

The Droids You're Looking For: On Servitude and Sentience in *Star Wars*

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“Never underestimate a droid,” General Leia Organa advises in *The Rise of Skywalker*, the final film of the Skywalker Saga. The quote is fitting for both a film franchise and a character who rely heavily on the exploits of various droid characters. But despite — or, perhaps, because of — their prominence in the franchise, the droids of *Star Wars* bring to light numerous troubling questions of sentience, personhood, and freedom that lack easy answers. Are droids people? Do they have agency? If the answer is yes, then how are we, the audience, supposed to understand the treatment of droids — and the work they do — in the films? If droids are people, there are serious issues of bodily autonomy, rights, and the value of their labor at play. Droids are the labor backbone of the *Star Wars* universe, performing a variety of functions from astronavigation to food preparation and everything in between. They are even used as soldiers in galactic war. But it is unclear exactly how *Star Wars* classifies the work they do. If droids are simply tools, machines created to perform a function, that casts doubt on their sentience, and stands in contrast with the vivid personalities of several prominent droid characters. But if we accept droids as sentient characters in their own right, then labor they do becomes more problematic. Are droids employees? Or are they slaves? The franchise for the most part seems to dodge the issue, choosing to focus solely on only a few specific droids and avoiding larger questions about droids in general. But more recent offerings push back, in particular the standalone film *Solo: A Star Wars Story*. Although *Star Wars* has not historically depicted droids as characters with rights and sentience, choosing instead to use them as plot devices and filler characters, as the franchise grows and develops it begins to question just how we are supposed to view droids, and the treatment of the organic beings that use them.

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The original trilogy of *Star Wars* films, 1977's *A New Hope*, 1980's *The Empire Strikes Back*, and 1983's *Return of the Jedi*, present droids in a fairly straightforward manner. There are two main droid characters who are given a prominent role in the trilogy, the more humanoid protocol droid C-3PO (often referred to in the films as "3PO" or "Threepio") and the more machine-like astromech R2-D2 (often referred to in the films as "R2" or "Artoo"). Other droids are more set-dressing (with a few exceptions), but 3PO and R2 are a vital part of the main cast. Despite their vastly different appearances, and the fact that R2 does not speak in a language the audience can understand, both appear to be equally and fully developed characters in their own right. The story treats them as such; *A New Hope* opens on 3PO and R2 and focuses almost solely on their exploits for the first 17 minutes of the film. The film opens with 3PO and R2 on board a spaceship that is about to be boarded by enemy forces. 3PO expresses concern over their impending doom, while R2 appears to be up to something mysterious with a human. The two droids escape the spaceship on an escape pod and land on the desert planet Tatooine, starting a grand adventure that will, eventually, completely change the galaxy as a whole.

Over the course of the trilogy, 3PO and R2 will have numerous exploits, both together and apart, with the organic main cast of the films. While the main character of *Star Wars* is Luke Skywalker, a human, 3PO and R2 are major supporting figures. R2 in particular is almost a sidekick for Luke. As an astromech droid — literally, a space mechanic — R2 helps Luke pilot and maintain his X-Wing starfighter. When Luke sets out to destroy the menacing planet-killer Death Star at the climax of *A New Hope*, R2 is with him, where he suffers extreme damage during the battle. R2 later accompanies Luke as he sets off to pursue training to become a Jedi in *Empire Strikes Back* and helps Luke with a plot to rescue his friend Han Solo in *Return of the Jedi*. While 3PO is less daring than his counterpart, he still experiences his fair share of adventure. He accompanies Princess Leia Organa, Han Solo, and Chewbacca when they flee the evil Empire in *Empire Strikes Back*. When 3PO stumbles upon representatives of the Empire hiding in the city where they have taken refuge, he attempts to alert his organic friends but is shot and dismembered for his trouble, though he is luckily reassembled later. In *Return of the Jedi*, both droids accompany the organic cast to the planet Endor where they work to defeat a second Death Star. 3PO is mistaken as a god by primitive aliens, and he and R2 ultimately end up ensuring the success of the heroes in saving the day.

The organic characters seem to form close relationships with the droids, though not every character has an equally friendly outlook. Luke sees the droids as somewhere between his friends and his responsibility. R2 accompanies him on most adventures, but Luke looks out for him when his sense of adventure overcomes his sense of preservation, such as saving him from being eaten by a swamp creature on Dagobah. Leia uses 3PO as a sort of assistant in her efforts to lead the Rebellion, often sending him on errands and keeping him with her in command rooms. Han clashes with 3PO fairly regularly, but this is played as more of him having no patience for 3PO's anxious, somewhat neurotic personality rather than any prejudice against droids. Han never seems to have any issues with R2, but bristles at 3PO's constant chatter, particularly when 3PO tries to warn him of upcoming danger. Chewbacca is interesting, as another non-human character. A member of the Wookiee species, Chewbacca is a large, furred humanoid who also speaks in a language the audience does not understand. However, his actions show his feelings for the droids more than words. When 3PO is shot and dismembered, it is Chewbacca who tracks him down and reassembles him. In the moments where Chewbacca holds 3PO's broken body, there is a tenderness in his actions.

