



BRILL

VIDEO JOURNAL OF EDUCATION AND PEDAGOGY

10 (2025) 1–22

VIDEO JOURNAL

OF EDUCATION
AND PEDAGOGY

brill.com/vjep

The Life of Droids: A Droidean Corporeal Horror

Star Wars: A New Hope for Visual Pedagogies in a Galaxy Far, Far Away

Andrew Gibbons | ORCID: 0000-0002-0847-5639

Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

andrew.gibbons@aut.ac.nz

Andrew Denton | ORCID: 0000-0002-2074-9196

University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

andrew.denton@usask.ca

Rainie Yu | ORCID: 0009-0007-8517-8500

University of North Texas, Denton, USA

rainieyu@my.unt.edu

Received 20 July 2025 | Accepted 17 November 2025 |

Published online 19 December 2025

Abstract

In this article the life of droids is explored through a weaving of scenes, dialogue, analysis, theory and an exhibition. The imagery and text are employed to work through the experiences of the droids and the relationships that are revealed, or perhaps even presenced (Heidegger, 1993). The works of Heidegger and Camus on technology and science, the story of Viktor Frankenstein's absence of care for 'his' creation, and insights from Daniel Wallace's book, *Star Wars: The New Essential Guide to Droids* add textual flavour to the images that have been produced by the authors and that invite exploration of life in the age of droidean corporeal horror. In this exhibition of machine lives, the images are presented as uncanny moments (Rancière, 2010), revealing questions concerning technology and being (Heidegger, 1993). The educational intention of this work is not to emancipate machine life through the horror stories of droidean cultures and communities, but rather to offer insights into the error of Modern mastery.

Keywords

Star Wars – droids – horror – machine-life – modernity



FEATURE This article comprises an exhibition of fourteen photographs, which includes *Contemplation* (Denton, 2024).

- This article is part of the special topic ‘*Star Wars: A New Hope for Visual Pedagogies in a Galaxy Far, Far Away*’, edited by Andrew Gibbons and Rene Novak.

1 Introduction

Citizens on any industrialized world can barely conceive of life without droids. For uncountable generations, automata have performed the jobs that intelligent beings are unwilling or incapable of doing.

WALLACE, 2006

If there's one repetitive scene as similarly thematic as having a “bad feeling about this” and porn pop bands in seedy cafes around far away galaxies, it's scenes of droids in pieces being tortured and fitted with restraining bolts and other nefarious happenings. These scenes are emblematic of the life of droids in far away galaxies, and of machine life here on planet Earth. What can we learn from the visualization of these scenes? What does the construction of these scenes of machine slavery and fear tell us?

In this article, the life of droids depicted in these scenes is explored for what they say about conditions of modernity. The article includes an exhibition and a discussion that sit together with a common interest. The exhibition sits in the foreground to invite thinking around machine and human being. The discussion engages with imagery and dialogue from *Star Wars* to work through the experiences of the droids and the machine-human relationships that are revealed, or perhaps even presenced (Heidegger, 1993). The works of Heidegger and Camus on technology and science, the story of Viktor Frankenstein's absence of care for ‘his’ creation, and insights from Daniel Wallace's book, *Star Wars: The New Essential Guide to Droids* add textual flavour to the images that have been produced by the authors and that invite exploration of life in the age of droidean corporeal horror. Following Heidegger, Camus, and Shelley, the case being made here is that the ways in which the droids experience discrimination reveals the ways in which Modernity treats not just machine-life but all life. Each of these authors additionally recognised some kind of suffering associated with those discriminations and hierarchies of living things.

In this exhibition of machine lives, the images are presented as uncanny moments (Rancière, 2010), revealing questions concerning technology and being (Heidegger, 1993) and caring for the suffering of techno-scientific creations (Shelley, 2009). The educational intention of this work is not to emancipate machine life through the horror stories of droidean cultures and communities, but rather to offer insights into the error of Modern mastery.

2 The Droidean Corporeal Horror Exhibition

we must know that we can never escape the common misery and that our only justification, if indeed there is a justification, is to speak up, insofar as we can, for those who cannot do so. But we must do so for all those who are suffering at this moment, whatever may be the glories, past or future, of the States and parties oppressing them: for the artist there are no privileged torturers.

