



Book Review:
Animating the Science Fiction Imagination

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Telotte, J. P. *Animating the Science Fiction Imagination*. Oxford UP, 2017. ISBN 978-0190695262.

Although all scholars and researchers endeavor to fill a gap in their field of interest, J.P. Telotte does not just fill a gap – he transforms the prior neglect of pre-World War II science fiction animation into a showcase for why it’s an irreplaceable facet of science fiction in its own right. More than that, Telotte’s *Animating the Science Fiction Imagination* succeeds in its quest to show how SF animation was a stepping stone for audiences to be familiarized with, and not threatened by, key science (and science fiction) concepts. The book is neatly bookended with an introduction, which orients the reader with foundational knowledge such as literary modernism and SF itself, and a postscript documenting and commenting on the transition of SF to post-war television and film. This introduction does not simply define modernism, memes, pulps, etc., but also introduces how SF animation prepared “us to accept that science-fictional vision” (22). This is restated in the postscript with how pre-war SF animation increased digestibility of new technological concepts and made technological wonder familiar rather than intimidating. As it is impossible to entirely divorce science fiction from 20th-century modernism and 19th-century cultural shifts, *Animating the Science Fiction Imagination* uses modernism as a recurring motif to further the readerly understanding of societal responses to animation and its cultural value.

The median four chapters of this book each examine the main tropes of animated science fiction in the pre-WWII era: extraordinary voyages, robots, aliens, and gadgets and scientists. Chapter 2, “Flights of Fantasy”, uses substantial examples to explore journeys that characters take, initially through their dreams but – in an increasingly important symbol of the era – through the use of rockets. At the end of the chapter, Telotte reminds the reader, as he does throughout each explored trope, how these animations affected real-world people. By the end of Chapter 2, he muses

that viewers, SF lovers or otherwise, could more easily grasp and be enchanted by the space travel in these films, though these films may also “paradoxically” show viewers that said enchantment is that and nothing more. Chapter 3 focuses on robots – a parallel to common anthropomorphic animals in other genres of animation – illuminating people’s tumultuous relationship with technology. This chapter also explores the binaries of robots in SF, including gender (and the seduction of machines), as well as the fear of artificial life replacing laborers. In Chapter 4, “strange” aliens and alien worlds are suggested to be the “promise of more subversive, other-worldly visions yet to come, and of other ways for representing our own alienation”; in other words, reflections of ourselves, as emphasized in Chapter 4’s last example of *Scrappy’s Trip to Mars* (83). Chapter 5 recognizes the excitement, obsession, madness, absurdity, and naivety surrounding the “gadgets and gadgeteers” – or the inventions and scientists – of SF animation (104). He solidifies the notion that despite the comic elements, which helped viewers understand their evolving world, these animations shared warnings and explored cultural understanding of “mad” scientists and unearthly procedures. Telotte explores *The Great Experiment* (1934), *The Mad Doctor* (1933), and *Stratos Fear* (1933), suggesting that the repeated theme of characters (Scrappy, Mickey, and Willie Whopper respectively) waking up from a bad dream demonstrates the great anxiety viewers had about scientists, experiments, and technological changes.

The majority of this book focuses on the content of pre-WWII SF animation, how it shaped its viewers, and why it needs the attention it deserves. In the postscript, J. P. Telotte contextualizes its position as a foundation for post-WWII SF. He meticulously shows what stayed and what didn’t due to the attitudes of the postwar nation and the closure of animation studios. The robot characters focused on in Chapter 3, such as the ones in *The Dancing Doll* (1922), *The Iron Man* (1930), *The Mechanical Cow* (1937), are intellectually overshadowed by the smarter, perhaps more threatening, post-WWII robots in films like *Tobor the Great* (1954), *the Colossus of New York* (1957), and *The Invisible Boy* (1957), shifting with America’s fear of artificial intelligence. While there is no reference to contemporary SF animation, it doesn’t seem necessary, as there are plenty observations around the very period of SF that gave us the foundation and tropes we use and love today.

Some of the points made in Telotte’s book about pre-war SF animation, without him ever explicitly saying so, can be easily carried over to all forms of SF. SF animation, as Telotte describes in his introduction, did not have the luxury of time that pulp magazine studios did for getting the hard science “right” (14). Therefore, the focus for this medium was time, accessibility, and cartoon production. Much of this animation, Telotte argues, critiqued the evolving technological world while being superficially comic. I would argue that all SF, or at least any content showing interaction between technology and characters, surely heeds some sort of commentary, critique, or warning, which perhaps Telotte agrees with – for example, he uses *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) to demonstrate the alignment between the function of SF cinema and SF animation. That being said, there is a long-standing comfort with cartoons – an ease in watching a distanced two-dimensional fiction – that surely makes SF animation the right tool to make scary technological changes palatable.

J.P. Telotte seamlessly braids together examples of animation through summary and images, shares influence of SF animation on media consumers and culture in the 1910–1940s, and reflects as a writer a century after these science fiction animations were created, offering a multifaceted perspective to each core science

fiction trope. He also demonstrates his thoughtfulness by answering potential reader questions, for example by resituating time, reminding the audience how “this period [was] prior to Isaac Asimov’s famed ‘Three Laws of Robotics’” (58). Not only does Telotte balance rich content with concision, but his writing style contributes to reader engagement. Some of this is with simpler moves like the direct inclusion of the audience, for example “...as *we* earlier noted” [emphasis mine] (26). Other times, the natural flow of his writing, which includes an occasionally relaxed structure and several exploratory transitions, promotes the refreshing feeling that one is participating in well-researched science fiction musings rather than reading a strictly didactic text. Content-wise, one great strength of *Animating the Science Fiction Imagination* is its self-awareness. There are appreciated moments of self-critique, such as confessing that the science fiction examined in this text is an “admittedly limited study” (20). But there are moments of grander claims that bring in modern ideology, as when Telotte criticizes the lack of gender and racial awareness in pre-World War II science fiction animation, calling out the “convenient blind spot” (125).

While Telotte heavily substantiates every claim and suggestion with multiple examples, some of his claims sometimes feel too safe. The aforementioned Chapter 2, for example, does not actually reference real viewer reactions at the time; instead, it ends with the position that animation may have made viewers feel one way (that space travel is indeed accessible), or perhaps the other way (that space travel is just imagination). It is in this way that this text often reads as observational rather than argumentative. Additionally, this reader found herself skimming through some summaries of discussed animation, the function of too many back-to-back plot recaps in *Animating the Science Fiction Imagination*. These points stated, the questions posited in this text, as well as the evidence that supports their being asked, outweighs any points taken off for redundancy.

Telotte is explanatory enough that a curious science fiction novice could read this book with ease, but dense and specific enough that self-proclaimed experts could certainly benefit from its reading. In a final applause for Telotte, he commits care to his examples, so much so that Scrappy, KoKo, Oswald, and Mickey almost become developed characters through this academic text. If J. P. Telotte’s one hope was to convince readers that pre-WWII animation deserves a recognized spot in the SF hall of fame, he succeeds. J.P. Telotte’s *Animating the Science Fiction Imagination* is an invaluable read for any science fiction media enthusiast.

Biography: Samantha Kirby is an English lecturer at the University of Arizona in Tucson, AZ. When she’s not helping her students, collecting research on gameplay discourse, assisting the debate team, or walking her dog, she’s playing video games. Her favorite SF video game of all time is *Mass Effect 2*. Email her any time at samkm@email.arizona.edu!