But despite the camaraderie with the organic characters, there is a distinct difference in status between them and the droids. Luke feels that the droids are his responsibility — because his uncle purchased them at a sort of slave auction. When the droids land on Tatooine, they split up and are each captured by the alien Jawas. While 3PO's capture is not shown on screen, R2's is, and it's not a pretty sight. Lost and alone, R2 is attacked and shot with an energy weapon that seems to shut down his functions. Before losing "consciousness," he moans dejectedly and falls on his "face." Then he is taken to the Jawas' transport and fitted with a restraining bolt to control him. Onboard the transport, R2 reunites with 3PO, who worries that they are going to be killed. Instead, they are lined up to be presented to a farmer who needs manual labor.

It is clear that this is a slave auction, rather than a hiring fair. The farmer, Luke's uncle Owen, converses with the Jawas to choose the droids he wants to purchase. Owen does speak with 3PO, who tries to upsell himself, believing that work on a farm is safer than being a captive of the Jawas. But when Owen chooses 3PO, it is the Jawas who are paid. It is a chilling sequence, given that these are our heroes who are purchasing the droids. The scene introduces us to other droids, but they are merely an exotic backdrop. None are named or given any agency, simply lined up for the purchaser to look over. When Owen chooses a different astromech, 3PO is

forced to separate from R2, despite them previously working together. It is only because the other astromech is defective that Owen purchases R2 instead, leaving the droids together, but still captive. The whole scene is reminiscent of slave auctions in the real world, and how enslaved persons would often be separated from their families. To drive the point home, 3PO even refers to Luke as their “new master” after they are purchased (*Star Wars: A New Hope* 00:21:53). Notably, the droids are still fitted with restraining bolts. Although Luke soon removes R2’s restraining bolt, it is not out of the goodness of his heart or out of any perceived fairness to another living being. Instead, he removes the bolt after R2 tricks him, and only because he thinks R2 is “too small to run away” (*Star Wars: A New Hope* 00:22:48-00:22:49).

Although Luke treats the droids kindly, cleaning and repairing them and telling 3PO not to call him “sir,” there is no doubt that he is in charge. When R2 does proceed to run away, 3PO hides in fear of being punished until Luke forces him to come out using the restraining bolt. Luke also refers to the droids as property, rather than people. He is not the only one to see the droids as less than the organic characters. Early in *A New Hope*, when Chewbacca is playing against R2 in a hologram game, Han obliquely threatens 3PO with bodily harm if Chewbacca does not win. Han shows consistent lack of respect for the droids’ bodily autonomy — or at least 3PO’s. When 3PO gets in the way while Han is piloting, Han yells for Leia to “shut [3PO] up or shut him down” (*Star Wars: Empire Strikes Back* 00:37:08-00:37:09). Later, they *will* shut 3PO down by literally turning him off. While Han does not seem to have similar issues with R2, showing that this is more a matter of clashing personalities than overall bigotry, the fact that he is willing to remove 3PO’s bodily autonomy to make him be quiet is concerning. Leia does seem to show a greater appreciation for the droids, but this is more of an appreciation for the work they can do rather than any specific fondness. In particular, Leia respects R2, but that is because he is working directly for her. It is Leia who gives R2 his mission at the beginning of *A New Hope*. It is unclear whether or not R2 agreed to this plan, though given his adventurous spirit he very well may have. But Leia, like Luke, sees the droids as valued workers, rather than equals.

Even minor characters and other menial laborers seem to hold higher status than the droids. When Luke and Obi-Wan Kenobi set out to rescue Princess Leia, they take the droids along as R2 has important information for the Rebellion, information given to him by Leia. They go to a cantina to find a pilot, where the droids are rejected by the bartender, who claims that they “don’t serve their kind

here” and that the droids will “have to wait outside” (*Star Wars: A New Hope* 00:45:38-00:45:44). It is hard not to see parallels between this treatment and Jim Crow laws restricting access to white customers only. Interestingly, the supplementary text *From A Certain Point of View* (“We Don't Serve Their Kind Here”) indicates that the bartender is prejudiced against droids due to their use in the Clone Wars. 3PO and R2 are held accountable for the ways these other droids, who had no choice in the matter, were deployed in a war more than two decades prior (Wendig 113-22). Because of the actions of the droid armies in the war — armies that were controlled by organic overseers — all droids are now *persona non grata* in this cantina. Because of the bartender’s bigotry, no droids will be served. Much like how people of color were restricted from participating fully in society, even after the end of American slavery, the droids are not free to participate fully either.