CAMUS, 1995, p. 267



FIGURE 1
Contemplation
DENTON (2024)



FIGURE 2 Drawing
DENTON (2016)

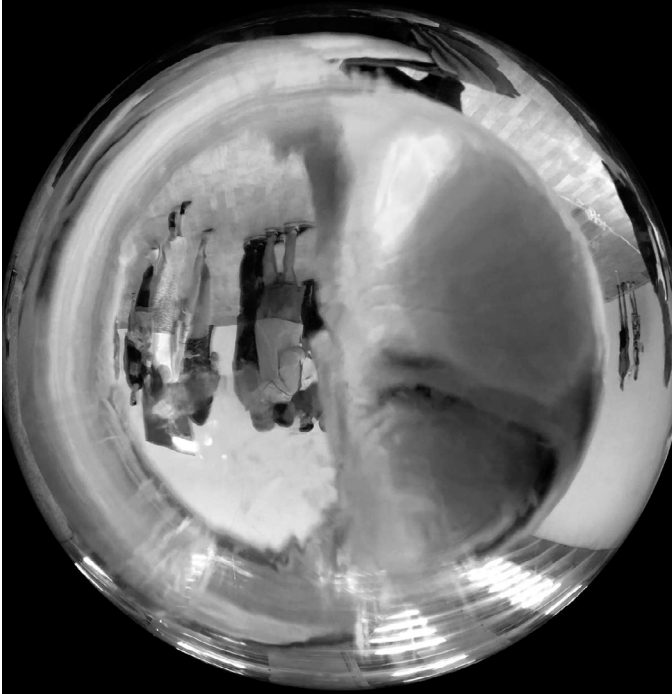


FIGURE 3 Circle
DENTON (2016)



FIGURE 4 Droid Eye View
DENTON (2019)



FIGURE 5 Humanoid II
DENTON (2019)



FIGURE 6 Well There It Is
SMITH (2025)

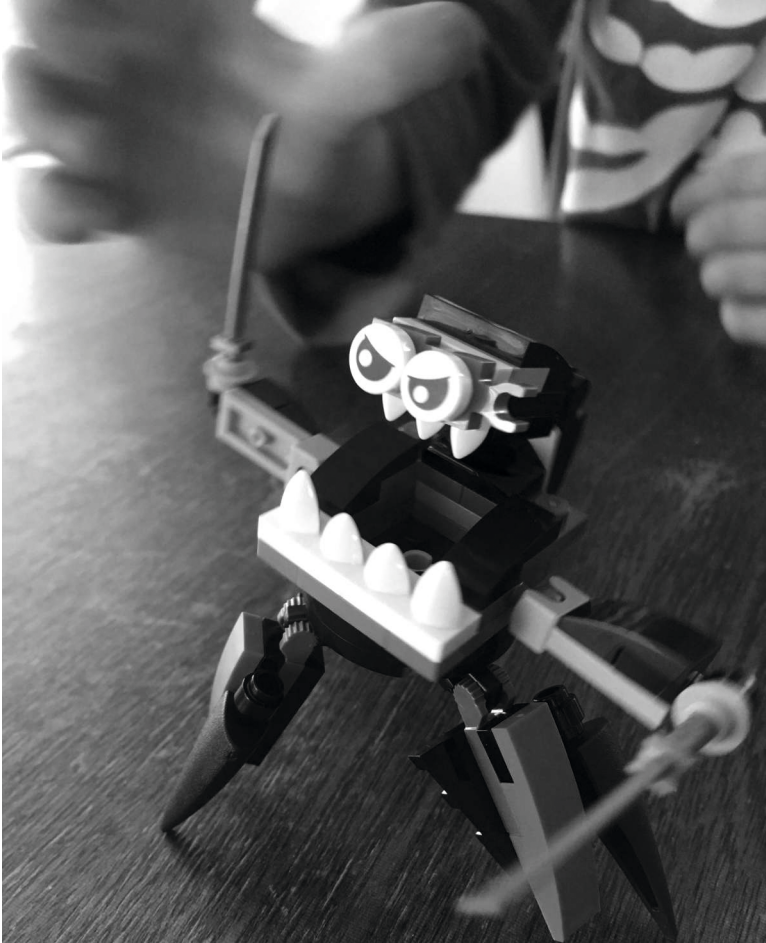


FIGURE 7 Mixel
DENTON (2016)

