

Sentience, Creativity, and the Language of Human Consciousness in K.I.T.T.

Becky Lee Meadows, Ph.D.

Michael Knight: "Give me a diversion, will ya?"

K.I.T.T.: "What did you have in mind?"

Michael Knight: "Use your imagination!" ("Mouth of the Snake, Part 2")

It is common to see Michael Knight, portrayed by David Hasselhoff, in tight situations in NBC's hit series, *Knight Rider* (1982-86). It is even more common to see Knight's sidekick, a black 1982 Pontiac Trans Am named K.I.T.T., short for the Knight Industries Two Thousand, racing to his rescue, even in the most ludicrous situations. K.I.T.T.'s human consciousness encased in a car body captured the hearts of his viewing public. We are emotionally distraught when we hear K.I.T.T. cry for Michael's aid as K.I.T.T. is pushed into a pit of toxic waste; we pace alongside Michael Knight as Bonnie Barstow, portrayed by Patricia McPherson, works to restore him. Yet, how can we be so emotionally invested in a machine? Why did K.I.T.T. capture our hearts so completely, to the point where we cannot forget him? Even today, we see commercials featuring this trope of the 1980s, such as a 2013 General Electric commercial in which K.I.T.T. introduces a computerized train; in addition, K.I.T.T. remakes (his consciousness cannot be duplicated, of course) still sell for \$55,000 and up. K.I.T.T. became part of our cultural consciousness and has not disappeared from it as many other humanized machines have because his consciousness is indeed human consciousness, not just artificial intelligence. An analysis of K.I.T.T.'s sentience and creativity as evidenced through his use of language, filtered through the lens of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, or established structures of human consciousness, explains how K.I.T.T. became a lasting, iconic superhero and friend to millions of fans.

We begin by applying Edmund Husserl's ideas of the structures of human consciousness to K.I.T.T. to see if K.I.T.T. experiences the world around him as humans do. Husserl maintains that phenomenology, defined as the study of the structures of human consciousness, is a universal science. Per Husserl, human consciousness consists in part of a transcendental ego, which we find when we reduce everything to just the "thing that thinks" inside of us (43); we might equate this with our awareness of our human selves as things that think. Like Descartes, even if we disbelieve everything in this world around us is real, we must still conclude that the thing that thinks inside of us is real; we affirm our own selves as thinking entities in the very act of doubting. As thinking things, we experience active and passive awareness and establish a horizon of experience as we encounter the world around us (58). For example, as I write this, I am actively aware that I am typing and looking at a white page on a computer screen. I am passively aware that a good basketball game is coming on television at 7 p.m., so I have little time to write this. Now that I have written that, I have moved the basketball game into active awareness, but I assure you it will move into passive awareness again as I contemplate K.I.T.T.'s active and passive awareness. K.I.T.T., like humans, must operate in the "natural attitude," or everydayness in which humans exist when they are not in the phenomenological epoche, or the "thing that thinks" mode. We see K.I.T.T. in the natural attitude throughout "Knight Rider," so there is no need to analyze that. However, we must establish that K.I.T.T. is indeed a "thing that thinks," or thing that is aware of his own self as a thinking being, or his conscious self, before we can continue, and because we cannot see our "thinking selves," we must establish K.I.T.T. as a "thing that thinks" through his use of language. We must also establish K.I.T.T.'s awareness of a body that houses the "thing that thinks."

We see K.I.T.T.'s conscious self in several episodes of "Knight Rider," such as in Season Three's "Knight of the Chameleon," when K.I.T.T. reads a flier he has flicked off of his windshield regarding a contest. K.I.T.T. cannot resist working a good puzzle, and when the man issuing the fliers tells him the puzzle is difficult, K.I.T.T. gladly accepts the challenge, solves the puzzle, and wins a year of car cleaning supplies. K.I.T.T. obviously thinks of himself as a "thing that thinks." In "Lost Knight," when the car loses his memory, he states, "Losing one's memory is so embarrassing," illustrating active awareness of his memory loss even as he is passively aware of the young boy who has found him and is with him. However, it is in "Soul Survivor" that we see K.I.T.T. is conscious of himself as a thing that thinks within a body, parallel to Husserl's idea of the transcendental ego. K.I.T.T.'s body is stolen but his CPU is recovered by the Knight Foundation, and to assist Michael in finding the car's body, K.I.T.T.'s "consciousness" is temporarily housed inside a television monitor. The following dialogue ensues as April Curtis, Devon Miles, and Michael see K.I.T.T. in his new body wheeled into the room:

K.I.T.T.: Don't say a thing. Not one word.