The slavery parallels come back with a vengeance in *Return of the Jedi*. Han has been captured by the gangster Jabba the Hutt, ironically kept as property with his bodily autonomy and consciousness stripped away. As part of the plot to rescue him, Luke gifts 3PO and R2 to Jabba. This is so that R2 is in position to help Luke with the daring rescue but shows an apparent lack of concern for the droids’ safety. 3PO is forced to work as a translator and is subject to physical violence. He was also not a part of the plot and had no forewarning that he was going to be given as a slave to the fearsome Jabba. 3PO is confused and hurt at being gifted away, and remarks that Luke “never expressed any unhappiness with my work,” as if that would justify the action (*Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* 00:10:41-00:10:43). This sequence also introduces some of the very few other droids shown in the trilogy, as R2 and 3PO are brought before a droid overseer to be assigned new tasks. Similar to the Jawa transport, the droid room is filled with set pieces of a variety of other types of droids. However, here we see a darker side of things, as a droid is tortured with hot irons and the sadistic droid overseer threatens both 3PO and R2. Jabba, for his part, seems to view all creatures as potential slaves, not just droids. He keeps Han as ornamentation, and when Leia attempts to rescue him, she is kept captive as well. Jabba puts Leia in a skimpy outfit and chains her to him, removing her freedom and her dignity. Ironically, it is thanks to the R2 that she can escape. Taking advantage of a distraction, Leia strangles Jabba with her own chains, providing a very strong moment of empowerment. Then, R2 comes along and breaks her chains. While she killed her “owner,” it is only thanks to R2 that she is then fully freed.

One might wonder if the droids and their treatment is deliberately echoing human slavery in the real world. However, if this is deliberate, it does not seem to make any social commentary to accompany the metaphor. The droids' treatment is seen as merely a fact of life, not something to protest or overturn. 3PO even remarks, early in *A New Hope*, that droids "seem to be made to suffer. It's our lot in life" (*Star Wars: A New Hope* 00:09:08-00:09:10). There is no protest, no indication that 3PO sees this as something to be changed.

Star Wars does present a look at actual slavery in the prequel trilogy, which begins over 30 years before *A New Hope*. 1999's *The Phantom Menace* introduces a galaxy before the evils of the Empire, when the Galactic Republic oversaw thousands of star systems. All is not well, however. When the Jedi Knights Obi-Wan Kenobi and Qui-Gon Jinn rescue the queen Padmé Amidala from a military occupation of her planet Naboo, they are forced to hide on Tatooine while they repair their ship. There we meet young Anakin Skywalker, who is a slave. He is owned by Watto, a Toydarian merchant who runs a junk shop. Anakin is rather blasé about being Watto's property, telling Padmé about previously being owned by a different master. However, he bristles at being called a slave, asserting his own personhood.

Still, even in this situation, *Star Wars* does not seem to present slavery in as negative a light as one might think. Even Qui-Gon, a hero and a moral light in the film, admits he did not come to Tatooine to free slaves. He does not see this as something vitally important to fix, but again, as rather a fact of life in the galaxy. Despite being slaves, though, Anakin and his mother Shmi are not necessarily mistreated in the same way the droids are. There is a corollary to the restraining bolt in the transmitter that Shmi explains all slaves have inserted in their body. If a slave tries to escape, the transmitter explodes, killing the slave. A restraining bolt may not kill the droid it is attached to, but it does remove their own bodily autonomy and lets the owner completely control the droid's actions. But aside from this, the depiction of slavery seems very shallow. While Jerold Abrams argues that Anakin "is Watto's own living tool, which is precisely how Aristotle defines a 'slave,'" the film seems to show him more as a sort of employee, who completes tasks and gets sent home early (Abrams 116). Notably, Anakin and Shmi seem to have a degree of material freedom; they live on their own, purchase their own food, and even have possessions.

The question of Anakin's possessions adds a further complication to the comparison between droids and slavery. In *The Phantom Menace*, we learn that

Anakin himself actually built 3PO when he was a child. Anakin is excited to show off his creation, and it is shown as an example of his mechanical prowess. But, as Dan Hassler-Forest argues, it is a little odd “that Anakin Skywalker, himself a child slave, built C-3PO, again without a second thought to confining his creation to its own (eternal) life of servitude.” Anakin resents being called a slave but sees no problem in building a protocol droid to assist his mother. That lends credence to the theory that droids are not in fact people. However, Anakin seems to care for 3PO, turning him on to say goodbye and apologize for not finishing him when he leaves Tatooine.