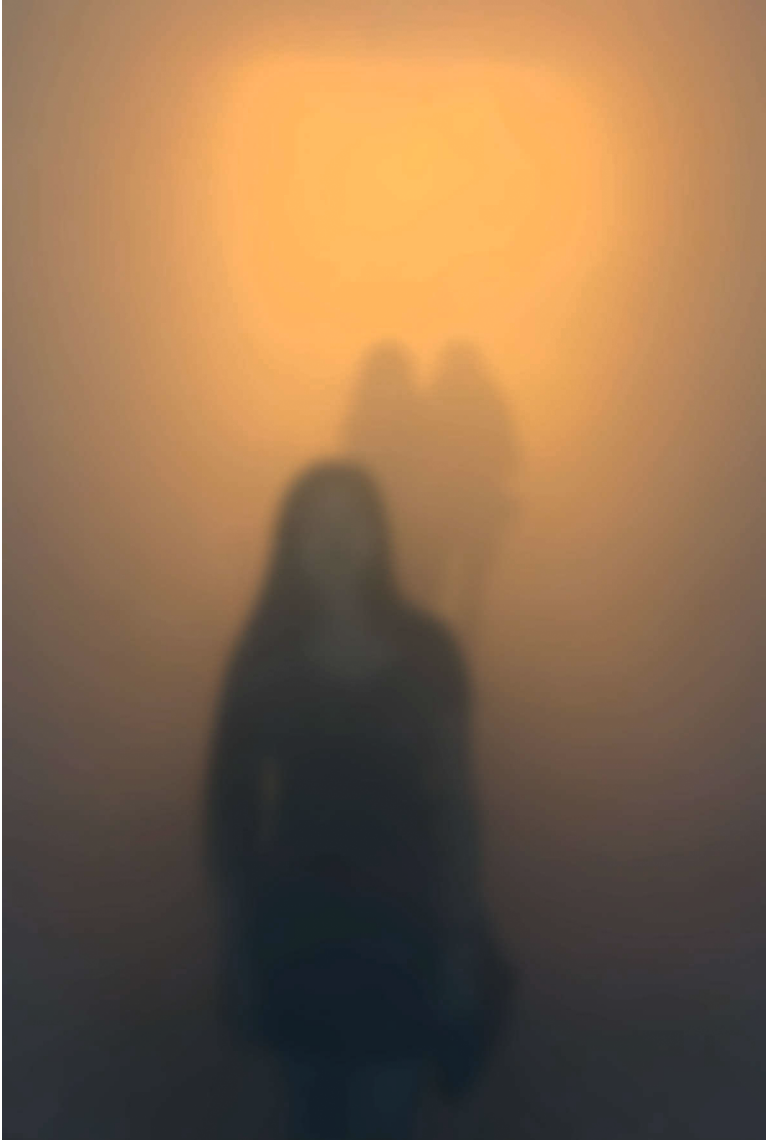


FIGURE 8 Humanoid 1
DENTON (2019)



FIGURE 9 Hug Me
DENTON (2017)



FIGURE 10 Stick
DENTON (2020)



FIGURE 11 Roomba
GIBBONS (2024)



FIGURE 12 Pieces
GIBBONS (2024)



FIGURE 13 Resting
DENTON (2017)