MICHAEL: K.I.T.T., are you ok?

K.I.T.T. I am not OK. I am being held prisoner inside a television set.

April: K.I.T.T., it's the best we could do to make you portable.

K.I.T.T.: And totally ridiculous. I feel like the booby prize at a Halloween contest. ("Soul Survivor")

We also see K.I.T.T. aware of his own body in relation to the bodies of others in "Goliath Returns," when Michael speeds the car toward a giant, indestructible truck created by Michael's arch nemesis, Garth Knight. "Michael, surely you're not planning to go nose-to-nose with that behemoth!" the car exclaims, illustrating K.I.T.T.'s consciousness of the size of his own body in relation to that of the much larger truck.

In addition, in Season 3's "Knight of the Chameleon," K.I.T.T. recognizes his own self, his own body, as an autonomous, viable entity—a living thing in relation to other things. A man approaches K.I.T.T. and puts a flier under the windshield wiper:

K.I.T.T.: "No, thank you."

MAN: "Who said that?"

K.I.T.T.: "I did. Please keep your advertisement off my person."

MAN: "Off your person? You're a car!"

K.I.T.T.: "A figure of speech." ("Knight of the Chameleon")

Note that it is through the process of intersubjective constitution, defined here as our constant redefining of ourselves in relation to others in our lifeworld, that the man reacts to K.I.T.T. as he would to another human, and even notes his own astonishment at doing so. The perception of K.I.T.T. as "human" is confirmed through this process of intersubjective constitution through the reaction of other characters to K.I.T.T.. In fact, it is when others hear K.I.T.T.'s use of language that they react to him as human.

In fact, K.I.T.T. can even use language creatively, and creativity is an expression of human consciousness Husserl does not fully examine. Animals can be creative during their play with toys, but we distinguish human creativity here with the addition of the consciousness of using it; K.I.T.T. knows he is being creative and is proud of his efforts. In addition, the car illustrates Husserl's idea of the "as-if" experience (58), another aspect of human consciousness, when he role plays. In "Not a Drop to Drink" from Season 2, K.I.T.T. Michael ducks down in the back seat of the car and asks K.I.T.T. to pose as a U.F.O. with a bad attitude to frighten a man into giving him information. "That might require considerable acting on my part," K.I.T.T. replies, and Michael retorts, "Not as much as you might think." The ploy works perfectly:

K.I.T.T.: You were very offensive last night... Earthling.

MAN: Earthling? Who are you?

K.I.T.T.: I don't really think you want to know the answer to that. We've had some unfortunate prior experience with earthlings who became too inquisitive. ... Any way, you had better get in. (opens door)

MAN: Get in? What for?

K.I.T.T.: I've come to collect you.

MAN: You mean you want to take me out there? Into space?

K.I.T.T.: That's right. Unless you have some information you want to give me. ("Not A Drop to Drink")

K.I.T.T. is obviously aware of his own conscious self inside a body, and he exhibits structures of human consciousness Husserl specifies. However, arguably one of the most important aspects of being human is the ability to not only use language, but to manipulate it to achieve one's own aims, and K.I.T.T. illustrates this as well. In Season One's "A Nice, Indecent Little Town," Michael is put in the local jail and K.I.T.T. is impounded. Devon Miles calls K.I.T.T. to speak with Michael, to which K.I.T.T. replies, "Michael is ... indisposed." Devon remarks that Michael must either be with a woman or in jail, and K.I.T.T. replies, "No comment." The car's comments illustrate his wry sense of humor as well as his ability to manipulate language to cover for Michael. The car even shows a sophisticated use of language by making jokes in several episodes, including a pun when a young woman asks him what he is doing hoisted in the air on a lift and he replies, "Spinning my wheels" ("A Nice, Indecent Little Town").