Aside from the demonstration that slavery of organic beings does exist in the *Star Wars* universe, the prequel trilogy adds another layer to the depiction of droids in the films. While the original trilogy primarily showcased 3PO and R2, with a few additions, the prequels introduce new droids. The main droids in the story are still 3PO and R2, who meet in *The Phantom Menace* and begin to have adventures together in the follow-up, 2002’s *Attack of the Clones*. However, the prequels do introduce a new concept, and the first real antagonist droids: the Trade Federation’s army of battle droids. The Trade Federation, which is blockading Naboo in *The Phantom Menace*, invades the planet not with soldiers, like the Empire’s stormtroopers, but with droids. During the climactic battle sequence, there is a sharp comparison between the army of the amphibious alien Gungans, who ride into battle on mounts, confer with each other beforehand, and show anxiety, and the droid army, which is deployed on racks via control from the Trade Federation starship. In *Attack of the Clones*, the Separatists, who want to leave the Republic, incorporate the Trade Federation’s troops with other droid technology to create even better, more efficient killing machines. These droids, and later, even more efficient ones, constantly plague the heroes throughout the entirety of the clone wars and feature heavily in the animated series *The Clone Wars*.

The battle droids complicate the question of personhood for droids as a whole in these films. In many ways, the battle droids seem to be a safe and easy plot device. The prequels show the Clone Wars, and wars are fought with soldiers. Creating an army of battle droids allows for massive casualties without the moral quandaries of organic soldiers. In many ways, these droids are like henchmen, faceless and easily dispatched, what Erik Sofge describes as “the bumbling, comically-useless ground troops mass-produced by the bad guys, who can be safely, incessantly dismembered on screen, without appalling concerned parents.” There is also the need to distance the Clone Wars from the moral high ground of

the heroes. The Republic has their army of clone soldiers, the Separatists their droids. Neither army is seen as the equal to the fully developed characters of either the heroes or the villains. Instead, they are the cannon fodder that allows these wars to take place. So, droids fit in well, a disposable, lesser-than group of individuals who can and will die without having to take the time to be mourned.

The contrast between these droids, the nameless mass of battle droids that fight the war, and the main character droids, 3PO and R2, is jarring. While 3PO and R2 may not have full autonomy, they are still seen as individual characters with personalities and stories. The battle droids, on the other hand, are interchangeable. That is not to say they are unmemorable; the droids do seem to have some personality, even if it is mostly bumbling, and even if it seems to be one personality for the whole army. But the contrast between them and the heroes is made sharply clear in *Attack of the Clones*, when 3PO and R2 stumble on a droid factory. 3PO is aghast, finding something “perverse” in the idea of “machines making machines” — though it is unclear if most droids are mass produced or handmade, like 3PO is (*Star Wars: Attack of the Clones*, 01:38:55-01:38:59). When R2 pushes him out of the way in his rush to save the day, 3PO ends up on the assembly line. His head is removed from his body, and ends up attached to a battle droid body, while his body is given a battle droid head. There is a strange sort of interchangeableness at play, where a body and a head will go together, even if they are innately very different types of droids.

This also raises questions of droids’ “brains.” In some ways, it seems that the head contains the essence of the droid. 3PO’s body marches off to war, and the battle droid head controlling it is displeased with what it sees as the body’s failings, not realizing it is not a battle droid body. Conversely, 3PO is horrified to hold a gun and be part of the army. However, later he will briefly engage in battle, crying “Die, Jedi dogs!” as he shoots, only to be horrified with himself moments later when he seems to come back to himself and apologizes to the Jedi he is shooting (*Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* 01:54:33). While it seems like primary control is in the head — as if a brain, controlling a body — there seems to be some programming in the body that overrules 3PO’s own sense of self. Though this event is mostly played for laughs, it does raise new questions about whether a droid is a person. A person who receives a transplant does not become a new person, but a droid brain connected to a different body may become a different droid.