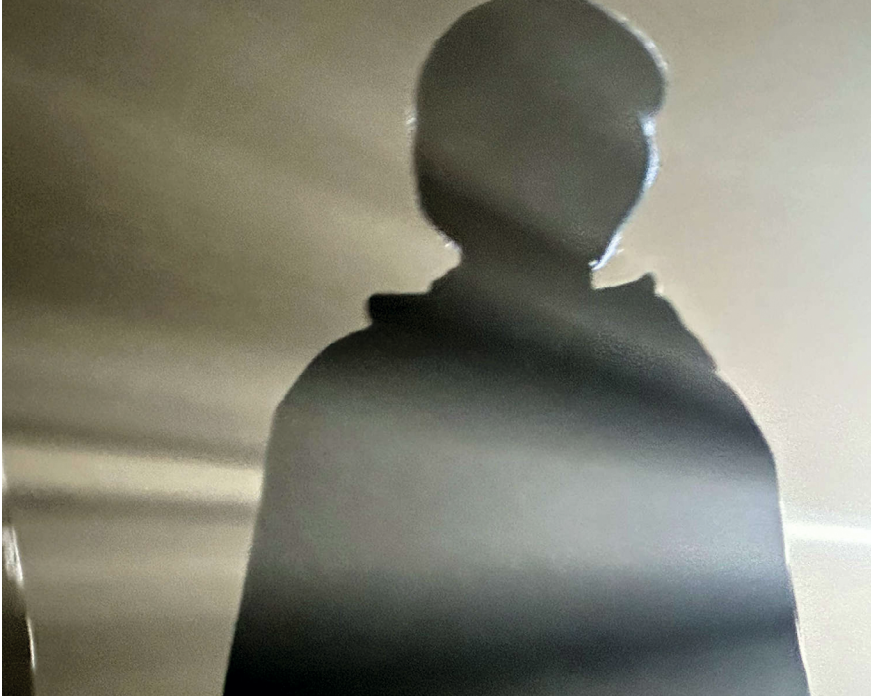


FIGURE 14 Humanoid III
DENTON (2019)

3 “We Seem to Be Made to Suffer, It’s Our Lot in Life” (Lucas, 1977)

This first section offers description and analysis of the familiar and thematic droid scrapyards, containment rooms, and workshop scenes that recur across the Star Wars series. We focus here on the first instance of these scenes as it sets the tone for scenes in later/earlier episodes.

In *Episode IV: A New Hope* (Lucas, 1977), the droids narrowly escape the Empire and Vader, ending up on Tatooine with the really very important plans to the Death Star. The droids have an argument over their mission and which direction they should head in when no direction appears to be a good direction. R2D2 calls C-3PO a “mindless philosopher”. They head in different directions.

C-3PO sees a Jawa Sandcrawler appear over the horizon and exclaims that he’s saved. Meanwhile R2D2 is ambushed by Jawas and taken to the same Sandcrawler. Outside the Sandcrawler: a shower of sparks; a droid screams; R2D2 is fitted with a restraining bolt; R2D2 is sucked up an industrial sized vacuum into the Sandcrawler.

In the Jawa Sandcrawler, the first image is of a shiny silver droid with big buggy eyes. A selection of shots reveals a poorly lit room with some whole droids and a lot of bits and pieces of machine junk. Droids are in various states of dis-composition and disconnection. The droids that are operational – that are alive – emit sounds of disrepair and despair. In similar scenes further along the narrative arc, droids are in the process of being operated on, typically by other droids, and are screeching in apparent pain and fear.

Many technologies exist for keeping droids in line. One of the most visible is the restraining bolt, an electronic signal disrupter usually attached to a droid's chassis in a prominent spot. The restraining bolt, when activated by a handheld 'caller,' bypasses a droid's motivational programming and forces the droid to perform specific actions, such as switching itself off.

WALLACE, 2006

The scene in the Sandcrawler is the visualisation of educational importance here. This is one of many scenes in which we find a collection of droid parts and droids. The droids we see are often shaking and beeping to communicate what appears to be some kind of fear, sorrow, or melancholia. Similar scenes occur in *Episode V* when *The Empire Strikes Back* on the cloud city (Lucas, 1980), and in *Episode VI* when, in *The Return of the Jedi*, Luke offers up R2D2 and C-3PO in return for Han Solo (Lucas, 1983).

