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***Animating Space: From Mickey To WALL-E*, J.P. Telotte. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010 (296 pages). ISBN: 978-0-8131-2586-2.**

A Review by Mihaela Mihailova, Yale University

Towards the end of his book, J.P. Telotte writes, "one of the underlying assumptions driving this study…is that we have generally neglected to recognise the extent to which animation is a spatial art" (253). Indeed, Telotte's perceptive, well-argued analysis of space in the context of animation fills a lacuna in the existing literature that is as glaring as it is inexplicable. How can something as obvious as animation's status as a spatial art remain neglected? After all, as the author himself points out, an animator creates and brings to life not only characters, but also the realms that they inhabit. In that sense, animation is an inherently spatial project—one that involves constructing and making sense of space, infusing it with meaning, and incorporating it within the film's representational and ideological project.

Telotte may not offer an explanation for the aforementioned neglect, but he takes a decisive step towards compensating for it—an initiative that one hopes others will follow. In this volume, he takes "space" to mean both the physical space that animators shape and manipulate (whether on celluloid or computer screen) and the "representational space" that is infused with life by the animation process. For Telotte, the relationship between the two types of space is "essential to thinking about animation" because it allows viewers to examine not only what they see within the frame, but also the mechanisms that infuse this on-screen universe with a life and energy of its own (1). Incidentally, this is also one of the book's projects—to study the form and its aesthetic evolution over the past century (with an emphasis on the question of realism), while also examining the ways in which animation both reflects and is influenced by changing attitudes towards space from modernity to the present. Indeed, Telotte's engaging, rigorous discussion animates space by revealing and exploring the depth behind the seemingly flat cartoon worlds and placing the evolution of cartoon space within the context of larger intellectual currents and social trends.

Telotte warns the reader that his book "is not quite a history of animation" (2). Nevertheless, his approach is pointedly historical; his chapters follow a nearly perfect chronological order, tracing an arc in animation history that begins with early efforts at manipulating the drawn image (by J. Stuart Blackton and Winsor McCay, among others) and ends in the present "new hybrid cinema", characterised by the fusion of live-action cinema and computer graphics. In addition to providing a smooth and logical progression for his narrative, this arrangement allows Telotte to highlight what he calls "signal moments" in the development

of animated space: periods when "the challenge of animating space—in both senses of the term—seems to have been particularly foregrounded and to have brought forth most telling responses from some of the key players in the field" (3). The "signal moments" method allows the author to identify appropriate and representative case studies whose connection to the developmental stage or trend they illustrate is as indisputable as it is productive. For instance, the importance of the development of the rotoscope for the work of the Fleischer brothers gives rise to a perceptive and comprehensive analysis of their aesthetics in the chapter entitled "The Double Space of the Fleischer Films".

However, the principal merit of Telotte's discussion is not his historical approach per se, rather it is his incorporation of animation into a larger artistic and intellectual narrative. Lamentably, animation scholarship occasionally suffers from insular thinking, choosing to examine the development of animation as an isolated phenomenon, as if it took place in a vacuum, completely separate and unaffected by concurrent theoretical, social and artistic movements and events. Telotte's analysis successfully avoids this theoretical pitfall by anchoring animated space within a framework of changing attitudes towards space that exist independently of—though in dialogue with—animation. Two theoretical perspectives corresponding to specific historical periods serve as beginning and end points of his analysis. These key ideas: the "warped space" of modernity (formulated by Anthony Vidler) and today's "lost" space (defined by Paul Virilio), frame and inform Telotte's own argument, which traces, in a methodical and fluent fashion, the evolution of concepts of space, beginning with late modernism and ending with today's "crisis in the conceptualization of dimension" resulting from post-modernism's foregrounding of the elusiveness of reality (183).