Overall, the prequel trilogy does not delve too deeply into the issue of droid autonomy. While the battle droids present a new type of droid, they are mostly

background. They tell a few jokes, shoot a few soldiers, and, mostly, die in large numbers. 3PO and R2 are up to their same shenanigans as in the original trilogy, with 3PO's long-suffering existence in contrast to R2's heroism. Even when the prequel trilogy does push deeper, it is usually played off for laughs. Towards the end of 2005's *Revenge of the Sith*, the final movie of the prequel trilogy, 3PO and R2 are given to Raymus Antilles, the man who 3PO identifies as his previous master in *A New Hope*. As they are handed over, Bail Organa, a senator and man who is shown as kind and heroic, tells Antilles to wipe 3PO's memory. This complete rejection of bodily autonomy is played off for laughs, with 3PO anxiously questioning the order and R2 seeming to gleefully laugh at 3PO's fate. This seems in line with what the series has shown so far. Even the good, kind, heroic characters see droids more as objects that they control rather than their own, full persons.

A memory wipe could even be seen as akin to murder. 3PO's body may remain, but the person he was, the sum of his experiences, is lost. The fact that his body remains, and that therefore the character appears continuously throughout the saga, may seem to imply that the character is consistent; 3PO is regularly viewed as one of the only characters to appear in every *Star Wars* film. However, can the 3PO of the original trilogy be considered the same as the one Anakin Skywalker built? The personality seems to be the same, anxious and annoying, but lacking any of the experience that 3PO earned. The fact that Bail Organa could so casually erase 3PO's past and hand him off to a new owner is callous and at contrast to Organa's overall goodness. But then again, it seems like even the "good" characters, those characters who are kind, thoughtful, and dedicated to doing the right thing, see no problems with the ways droids are treated.

The new era of *Star Wars*, after Disney purchased Lucasfilm and the rights to create more *Star Wars* films, starts to challenge that idea. 2015's *The Force Awakens* finally shows a character who sees droids as people in protagonist Rey. Rey is an orphan and a scavenger on the desert planet Jakku. She lives a life of servitude, rather like droids. Every day she gets up and works to find useful debris, which she then gives to her overseer in exchange for food, usually not enough food. Like droids, she lives in a liminal space where it is unclear if she is a slave or not, but she is definitely exploited for her labor and treated as lesser-than. It is not surprising that Rey finds kinship with droids. *The Force Awakens* introduces the first new major droid character besides 3PO and R2 with BB-8, a more advanced astromech. BB-8 is marooned on Jakku when his master, Poe Dameron, is taken captive by the sinister First Order. BB-8 runs away on Poe's orders, and soon finds

himself captured by another scavenger. When Rey hears BB-8's cries for help, she intervenes. Rey is furious, yelling at the scavenger and brandishing a weapon as she frees BB-8. The reason she is so angry is because of the scavenger's treatment of BB-8 as an object, rather than a person. As she puts it, the scavenger "has no respect for anyone" (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens* 00:15:31-00:15:33). To Rey, BB-8 is a person, who deserves respect and freedom. She treats him as such, giving him advice and companionship.

Aside from this opening sequence, however, the sequel trilogy does not provide much in terms of furthering the cause of droids' rights. BB-8 is still "owned" by Poe, although Poe treats him as more of a beloved pet than as property, at one point even giving BB-8 affectionate pets. R2 spends the majority of *The Force Awakens* shut down, seemingly in mourning over Luke, who has gone missing. Although he reappears at the end, his agency is almost nothing, a far cry from the heroic droid of the previous six movies. 2017's *The Last Jedi* gives him a bit more power, as he reunites with Luke and attempts to once more manipulate him as he did when they first met in *A New Hope*. Luke calls R2 an old friend, reasserting their dynamic from the original trilogy. However, R2's role in the sequel trilogy is far from the prominence he once held, seemingly pushed aside in favor of the newer BB-8. 3PO, unexpectedly, gets more of a role than R2. While his role is minimal in *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi*, mostly comic relief, he plays a major role in the final film, 2019's *The Rise of Skywalker*. In the film, 3PO accompanies BB-8, Rey, Poe, Chewbacca, and new hero Finn on a journey to save the galaxy from certain doom.

The Rise of Skywalker seems to be a sort of swansong for 3PO, giving him more attention than any previous movie. While he has mostly lost his connection with R2 by this point, 3PO has formed relationships with other characters that are just as rich and deep. When 3PO stumbles upon a clue that could help the heroes but is unable to solve it due to his programming, he faces unexpected harm from his allies. Poe suggests that they perform a procedure that will overwrite 3PO's programming and wipe his memory, despite 3PO's horror at such a prospect. But when they find a droidsmith able to complete the procedure, Rey gives 3PO the choice. Showing again the respect she previously showed BB-8, Rey treats 3PO like a person, an ally, and a friend. She respects him enough to not just let him make the choice, but to believe that his input would be valuable. Rey tells 3PO that he "know[s] the odds better than any of" them, respecting his processing power, and paying homage to 3PO's annoying habit of giving unhelpful odds (*Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, 00:49:41-00:49:42). It seems that this unexpected respect gives 3PO pause. Where

he had previously been panicking about his impending memory wipe, after listening to Rey he contemplates the question and decides that his sacrifice is worth saving the galaxy. This is a far cry from every time a droid has been used and discarded — 3PO is treated as a hero, here, given a poignant farewell befitting his actions. While he will later be rebooted and come back, this moment shows some more thought on the question of droids and their choices than previous *Star Wars* movies have given.

