was—and what instead fell short of the mark. If Haftel's normative view on what constitutes a family mirrors the general consensus on the matter, the other members of the crew of the *Enterprise* embody those who defend the rights of non-conventional families. They counter his qualms about Data and Hal by using the same rhetorical strategies that supporters of same-sex families have been using for decades, questioning the supremacy of the biological parental bond (Jefferson 2014) and arguing that we should not cast aspersions on things that do not involve us personally ("If he wishes to call Lal his child, then who are we to argue?"). To us, TNG's choice to address rationally and explicitly the general consensus on what constitutes a family echoes the same real-life attempts to grapple with what was fast becoming a visible trend in the late 80s and early 90s (in March 1990, *Newsweek* reported that "a new generation of gay parents [had] produced the first-ever 'gayby boom'" [Rudolph 2017]).

Conversely, in RW the prejudiced belief that androids have no soul, and therefore cannot truly care for human children, is framed as originating from religious superstition, and the TV series takes quite a solid stance in framing it as lacking any rationality. Religiosity is one of several variables that Dotti Sani and Quaranta identify as relevant in determining the opinion of a given individual or social group on homosexuality (2022: 128), with multiple studies confirming a negative association between religiosity and acceptance of queer individuals, families, and communities. RW presents a much more polarized take on the topic of android parenting than TNG, and centers the entire story on the concept of non-conventional care, whereas Data's

parenting experiment occupies only a small part of the narrative in TNG. What was a highly controversial but ultimately futile debate in the 80s has therefore shifted to an incensed clash of moral and political leanings in the 2020s, with support towards same-sex families growing slowly but steadily over the past twenty years (Pew Research Center 2010, 66). It is not by chance that Lal's narrative arc begins and ends in a self-conclusive episode that seems to only remark on the inability of Data to care for his child *despite* the goodwill and acceptance of his crewmates. Conversely, RW stays with the trouble, to borrow the title of Donna Haraway's 2016 book, and suggests an opposite trajectory to Data and Lal's story, as the religious minority, framed as the bigoted antagonists, slowly comes to accept that the androids 'deserve' to be called 'mother' and 'father,' as the Mithraic children themselves do after some hesitation.

5.2 Weaponization of the discourse of care

The second way in which CDA and care theory intersect is in how care, just as much as discourse, can be (and has been) weaponized to support a dominant, oppressive ideology. The intervention of society in the parental or familial bond has a history of oppression—if not straight-up genocide—masked as goodwill. Gary, following Uma Narayan's 1995 seminal study, exemplifies care weaponization through a reading of the repressive acts of colonizers as expressions of care for 'inferior' Others (2022, 7). Of the many twisted forms such care assumed, one of the most devastating practices was that of separating indigenous children from their biological parents on the assumption that they would be better off with white adoptive families. Recent history is littered with examples of dominant communities taking indigenous children away from their biological families under the guise of protecting and "acculturating" them in boarding schools (Engel et al. 2012, 280). These programs, which took place from the 1860s up to the 1980s in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, "resulted not only in trauma to the children, their families, and to the cultures, but also in abuses that were in violation of children's rights as defined by international organizations, in particular the United Nations" (Engel et al. 2012: 279). Their justification, as per Jacobs's account of the separation of Native American children from their natural families, was that Native American women were "*unfit mothers* whose children had to be removed from their homes and communities to be raised properly by white women within institutions" (Jacobs 2008, 192, emphasis added). Children were also forcibly removed from their families by social workers and placed for adoption in non-native families (Engel et al. 2012, 288). Shortly after the abolition of slavery in 1865, African American children who were considered orphans were removed from their remaining families and went into State custody, which often meant they would continue working for their former owners

(Hunter 2018). As recently as 2018, Trump's "zero tolerance" immigration policy resulted in the separation of families who crossed the US borders illegally, with children being placed in shelters as their parents were transferred to jails (Brown 2018). A parallel may be drawn with the shows under investigation, where a superior authority—in this case, humans—similarly acts as gatekeeper of parenthood, deciding whether androids should be allowed to take care of their offspring on apparently objective grounds that do very little to hide their prejudiced roots. Child removal, besides having evident racist connotations, often served a political purpose as well: in the case of Native Americans, it was used "to break up tribal kinship networks that formed the basis for self-government" (Woolman and Deer 2014, 954). We may perceive a similar political reason in the shows as well: dominant communities which exercise authority over the artificial life forms—Starfleet in TNG, the civilian and military leaders in BSG, and the Mithraic in RW respectively—want to separate child from parent and appoint someone they deem fit to take responsibility for the young, while satisfying their need to control the androids and prevent them from building independent communities within human spaces. Therefore, hiding behind a patina of care lies the *topos of threat*, which overrides the *topos of humanitarianism* expressed by the characters who support the android parents' right to raise their children.

This leads us to one last consideration on the artificiality of the care that androids show their children. The kind of care that the audience recognizes in the androids as genuine, regardless of the moral evaluation of the human characters at the diegetic level, is a form of care equated to the human one—one that is indeed familiar to the audience. The androids are attributed some form of empathy which we accordingly recognize as being the most genuine vector of care.

6. Conclusions

The texts under consideration in this article stage care and caring acts and discourses within the diegesis, with characters often discussing explicitly the ramifications of androids in a caregiving role. In all the three texts, androids are clearly Othered through the linguistic choices adopted by human characters: as a result of this, regardless of their attitude towards artificial life forms, an in-group and an out-group are constructed. While in TNG Data may be included in the in-group of the *Enterprise* bridge crew and supported through the *topos of humanitarianism*, Starfleet representatives still refuse to consider him an acceptable caregiver and ironically use kinship terminology applied to Data and Lal. In the dystopian universes of BSG and RW, the construction of androids as an out-group is accompanied by the widespread use of discriminatory, dehumanizing language, denying them personhood in the first place and

caregiving capabilities in the second. Such a negative representation of alterity also emerges through the *topoi of threat* and *of genuineness,* and, in RW, the *topos of religious faith,* which situates both androids and humans who do not follow the Mithraic religion in an out-group.
The choice of a fictional Other to represent non-conventional acts of care lets the audience interact with the notion of alternative forms of caregiving in the real world from a sheltered position, allowing for a reflection of real-world forms of alternative care. However, these TV series stop short of imparting a clear moral message on what non-conventional care should entail. There is no explicitly normative take on non-conventional care, and their narratives do not stray too far from the expectations of their socio-cultural context, rather perpetuating real-life social dynamics even when, as in the case of BSG, the message is truly hopeful and inclusive. Thus, their role within care discourse is representative, not normative, in order to elicit a reaction from the audience through an act of *witnessing*. The viewers cannot avoid interacting with the themes brought on screen by the TV series, they are forced to take stock of what is happening diegetically and engage with it, absorbing the linguistic and discursive choices made by the characters and assessing them. By witnessing non-conventional care, we ensure that such form of care is at the very least made to emerge explicitly: it becomes visible and cannot be relegated to the background or passively understood as a given—when not as an abomination or a failed form of care. The way that minorities' acts of care have been erased from both historical accounts and contemporary studies and theories of care demands that we actively witness the alternative forms of care that the marginalized Others put into practice. If we must rely on fictional depictions of Otherness to make them visible—and therefore unerasable—we feel it is a relatively small concession to the mainstream, hegemonic collectivity, in a sense a form of *recognition* of its need to be taken by the hand and—well—*cared for* as it approaches alterity and confronts its misgivings towards these marginalized groups.

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