Telotte limits his scope to the American animation industry. This choice inevitably leads to the exclusion of a number of exemplary films belonging to the world canon of animation and confines the author's arguments and conclusions to a single national context. However, using American animation as a case study is neither arbitrary, nor unmotivated. As the author himself points out, "that body of work has produced a number of the key developments in the form, has for much of its history dominated the international animation scene, and, for better or worse, has colonized the consciousness of both audiences and animators worldwide" (3). His argument is solid, if not completely irrefutable; for instance, one may argue that "a number of key developments" have also been produced elsewhere and the author himself alludes to Russian and German animation in his analysis. However, the last point he makes above is a crucial one: it is precisely the wide availability and appeal of American cartoons to which his study owes its accessibility. With the exception of the early animation examples, the average reader is likely to have heard of or seen many of the films discussed by Telotte, which allows this book to function as both a systematically researched and conceptually rich scholarly reference, and an appealing and informative read for a non-academic audience.

There is no weak or dull chapter in Telotte's original and ambitious work, which is likely to become one of the key texts on the topic. He is equally comfortable and convincing discussing Winsor McCay's "warped spaces" as the ghostly special effects in Gore Verbinski's contemporary blockbuster *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003). He guides the reader with a sure hand, demonstrating a remarkable eye for vivid and representative case studies and a talent for a rigorous and penetrating close analysis. Indeed, his discussion of

Robert Zemeckis's feature-length *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988) as reflecting a postmodern cultural sensibility, and being "haunted by cultural and cinematic history, and by a new sense of animating space that requires us to see the cartoon world as fundamentally disconnected from the real world", is one of the most inspired and thought-provoking readings of this film published to date (193). In fact, throughout the book, Telotte demonstrates a talent for reinvigorating the study of classical texts by dusting off undeservedly forgotten works or providing surprisingly fresh perspectives on over-analysed ones. Thus, he brings attention to the Fleischer brothers' largely neglected *Superman* cartoons and infuses new blood into the discussion of Ub Iwerks's animation (even while noting that Iwerks's work was incapable of rivalling the aesthetics and technical achievement of Disney or the Fleischers). As already mentioned, Telotte achieves this by successfully situating given cartoons within larger historical and artistic contexts. For instance, he frames Iwerks's cartoons as "symptomatic of a larger struggle in [the 1930s] between the avant-garde and an emerging realist aesthetic that was closely aligned with the classical narrative mode of live-action cinema—a mode that would increasingly implicate a new sense of animating space" (114).

The author is arguably most eloquent and astute when writing about contemporary animation. Indeed, his chapters on Pixar and digital effects are the crowning achievement of his analysis, both in terms of the sharpness and originality of his observations and because of his unabashed and contagious enthusiasm for the latest technological and aesthetic advances in animation, which makes the text all the more riveting. Attempting to summarise his arguments in such a limited space would do them a disservice, but suffice it to say that Pixar's bold reconfigurations of computer-generated spaces—be it vis-à-vis an exploration of motion in John Lasseter's *Cars* (2006) or the desire to reveal the three-dimensional world as often "simply a simulation" in *Monsters, Inc.* (2001)—have received their theoretical due. Likewise, what Telotte dubs "the lure of digital effects" is indeed an enticing finale to his analysis, providing a glimpse into the promise of transforming cinematic narrative through "an expanded sense of animation" and into the fantasies of control that lurk behind the "postmodern magic of simulacra found in digital effects animation" (249, 243, 249).

Thus, while being thoroughly engaged with and reverent towards the pioneering efforts that marked animation's colourful past, this book is very much a product of our own historical moment. One of the volume's goals, Telotte states, is to describe historical developments in animated space and examine the legacy of the key figures presented in his study "in light of the current turn toward digital animation and effects—of an emerging cinema where, indeed, animation increasingly seems to be crowding out live action, promising to turn relationships a bit topsy-turvy, perhaps even to transform conventional live-action cinema into tomorrow's 'stepchild'" (3). From its title—*From Mickey to WALL-E*—to its fascination with the work of Pixar studios and its belief that hybrid works like Robert Zemeckis's *Beowulf* (2007) hold the key to animation's future, Telotte's study is as concerned with making sense of the present as it is with studying and appreciating the past. His volume, permeated with feverish enthusiasm for the potential of new technologies to bring about aesthetic development and open up new artistic horizons, reminds the reader that animated space is in constant flux, forever reinventing itself, and that today's moment is ripe for change—change that may see animation finally come to the forefront of the seventh art.

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