These scenes are emblematic of the lot in life of droids (Burkett, 2015; Gault, 2023) – the lot of being made to suffer in two senses. The first sense is the design, programme and deployment of droids to take on the risky work that living beings (including but not limited to humans – consider for instance the Galactic Trade Federation) would prefer to delegate. The first R2D2 scene, in which repair droids are blasted off the exterior hull of a ship, and left behind in space, is a brilliant example of this as R2D2 saves the day for the Jedi and Princess Amidala when escaping Naboo (Lucas, 1999).

Every standard day, millions of subservient automata negotiate treaties, repair hyperdrives, cure plagues, incinerate garbage, nurse children, haul cargo, deliver messages, cook meals, and destroy enemies. At the same time, droids are ignored and unappreciated, treated as chattel by many owners and regarded with outright hostility by others.

WALLACE, 2006

The second sense of being made to suffer is evident in the persistent and toxic discrimination against droids (Gault, 2023). The scenes in the Sandcrawler,

and similar droid workshops, scrapyards and torture chambers across the episodes, are iterations of Frankenstein's laboratory – what looks initially like some place between a scrapheap and workshop is revealed as something else when we see and hear the droids. The story of the horror that is created in Frankenstein's laboratory brings the gaze back to the makers who make droids to suffer: “Unowned droids are often seized, forcibly memory-wiped, and sold at public auctions” (Wallace, 2006).

Witness, for example, the maker of C-3PO: Anakin Skywalker. Anakin is a slave at the time that he makes C-3PO. In *Episode I* we meet a naked C-3PO in Anakin's room (Lucas, 1999). The scene seems pleasant enough and we get a sense that Anakin cares for his creation. It certainly does not seem like a horror scene. But then ... Anakin meets his destiny in the form of a Jedi master who senses the Force is strong in the slave boy and conspires to free the boy from his slavery in an act that begins, or at least accelerates, Anakin's transformation into Viktor Frankenstein/Darth Vader.

In *Episode II* (Lucas, 2002), Anakin whines to Padme that life was simpler when he was a slave fixing things. Anakin Skywalker is Viktor Frankenstein in that, like Viktor, once freed, Anakin abandons C-3PO (Lucas, 1999). And like Viktor, Anakin is an insufferable whiner with very strong opinions on everything, and a destructive love life. Unlike Viktor, Anakin actually tells his creation that they are being abandoned. Anakin turns C-3PO on, shares his own good luck and being freed and invited to join the Jedi on their journey to Coruscant. C-3PO replies, “you're my maker and I wish you well. However, I should prefer it if I were a little more completed.” Anakin refuses, apologises, and then says: “I'm gonna miss working on you. You've been a great pal. I'll make sure mom [Shmi] doesn't sell you or anything”.

Though anti-droid prejudice is a reality among the unenlightened, owners who have spent long stretches with their droids have discovered that they can be both trusted companions and loyal friends.

WALLACE, 2006

C-3PO is horrified: “Sell me?” [or anything?]. Anakin walks out with a “bye”.

In *Episode II*, when Anakin and Padme are in search of Shmi they arrive at the Lars property and C-3PO is there working. C-3PO initially does not recognise Anakin, and asks “How might I be of service? I am C ...” and Anakin interjects “...3PO?” who then exclaims “The maker ... oh master Ani, I knew you would return, I knew it ... bless my circuits, I'm so pleased to see you both.”

Unlike Frankenstein's creation, C-3PO maintains generous feelings and ideas about their creator and the world in which he was created. They do not

run amok in a hopeless and horrifying search for belonging. More curiously, in *Episode IV*, C-3PO doesn't seem to remember that Anakin made him on Tatooine nor that he was, for a time, the property of the Lars family when the family purchased C-3PO (back) from the Jawa.

This inconsistency should not distract the viewer from the point here – the point of droid slavery (Gault, 2023) and the intentions of the creators to make the droids suffer. The inconsistency should additionally not distract the viewer from recognising that the film makers, as well as the droid makers, are Frankenstein-like. Droid suffering is programmed as a comedic rather than tragic scene in each story line. Any hint of actually feeling bad for the lot of droids is washed away by the pantomime of droid misfortune. Does this spectacle numb the viewer to the horrific world of those who are made to suffer?