The Rise of Skywalker is not the only *Star Wars* film to finally give droids their due. The Disney Era also gave audiences two standalone movies (so far): 2016's *Rogue One* and 2018's *Solo: A Star Wars Story*. Both films featured droids in prominent roles, adding to the small number of major droid characters. *Rogue One* is a war film with an ensemble cast. In the film, Jyn Erso must assemble a group of allies to attack the Empire and steal plans for the Death Star. Her retinue includes four fellow humans — Cassian Andor, Bodhi Rook, Chirrut Îmwe, and Baze Malbus — and one droid, K-2SO. K2 is a former Imperial security droid who was captured and reprogrammed by Cassian. He is seen as a helpful, if awkward, companion for Cassian, doggedly loyal. But the film skims over the question of his reprogramming. If a memory wipe can be seen as akin to murder, reprogramming could be seen as brainwashing.

The film seems to indicate that, because K2 is treated better by the Rebels — and because the Rebels are better than the evil Empire — the reprogramming was a good thing. But it is unlikely that K2 consented to being reprogrammed, and unlikely that the droid he was would be happy with who he becomes. If droids do not have the right to bodily autonomy, do they at least have the rights to their own personality? This question of reprogramming comes up again in 2019's *The Mandalorian*, the first live-action *Star Wars* television show. In the series, assassin droid IG-11 is reprogrammed to be a nanny droid. While this is seen as a good thing, as he assists the heroes, it is completely contrary to his original persona. Where he originally is hired to kill a child, he later becomes that child's protector. While this might be seen as character growth in an organic character, this is instead a pure flip of a switch. IG-11 has no choice in the matter.

The thought process is the same in both cases: because the person doing the reprogramming is a good person, then the reprogramming must be a good thing. Because the reprogramming turns an enemy into an ally, it was the right thing to do. Naturally, Disney wants their heroes to be seen *as* heroes, so the series does not focus too much on this issue. There is no moral dilemma here, where the heroes

wonder if they have done the right thing. In fact, the only concern in terms of reprogramming seems to be more a question of whether a reprogrammed droid can be trusted, rather than whether or not the droid should have been reprogrammed in the first place. Focusing more on the morality of reprogramming would muddy the waters around Disney's heroes, and that would be bad for business. Even Cassian, who is seen as a somewhat shady character — he is an assassin and a saboteur, a morally gray spy — is not questioned for his decision to reprogram K2.

While *Rogue One* seems to avoid the question of whether what Cassian did to K2 was the right thing — in contrast to showing many of Cassian's other decisions to be flawed — it does at least develop K2 into a fascinating character. As a droid who can talk, unlike R2 or BB-8, K2 provides a foil for 3PO. Whereas 3PO is anxious and obsequious, K2 is sullen and disrespectful. Both are loyal to their masters, but in different ways. 3PO is loyal to Luke because it seems to be innate in his personality, whereas K2 seems to have chosen Cassian as a friend. The extent to which this is programming is unclear, but it provides a more equal footing than has previously been seen between droid and master. K2 is also a contrast to the battle droids of the prequels. While he is overtly violent like they are, he is individual and has a rich personality. It is unclear how much this is innate to KX security droids, or if this is solely a trait of K2; the only other KX security droids we see are quickly dispatched by the heroes without any chance to display personality.

What *Rogue One* does well is showcasing K2 as an integral part of a team, rather than a sidekick. He stands on equal footing, with as much a part to play as any of their group. K2 is even shown to be respected as an equal by the organic cast. He is a skilled pilot and fighter, and in the climax, Jyn even gives him her weapon, something he had wanted since the beginning of the film. When K2 dies during the attack, this keeps him on equal footing with the rest of the cast, who all also die. Although he remarks earlier in the film that he would not die if they were shot down in space, he is in fact the first to die, shot down protecting Jyn and Cassian. His death is not played for laughs or skipped over, but an emotional look at the cost of war and a sobering hint of what is to come.