In addition to establishing that K.I.T.T. has the same structures of consciousness Husserl describes for humans, it is also essential to prove K.I.T.T. is a sentient being, an essential component of humanity. K.I.T.T. demonstrates this by being capable of not only being hurt, but of experiencing fear, arguably an emotion only existing in "living" beings. While Hal in *2001: A Space Odyssey* asks if he will dream upon being turned off, K.I.T.T. has a very real fear of death, most notably Episode 14 from Season 3, titled "Junkyard Dog." A massive machine shoves K.I.T.T. into an acid pit, and as he sinks, he screams, "Michael, help me! Help me, Michael!" Michael is helpless to watch his partner sink into the depths of the pit. When K.I.T.T. is retrieved, he is rebuilt by the same team that first built him, but the group finds that K.I.T.T. has lost his nerve after his repair; K.I.T.T. is afraid to hit the streets again. Michael helps K.I.T.T. overcome his fear when he explains:

It's no crime. If it were, we'd all be guilty. (beat) Before we met, when I was still Michael Long...what am I telling you for, you know what happened. But maybe you don't know all of it...When I regained consciousness days later, I could still see that muzzle flash. I couldn't get it out of my mind. For months afterwards I'd flinch when someone lit a match, when a car's headlights would flash in my face....

K.I.T.T. (long beat) How did you overcome it, Michael?

MICHAEL I didn't. It overcame itself. All I did was refuse to give in to it, and do what I knew had to be done.

(A thoughtful pause before K.I.T.T.'s scanner flashes. His voice takes on a more determined, confident tone.)

K.I.T.T. Speaking of what has to be done, I believe we have an arsonist to stop. ("Junkyard Dog")

It is important to note in this episode that Michael reacts to K.I.T.T. as if the computer-car is human, and this process of intersubjective constitution is an important aspect of human consciousness. It is through intersubjective constitution that we experience and react to people and events in our lifeworld. Michael treats K.I.T.T. like a human; he tells a powerful tale of his own experience, fully expecting K.I.T.T. to understand his experience and appropriate it into his own consciousness, as the car does. In this instance, K.I.T.T. demonstrates he is several steps above a typical computer consciousness; he *empathizes*, arguably a distinct capability of human consciousness.

We again see K.I.T.T. as a sentient being in the Season Two episode, "Goliath, Part 2," in which K.I.T.T. and Michael meet their arch-nemeses, Garth Knight and his giant indestructible truck, Goliath. Michael has driven K.I.T.T. into the front corner of Goliath's front bumper, intending to wipe out Goliath's front wheel, to no avail—the crash of the "titans" leaves K.I.T.T. almost destroyed in the middle of the desert with Michael hurt. K.I.T.T. feels his own mortality when he says to Michael, "I've never felt this way before. I mean, so vulnerable, so mortal. Do you think it's possible I could cease to exist?" to which Michael replies, "If I don't get you running soon, you can count on it." The two do escape and return to defeat Garth and Goliath.

Another human arena is the area of aesthetics. Animals, while appreciative of items such as food, warm beds, and other comforts of home, are typically incapable of appreciating art, even interpreting it, as humans do. Aesthetics is an elevated form of human consciousness that K.I.T.T. exhibits as well. In fact, part of the humor of "Knight Rider" is that K.I.T.T., with the body of a car, has aesthetic taste. In Season Three's "Knight of the Chameleon," we see Michael, in K.I.T.T., pull to the curb in front of a house. "Michael, if Toni Baxter lives where that so-called music is coming from, I suspect she hasn't heard about her father's escape," K.I.T.T. says. Note the use of the term "so-called" music, which implies an immediate analysis and negative value judgment of the sound of the music; K.I.T.T. evaluates the loud, bawdy rock music in relation to other forms of music and evaluates it as lesser-than, in effect rendering a value judgment.

In essence, K.I.T.T. experiences himself as a human and, through the process of intersubjective constitution, is experienced as human. Perhaps this is why this 1980s icon has remained part of our cultural consciousness in comparison to some other figures of artificial intelligence we have met and left behind in film and television. K.I.T.T. is superhero and friend, and we refuse to relinquish him to the disappearing depths of memory.

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