A Galaxy of Things: The Power of Puppets and Masks in *Star Wars* and Beyond. By Colette Searls. New York: Routledge, 2023. xii, 129 pp., 11 b/w illustrations. Hardcover $136.00, softcover $48.95, eBook $48.95.

Star Wars and Lucasfilm have become so celebrated for the pioneering use of digital effects that it is easy to forget how much of their world is made up of material things. Colette Searls is here to remind us of how much puppets and performing objects shape and make the world of *Star Wars*, and what a fun, fascinating and insightful reminder it is. Her analysis of the use of puppets, masks, and performing objects in the eleven *Star Wars* films and related live-action streaming series is both spot on and useful for thinking about how this franchise uses physical objects to make the stories more "real."

Five chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue run the gamut of objects and serve to dig deep into the practical use of what Searls terms "material characters"––"the non-human, semi-human, or concealed human" that, as a category, offers "a way to collectively consider not only puppets, masks, and other performing objects, but also actors wearing face-altering prosthetics or creature suits" (p. 4). This includes suit characters (Chewbacca, Darth Vader), masked characters (Boba and Jango Fett, Kylo Ren, Din Djarin the Mandalorian), droids (R2-D2, C3P0, BB8, L3-37), prosthetic-using characters (Ahsoka Tano, Lobot), and puppets (Yoda, Jabba the Hutt [in *Return of the Jedi*]), and Salacious Crumb (who deserved a mention in this book, one of my few complaints). Searls explores how material characters serve as meaning-making vehicles and also full characters who exist in a galaxy far, far away. Her taxonomy here is a useful one, and a new way to think about what binds these characters together in the world of the franchise and in the real world of film production.

Searls argues in the first body chapter that material characters evince three "powers": distance, distillation, and duality, and dedicates much of the rest of the volume to analyzing how different types of characters and objects manifest these properties.

Distance reflects how a material character may be "one or more degrees away" from the human (p. 27). Searls is canny enough to suggest that, in a galaxy far, far away all the performers, regardless of what they represent and what kind of performing object is involved, are still human underneath. So the mask, the puppet, the prosthetics, create distance from the human. Also significant is the fact that such characters, released from the limits of human form, can manifest in a variety of ways, inviting designers and performers to be fully imaginative in creating characters. Distillation, on the other hand, is "the material character's ability to perform concentrated ideas" (p. 33), and it is here that Searls dives deep into puppetry with a focus on Jabba the Hutt in *Return of the Jedi*. Duality refers to the fact that all material characters are paradoxically two things at once: an absent presence, limited and limitless, real/not real, living/inanimate, and supplying "novel familiarity" (p. 36). The philosophical and practical overlap here, and I appreciate Searls' reflections on the implications for performers of these dualities. R2-D2, for example, is a droid in the original film; it was also a series of "real" (in the sense of materially constructed and present on set) objects, some of which were also occupied by performer Kenny Baker. Baker is celebrated in the same manner as Anthony Daniels, who played C3PO, but whereas C3PO maintains human form, uses Daniels' actual voice, and implies the performer behind the droid, R2-D2, played by Baker, did none of these things. I was also profoundly struck by Searls' observation that in *The Last Jedi*, Yoda was once again a puppet after being the product of computer generation in Lucas' prequel trilogy. However, Yoda in this film was a "Force ghost," so a puppeteer (Frank Oz) performed and voiced a non-corporeal being now being "performed" by a physical object, as opposed to the previous films in which a corporeal being was never a physical presence but generated within a computer. Searls makes a strong case for the significance of puppetry and performing objects in the films.

A Galaxy of Things is also at the forefront of current scholarship on the politics of *Star Wars,* especially when it comes to issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation. A few books have come out recently tackling the Disney *Star Wars*, tracking its challenges in representation, but Searls does so through considering how material characters have changed, and in turn have changed real world reflections in the franchise. "How do

material characters contribute to negative representations of race in live action *Star Wars*?" the author asks (p. 79). It is an excellent question. Searls focuses on the absence of Asian characters in the first two trilogies (and a very small Asian presence in the form of Rose in the last two films of the sequel trilogy). She then gives an in-depth analysis of the "lost potential of Jar Jar Binks." She notes the character was ably performed by Ahmed Best but savaged by critics as a minstrelesque Black stereotype. Despite the fact that neither Lucas nor Best intended Jar Jar to be a racist caricature, it was so clearly and easily read as one by audiences and critics. The fault lies not in intention or audience, but the fact that the artists never considered that the portrayal could be read that way.

In the final chapter, Searls engages with the ways in which material characters either problematize oppressed groups as represented in *Star Wars* or can illuminate real-world issues of race, gender, and class, and how representation in the series has changed through time. Searls considers how more recent iterations of the Disney *Star Wars* have avoided the Jar Jar trap by treating the non-human seriously instead of cartoonishly. Tusken Raiders, for example, also known as Sand People, were stereotypical desert savages in the first film and prequel trilogy. Searls examines how *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett* challenge these earlier representations by showing the title characters interacting with Tusken Raiders, learning their culture and language, and understanding them as a colonized people. Thus these series serve as "collaborators of positive growth" in how the series represents the non-human (p. 107). Droids also present an ethical issue that the franchise rarely discusses: sentient mechanical beings treated as slave labor (*Solo* being the obvious exception). Also of great interest are discussions on helmet/mask characters such as Vader, Boba Fett, and Kylo Ren, who are unreadable as characters because of the face covering, and how audiences (and performers) must read the body language of the characters. Such characters are both human yet not human, and Searls' discussion of what happens when the mask comes off is edifying and fascinating.

I share Searls' anger at the prequel trilogies for using computers to make the world of

the franchise less “real.” Part of the beauty of the original films, especially the first, is that the world seemed lived-in and tangible. Luke’s landspeeder was a teenager’s jalopy. The Millenium Falcon was both an excellent ship and a machine in need of constant repair. The Empire was shiny and bright and had new stuff, and the rebels had a thrown-together military with mismatching outfits. The material characters seemed like material, physical parts of that world. The prequels made them far less real. The sequels and streaming series, in contrast, brought back practical effects and costumed characters, much more effective in both creating the reality of the imaginary and confronting us with the humans behind the inhuman. Perhaps the highest praise I can heap on Searls’ wonderful, brief volume is, as a life-long *Star Wars* scholar/fan, I learned a good deal from it, and it made me want to go back and rewatch the films and series through these new eyes. And, if I am honest, I have started to do so. Searls is another scholar/fan, clearly deeply knowledgeable about the franchise and unafraid to scrutinize and critique that which she loves. Plus, in conclusion, *A Galaxy of Things* is just fun, well-written reading. The Force is with this book.

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