Where *Rogue One* takes baby steps, however, showing K2 as more of a person and an equal, *Solo* strides forward in its droid character L3-37. *Solo* is primarily the origin story of Han Solo, but features a team-up heist plot. L3-37 becomes a part of the team when Han's crew hires Lando Calrissian and his freighter the *Millennium Falcon* for their job. L3 is Lando's partner and co-pilot; she is also a revolutionary,

advocating for droids' rights. L3 first appears in an underground gambling hall, where two droids are fighting each other in a ring that is a cross between Battle Bots and dog fighting. L3 is appalled by this violence and tries to convince one of the droids to stand up for himself, while being fought back by the droid's owner. The sequence is very evocative, with L3 desperately trying to convince the droid to rebel: "how can you condone this savagery? You, you should not be doing this. They're using you for entertainment. Yeah, you've been neurowashed. Don't just blindly follow the program. Exercise some free will!" (*Solo* 00:59:27-00:59:39). L3's protests seem to reaffirm that programming is akin to brainwashing, or what she calls "neurowashing." The droid's owner, who is no doubt getting rich off of the violent exploits, fights back, arguing that the droid "never had it so good," a callous statement that equates the droid's exploitation with a pitbull used for fighting or, even, arguments used by slave apologists (*Solo* 00:59:41). When the owner gets violent, L3 responds in kind, showcasing her willingness to be aggressive in her convictions.

The evocative entrance is only a hint at what will come with L3 throughout *Solo*. Unlike the other droids *Star Wars* introduces, L3 is fully autonomous. She is less loyal to Lando as a servant to a master than she is fond of a reluctant ally. She sasses back at Lando and never lets him take her compliance for granted. Their relationship is contentious, with L3 derisively calling Lando her "organic overlord" in a way that makes it clear he has no actual control over her (*Solo* 01:00:29). Lando, for his part, gives as good as he gets. When L3 mockingly asks if he will "have [her] wiped" if she does not comply, he brushes it off (*Solo* 01:00:17). Later, though, he says that he "actually would have her memory wiped, but she's got the best damn navigational database in the galaxy," implying that it is only because of L3's usefulness that he puts up with her sass (*Solo* 01:00:34-01:00:37).

This friendly antagonism is shown to be nothing more than a front when danger approaches. During the heist, L3 needs to take control of the central processing center of a mine to keep an eye on the team and assist remotely. An astromech droid stands in her way and is unable to move due to a restraining bolt, something L3 views as "barbaric" and immediately removes, freeing the droid (*Solo* 01:14:55). When the newly freed droid asks her what to do, she suggests that it free the other droids being kept captive, advice it follows. What comes next is pure rebellion, as the many slaves of the mine — both organic and mechanical — set out to free themselves. This also reasserts the idea that droids are slaves, as they are put on equal footing with the organic captives held as slaves. L3, of course, is thrilled with

this uprising, and proclaims to Lando that she has found her purpose. Lando, meanwhile, is exasperated by the conflict and the wrench it throws in their plans. When L3 is shot trying to escape, however, Lando is horrified. He rushes into danger to save her, which proves futile. L3's body falls apart until Lando is left holding her head and shoulders, and her processors fail. Lando mourns her not as a piece of property broken but as a friend, a partner, lost.

However, while *Solo* provides a strong droid character in L3, it fails to follow the thought through. After L3's death, the crew still needs her navigational database to complete their mission. So, with a complete lack of regard for her bodily autonomy, they scavenge L3's brain and connect it to the ship. Despite the grief Lando had just shown for L3, he sees no problem in them yanking out her processor — shown violently as wires rip and sparks fly — to save themselves. Joanna Robinson, writing for *Vanity Fair*, tries to put a commercially positive spin on things. Robinson argues that “Lando's attachment to L3 is so strong that... he implants her consciousness in his ship, so they can be together forever.” Robinson is going off the implication that L3 and Lando had a romantic connection, something the film and the cast support. However, Robinson does concede that “regardless of how you interpret Lando's romantic gesture, the sad fact is that it's very short-lived [...] *Solo* not only takes Lando's home from him, but also takes his girlfriend.” Even aside from the simplification here — L3 was not Lando's girlfriend but his partner and friend — this does reduce L3 to a possession, something to be stolen and owned, rather than a person with autonomy. Others are more cognizant of the darker implications of this action. Matt Goldberg writes that L3 is “treated like an object even though her entire character is about not being treated like an object.” It is quite possibly the worst outcome L3 could ever have — to be reduced to a *thing*, just after she had found purpose freeing other droids.