4 “If Droids Could Think There'd Be None of Us Here” (Lucas, 2002)

A droid is generally distinguished from a robot by having a self-aware consciousness (though some use the terms droid and robot interchangeably), and is set apart from a computer by having a self-contained method of locomotion, such as wheels, legs, treads, or repulsor lifts.

WALLACE, 2006

Why is it ok to see droid enslavement and torture as comedic? In this section we consider the ways in which droid cognition might allow for this pantomime to proceed, through references to the thinking-ness of droid life.

Obi-Wan makes his feelings on the matter of droids quite clear in a conversation with Dex, a chef at Coruscant diner who seems to have a military background. Obi-Wan and Dex are discussing the origins of a piece of military tech. Dex advises Obi-Wan that the tech is made by Camino cloners. Obi-Wan wonders why it is that Dex is able to identify the object when the Jedi analysis of droids could not. Dex explains, quite sarcastically, that the Jedi should understand the difference between knowledge and wisdom. This leads Obi-Wan to observe that: “If droids could think there'd be none of us here” (Lucas, 2002).

The issue of whether droids are truly alive is one that has vexed philosophers and ethicists since the dawn of the Republic. The renowned thinker Plaristes famously argued against the possibility of droid sentience in his work *Of Minds and Machines*.

WALLACE, 2006

This philosophical exchange on the question ‘what is thinking?’ offers more insight into the possible manifestations of hubris, chauvinism and ignorance with regard to the meanings of life and qualities of being alive. That Obi-Wan is a Jedi should not, of course, lead us to the view that all Jedi are ignorant when it comes to the philosophical questions concerning thinking and life. At the very least, it seems pretty ungrateful to be talking about R2D2 like this when R2D2 has been there risking their circuitry/life for the Jedi and friends again and again. Here then is an inkling of why it might be possible to enjoy the pantomime of droidean horror.

Can droids think (see also Burkett, 2015)? In *Episode II*, on Geonosis, R2D2 and C-3PO are on a mission that R2D2 instigates. C-3PO opposes the mission, explaining: “My obtuse little friend, if they had wanted our help they would have asked for it. You obviously have a great deal to learn about human behavior” (Lucas, 2002). C-3PO goes on to ‘droid-splain’ that they know more about human behaviour because that’s how they’ve been programmed. So, in a sense, they’re not thinking, they are simply following the thoughts programmed (Burkett, 2015) into them by Anakin. Yet, in the same conversation, C-3PO observes: “For a mechanic, you seem to do an excessive amount of thinking” (Lucas, 2002).

So, R2D2 is not programmed to think but engages in an excess of thinking. Did someone (or thing) programme R2D2 to excessively think, or to give the appearance of thinking? Perhaps this is an important distinction for Obi-Wan. It is convenient to see droids appearing to think, but they are not really thinking. If droids can indeed think, then things are less convenient for Obi-Wan and his discriminating against droids while all along seeming like a stand-up kind of knight who follows the ways of the Force. The what now?

Perhaps the Force is part of the problem. What is the point of the Force if, through the Force, droids (as only apparently thinking beings) are at the same time regarded as lacking life and therefore devoid of the force? Is force a kind of enabler, that chooses to bestow itself on some ‘thing’ but not another thing? Or does the force wait to be released by the will of the individual to be actualized?

The previous section introduced one of C-3PO’s many observations that raise one of the many contradictions here: “It’s our lot in *life*” they say to R2D2 while considering that droids are made to suffer. C-3PO goes on to state to R2D2, “you wouldn’t want my life to get boring”. As with thinking then, a case can be made for droids to be recognised as simply appearing to be living and therefore entitled to their share of the force. For example:

Many great intellects [argue] ... that droids are self-aware and, in many cases, capable of feeling emotions and pain. Some droids even appear to believe in a higher being and an afterlife, as evidenced by the droid members of the Sunesi religion and the throngs of mechanical worshippers found in the rust heaps of Ronyards.

WALLACE, 2006

When C-3PO says it's our lot in this interesting life, they assign their droid-ness with life. Yet Obi-Wan seems to challenge any entitlement to life for droids, arguing that droids cannot think. Whether droids can or cannot, do or do not, try or try not, the point here is that this Jedi Master holds that one's life-ness is earned with the ability and readiness to think. Obi Wan projects certain living values, and establishes what is entitled to dignity.

