

Karen Beckman (Ed.), **Animating Film Theory**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014, 376 pp., \$99.95 (hardcover), \$27.95 (paperback).

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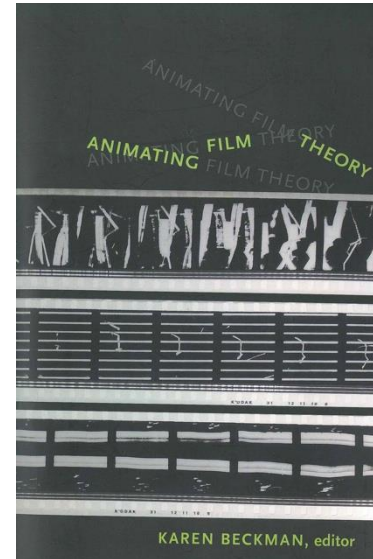
How has film theory discourse engaged animation up until now? And how would engagement with animation enrich contemporary film theory? **Animating Film Theory** explores these two questions through contributions from various authors in 17 separate chapters. The book's overarching goal, as defined by editor Karen Beckman, is to explore the un(der)developed theoretical questions regarding animation in the film studies field.

In structure, *Animating Film Theory* opens with an introduction that is among the most important of any edited book I have read. Beckman barely uses the introduction to summarize and foreshadow the upcoming chapters; instead, she aims to provide an essential background of animation history that is needed to follow the contributors' train of thought and to understand their arguments more fully in their respective chapters. In addition, she provides readers with guidance on expectations and key points that can be looked for in each chapter. Using Vachel Lindsay's work, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915), in particular, Beckman lays out the following four subtopics that the authors implicitly or explicitly discuss in their respective contributions: (1) Cinema has the capacity to reframe the relationship between humans and objects; (2) animation can evoke attachments and emotional responses to nonhuman things; (3) readers should reconsider the definition of the term *movement* and the discussion of where said movement is located in relation to film; and (4) cinema has the ability to alter one's perception of space and time, as the combined chapters illustrate.

The book's overarching focus is defined as uncovering how film theory discourse to date has engaged animation and how deeper engagement with animation can enrich contemporary film theory. Marc Steinberg's essay in chapter 16, "Realism in the Animation Media Environment: Animation Theory from Japan," is just one example that fits the volume's goals like a glove. He draws the following key conclusion:

Both animation studies and film studies can benefit from this transmedia approach to realism. Indeed, this group of writers and the problematics they develop in their debates shows the value of expanding the canons of film and animation theory to include writers from as yet underexplored critical milieus. (pp. 297–298)

The overarching guideposts make the book's overall structure a success. Regardless of which essay is being read, the background information standards outlined in the introduction assist in guiding the reader



through each individual chapter. The essays are generally 10–15 pages long, permitting exploration in as much depth as developing an argument warrants while providing succinct, respective subfocuses that the reader can take away from each chapter.

In addition to the introduction, the book is segmented into four parts. Although the chapters are organized within these four parts, the introduction's guidance is more useful than the other divisions that order the essays in this volume. The exception is part 1, "Time and Space," which is most distinct, as the essays in this section introduce the book's premise from various perspectives and, arguably, include the loudest call to action for animation as an enrichment of film studies. Chapter 1, Esther Leslie's "Animation and History," calls for animation to be its own category worthy of study and removed from a purely historical perspective. Her arguments favor animation becoming ahistorical, which will make other applications possible. In her view, animation "models the possibility of possibility" (p. 35). Part 1 also references many widely known historical moments, such as Muybridge photography in chapter 2, permitting readers with a background in film studies to associate certain aspects of animation with widely known historical events or concepts. Consequently, the essays in part 1 successfully bridge the potential knowledge gap that may exist between traditional film theorists and animation scholars. Thereafter, the part structure is less important because of the niche focus of the respective essays, and readers can target specific chapters based on their individual interests and needs. In contrast, the heading of part 2, "Cinema and Animation," is so general that it is devoid of much guidance and means that chapters in other parts would fit equally well into part 2.

Parts 3 and 4, in particular, seem to divide essays into sections that may limit the reading position to a particular perspective—either "The Experiment" (part 3) or "Animation and the World" (part 4). Many of the essays could fit equally well under both headings. Chapter 13, for instance, focuses on Japanese animation. Thomas LaMarre's contribution on Imamura Taihei's work in Japan is the opening chapter of part 4. This makes sense in terms of the focus on international animation in part 4; however, reading the chapter and comparing it with other essays in part 3, it becomes apparent that this piece could equally well be positioned in part 3, given the details of Imamura's work and theory under discussion. In fact, part 3 includes discussions of international filmmakers, such as "Frame Shot: Vertov's Ideologies of Animation," coauthored by Mihaela Mihailova and John MacKay. Why was this latter essay placed in part 3 as opposed to part 4? Besides the respective headings of the parts, no summary or other guidance is provided regarding these subdivisions. This is a minor critique of the book that could be resolved by adding specific context to the respective purposes of the four parts.

By including essays focused on animation analysis in different parts of the world, the book definitely meets its goal of "explor[ing] the un(der)explored theoretical questions in the film field" (p. 17) on two levels. First, the book brings unknown information to the reader. It is likely that not many readers will have heard of Imamura Taihei or will be familiar with the Japanese word for photography, *shashin*, and the impact of this word's orientation on animation discourse. Second, by providing worldwide coverage, the editor demonstrates how underexplored the area of animation studies remains on a global scale. Although the majority of authors for this volume work at U.S. institutions of higher learning (at least at the time of the book's publication), the book represents work from scholars employed in six different countries, representing North America, Europe, and Australia. The respective author biographies,

however, illuminate further diversity in the authors' upbringings in different parts of the world. For readers interested in niche happenings and developments internationally, this book has a lot to offer.

The book definitely provides an eye-opening experience in terms of the multiple viewpoints and subtleties through which animation can be analyzed. Even seasoned film scholars will likely encounter a new argument or perspective that they had not considered previously. This makes the reading very rewarding. Film scholars will come across familiar information, such as Russia's contributions to film development, specifically Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, (chapters 12 and 13 are just two in which their names surface), but the content is applied in new directions, illustrating the book's argument for animation to become a more prominent part of film theory and scholarship. As implied throughout this review, a particular success is the blend of known innovators and filmmakers that have become part of the history of film and unknown figures and their respective contributions across the globe. Reading essays from authors positioned in different parts and, thus, cultures of the world also implicitly demonstrates how one's perspective on the subject matter is framed by one's environment. It is not surprising that the works cited in the essays represent the respective authors' cultural and academic backgrounds. The book suggests that sharing international perspectives will move film theory forward in a potentially much more significant manner than intracultural collaborations.

Although the effectiveness of the essay order can be debated, the book ends with a particularly uplifting essay, which—if a reader studies the book in chronological order (as this reviewer did)—results in satisfactory closure to this dive into animation history and theory. "Some Observations Pertaining to Cartoon Physics; or, The Cartoon Cat in the Machine," by Scott Bukatman, discusses beloved cartoon characters *Tom and Jerry*, among others. Readers may find themselves on a trip down memory lane of their own personal experiences with these characters. Consequently, this last chapter certainly makes readers smile. Implicitly, the essay argues—as many other essays do throughout this volume—that animations are well known, that readers have consumed many animations, and that animation deserves (more than) a spotlight in film theory. Both discourse and engagement questions are thoroughly answered throughout this book, both explicitly and implicitly, and its goal has certainly been met.

### Reference

Lindsay, V. (1915). *The art of the moving picture*. New York, NY: Macmillan.