Still, Goldberg does at least give *Solo* credit for being “the first time the *Star Wars* movies have delved into a fan debate about whether or not droids are robots or sentient lifeforms.” Goldberg argues that, while droids are “treated like a servant class by the larger galaxy,” *Solo* argues that they should be seen as “individuals with thoughts, ambitions, and goals. They're the second-class citizens of the *Star Wars* universe, but they are sentient lifeforms worthy of recognition and respect” (Goldberg). While *Solo* fails to take this idea to its completion, it does at least consider the fact that droids are sentient — L3 even says it explicitly, yelling “Droid rights! We! Are! Sentient!” at the droid fighting ring (*Solo* 00:59:49). While *Star Wars*, for most of its 40+ year history, seems to have been unsure of how to consider

droids, it seems that, with Disney's acquisition, the answer is that they are in fact sentient beings.

If droids are actually sentient beings, how can they be seen as anything other than slaves? At no point prior to *Solo* is any droid seen to be autonomous, and even *Solo* seems to struggle with the notion. 3PO is literally created to serve. He and R2 are sold at auction and given away without any thought of how dangerous it would be. Droids like K2 and IG-11 are reprogrammed and completely changed into new persons, and 3PO at least is wiped not once but *twice*, losing himself and all his history. Countless droids are created to be soldiers, put into battle for a war that has nothing to do with them, and killed without hesitation by the "heroes." And many more droids of all kinds are used as tools by the organic beings of the galaxy. Droid slavery props up the galaxy and keeps things running. Throughout the films, countless droids are shown performing any number of mundane functions — serving food, driving, performing medical assistance, communicating across the galaxy, and so much more. How different is that to how Arnold Brown describes the real-world future of robotic servitude as "the machines that will increasingly do our manual labor, operate and direct interactions between people and institutions, perform domestic services, fight our wars, take care of children and seniors, clean up our messes, and so on?" (Brown 50). Some critics use the term "servant" to describe the work that droids do (Kornhaber; Zakarin). But servant implies something different; after all, servants are paid. For his part, Brown is quite clear that "the most apt term for the[se] machines... may be slaves" (Brown 50). Gregory Hampton links the droids in *Star Wars* even more clearly to the history of human slavery in America, arguing that "the domestic robots found in films such as *Star Wars* [...] share a frightening resemblance to antebellum slaves" (Hampton 13).

If the droids of *Star Wars* are slaves, what does that say about the world in which these films take place? It does not seem like a very nice place. As Sofge points out, even the "seemingly infallible heroes" of *Star Wars* "could care less about the plight of the slave caste propping up their society." Spencer Kornhaber argues that the fact that droids "are bought and sold, denied entry into certain gathering places, and subject to deactivation at their owner's whim isn't presented as a moral issue at all." This is true for both the characters in the films and the fans who consume these films. Just as Luke, Cassian, Anakin, and others see no problem with owning and controlling droids, most fans never give a second thought to the way droids are treated because "we see our beloved human heroes treat them with affection and the droids never complain" (Hassler-Forest). Hassler-Forest argues

that “it all seems so obvious in retrospect, and yet the master-servant relationship between organic and artificial life in the Star Wars franchise has been largely ignored until now.” *Solo* pushes fans to think about this “can of worms,” as Hassler-Forest puts it. The “movie’s explicit statement that Star Wars droids are fully autonomous and conscious intelligent beings — as the evidence so clearly suggests — really does challenge the ‘innocent’ depiction of a form of slavery that has long slipped by under our collective radar” (Hassler-Forest).

Droids in the *Star Wars* universe are infinitely varied, but they seem to have one constant — they are used by the organic beings that own them with little thought or consideration of the droids as actual people. To be fair, some droids seem to have little processing power and are more like the tools already used in the real world; MSE cleaning droids could be akin to Roomba robots. However, even the MSE droids have some base sentience. The MSE droid MSE-6-G735Y runs into Chewbacca in *A New Hope* and flees in fear when Chewbacca roars at it (Weldon 277). More advanced droids perform so much of the labor in this universe and are treated less like minimum wage workers dealing with customers and more like an inert piece of technology. If droids are capable of so much — even capable, as *Solo* indicates, of love and sexual attraction — why are they viewed as simply tools?

Speaking a decade before the first Disney *Star Wars* movie would be released, well before L3’s cries for “equal rights,” Robert Arp suggested that it was time for a change (*Solo* 01:08:22). He argues that “maybe it’s time for droid liberation in the *Star Wars* galaxy, in much the same way that other groups of people who have been unjustly enslaved throughout human history have been liberated” (Arp 130). Although things have not changed much, some progress has been made. *Star Wars* is taking baby steps to confronting the idea that the droids the audience knows and loves are slaves, used and abused and discarded by even the heroes of the films. It may not happen anytime soon, but Disney may yet provide a future where droids are their own, autonomous people, not just sentient tools.

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