Obi-Wan's failure here is not just a failure in recognizing a dignity in all things – it's a failure in taking care with his thinking about thinking. Obi-Wan's shallow thinking on this topic invites, following Adomaitis and Grinbaum (2024), a study of the many ways in which machines enable and interact with human thinking and the exercise of free will.

5 “Oh My Goodness Shut Me Down ... Machines Making Machines ... How Perverse” (Lucas, 2002)

In his questioning of technology, Heidegger (1993) offers a way of understanding a deeper essence to the lives of the droids. Heidegger was himself open to using images of the technological world to work through his thinking on being and on things (for example, the image of Cezanne's *Pont de Maincy* in Heidegger, 1993). Bridges and jugs and other 'things' are of importance to Heidegger's (1993) work on the “four causes” (*causa materialis*, *cause formalis*, *causa finalis* and *causa efficiens*). These causes, when applied to droids, reveal a complex relationship of responsibility between droid and maker.

Being responsible is, perhaps, what the Franken-jedi (for example) lose track of in their summation of the Force and their views on droid life. Heidegger's concern might be that the Jedi are entirely modern in their epistemological chauvinisms (Young, 2002). Droid horror scenes reveal the nature of standing in reserve – the “challenging ... which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 320). C-3PO articulates this challenging as being a being that is “made to suffer”. This making is profound because droids don't seek to rescue themselves from their condition – they are neither Pinocchio (see Ghiraldehlli, 2000) nor David (Spielberg, 2001).

That suffering takes on a deep irony in the droid army factory scenes on Geonosis in *Episode II* (the episode in which R2D2 is accused of an excess of thinking). C-3PO is horrified – the perversity of machines making machines (Lucas, 2002). C-3PO should be more worried that, typically, the torturers in the droid workshops are also droids (*Episodes IV, V and VI*), and that droids refuse service to other droids at kiosks even when on an errand for their human masters (*Episode II*). These are the conditions of a supposedly technologically and scientifically advanced past in a far away galaxy – a galaxy in which librarians can remark confidently that a thing does not exist if it is not an entry in the Jedi archives (*Episode II*).

A failure to care for things that are created is seen in these scenes. The Jedi, like Frankenstein (see Shelley, 2009, p. 57), recognise an ethic of care. And like Frankenstein, they fail to enact that care (Burkett, 2015; Haynes, 1995): “Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due” (Shelley, 2009, p. 118).

6 Conclusion

We began this exhibition and article with two questions regarding droid scenes in *Star Wars*:

- 1) What can we learn from the visualization of these scenes?
- 2) What does the construction of these scenes of machine slavery and fear tell us?

The images in this exhibition are concerned with an affective relationship between droids and humans – one that the scenes of the films evoke but that become too canny in their hyper popularized fiction. The *Droidean Corporeal Horror Exhibition* presented here takes an uncanny look at life through images that question the life of machines and that ask, following Samuel Butler (1970), as to the a machincate-ness of being human. The images invite questions about what it means to be and to think as a machine and explore the porosity of boundaries between machines and humans.

It is important to us to recognise that the article is not intended to prescribe a reading of the *Droidean Corporeal Horror* photographic exhibition. As an exhibition with something to teach, we recognise and value the impossibly diffuse and diverse readings of our selected photography. In other words, the exhibition asks these questions, without looking to settle on any answers. Yet we can also say that our turn to the openness of an exhibition coheres with a particular critique of science, technology, knowledge and meaning that resonates with our reading of the lives of droids in *Star Wars*.

So that science that was ready to teach me everything ends up as a hypothesis, that lucidity founders on a metaphor, that uncertainty is resolved in a work of art. What need had I of so many efforts? The soft lines of these hills and the hand of evening on this troubled heart reach me much more. I have returned to my beginning. I realize that if through science I can seize phenomena and enumerate them, I cannot, for all that, apprehend the world. Were I to trace its entire relief with my finger, I should not know any more.

CAMUS, 1991, p. 19

The droid scenes and the cinematic tapestry woven around them are a lesson in the thinness of life and of meaning. This thinness is engaged through images that explore machinery and life, and that question the ways in which machinery is cast aside by Modernity – that question a failure to care for all things. Of course, care for all things is not a remarkable discovery. For example, we recognise in the tradition of Daoism the art of always collaborating with the world (Ames, 2015). The Daoist recognises that both one's virtue and one's creations are provided and enabled by the things that constitute their world. This reflects an important aspect of a Classic Chinese cosmology. Humans, just like droids, are no more central nor privileged than anything else. More than this, being human is not a given; it is realized through what one does, through attending, responding and allowing oneself to be in and with the rest of the world (Ames, 2015). Following Heidegger (1993), the films, and the exhibition, are invitations to wonder as to where Modern ideas of technological slavery come from, to whose and what end those ideas might lead, and what has been, within this slavery, forgotten about being in the world. Remembering what has been forgotten perhaps leads a way back, across, and forwards, to alternative forms of care-full making that do not depend on the suffering of things.

References

- Adomaitis, L., & Grinbaum, A. (2024). Neurotechnologies, ethics, and the limits of free will. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 58, 894–907. www.doi.org/10.1007/s12124-024-09830-2
- Ames, R. T. (2015). “Knowing” as the “realizing of happiness” here, on the bridge, over the River Hao. In R. T. Ames & T. Nakajima (Eds.), *Zhuangzi and the Happy Fish* (pp. 261–290). University of Hawaii Press.
- Burkett, D. (2015). Mindless philosophers and overweight globs of grease: Are droids capable of thought? In J. T. Eberl and K. S. Decker (Eds.), *The ultimate Star Wars and philosophy: You must unlearn what you have learned*, 229–239. Blackwell.

- Butler, S. (1970). *Erewhon*. Penguin Books.
- Camus, A. (1991/1955). *The myth of Sisyphus and other essays*. New York: Vintage.
- Camus, A. (1995). Create dangerously. In *Resistance, rebellion, and death: Essays* (J. O'Brien trans.) (pp. 249–272). New York: Vintage International.
- Gault, C. (2023). *The well-tempered android: Philosophical posthumanism in science fiction cinema*. University of Louisville. Electronic Theses and Dissertations. Paper 4063. www.doi.org/10.18297/etd/4063
- Ghiradelli Jr, P. (2000). The fundamentals of Gepeto's philosophy of education: Neopragmatism and infancy in the postmodern world. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 32(2), 201–207.
- Gibbons, A. (2019). Franken-education, or when science runs amok. In D. W. Kupferman & A. Gibbons (Eds.), *Childhood, science fiction, and pedagogy: Children ex machina* (pp. 19–39). Springer.
- Haynes, R. D. (1995). Frankenstein: The scientist we love to hate. *Public Understanding of Science*, 4, 435–444
- Heidegger, M. (1993). The question concerning technology. In M. Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (pp. 311–341) (D. F. Krell, Ed.). Harper Collins.
- Lucas, G. (Director) (1977). *Star wars: Episode IV – A new hope*. Lucasfilm.
- Lucas, G. (Director) (1980). *Star wars: V – The Empire strikes back*. Lucasfilm.
- Lucas, G. (Director) (1983). *Star wars: VI – Return of the Jedi*. Lucasfilm.
- Lucas, G. (Director) (1999). *Star wars: Episode I – The phantom menace*. Lucasfilm.
- Lucas, G. (Director) (2002). *Star wars: Episode II – Attack of the clones*. Lucasfilm..
- Rancière, J. (2010). *Dissensus: On politics and aesthetics* (S. Corcoran, Trans.). Continuum
- Shelley, M. (2009). *Frankenstein: Or the modern Prometheus*. Penguin (original work published 1818).
- Spielberg, S. (2001). *A.I. (Artificial Intelligence)*. Warner Bros.
- Wallace, D. (2006). *Star wars: The new essential guide to droids*. EPub.
- Young, J. (2002). *Heidegger's later philosophy*. Cambridge University Press.