

Book Review

Deborah Levitt. 2018. *The Animatic Apparatus: Animation, Vitality, and the Futures of the Image*. Winchester, UK: John Hunt Publishing.

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Ontology is in a post-crisis moment. The divide between life and images is increasingly untenable. Life is ever more imaged (biometrics) just as images are ever more alive (cloning). Virtual spaces and bodies dominate Hollywood, and deceased actors haunt new productions. Virtual idols like Hatsune Miku draw crowds of fans. In 2016, the inaugural year of US President Donald Trump, the Oxford English Dictionary's word of the year was "post-truth." According to Deborah Levitt's *The Animatic Apparatus* (2018) all these things—animation, cosmetic surgery, cloning, virtual idols, and the politics of Donald Trump—have something in common. They are features of what she terms, "the animatic apparatus." As animation is becoming the dominant super-medium of our time, new possibilities for the production of life reify the centrality and importance of biopolitics. These two threads—animation and biopolitics—transform both the status of images and the status of "life" (2). From abortion to euthanasia to the patenting of living organisms, these questions define our current moment. In the animatic apparatus, two definitions of animation converge, "to give life to" and "to represent life, or create the illusion of life" (3). Life is increasingly a state which bodies move in and out of, rather than a quality to be possessed by a particular type of body. Questions of "ontology, category, and being" are replaced with questions of *an-ontology*: of "appearance, metamorphosis, and affect" (2).

While short, *The Animatic Apparatus's* dense prose covers a wide and disparate number of objects in support of its central argument: animation (including CGI) is not just becoming the dominant form of popular culture, but also our epistemological framework for the world. Levitt demonstrates this in her methodology, "media ethology." Ethology, the study of animal behavior, tracks a single behavior across species. It is an inquiry into the *how*, rather than the *what*, or the *who*, of behavior. Media ethology, already evoking a blurring between image and life, "make[s] sense (meaning) of sense (sensation)" in a way that is ambivalent towards the ontological status of objects (5). Her analysis of Oshii Mamoru's *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (2004) successfully advocates for the film as a treatise on the animatic apparatus. However, the book does much more than offer perhaps the best analysis of *Innocence*, it leverages that analysis into a daring overview of our current cultural moment.

The first chapter, "The Cinematic Regime: Biopolitics, Spectral Life, and the Crisis of Ontology," examines and historicizes the preceding cinematic regime, or apparatus, of the 20th century, in order to track the central transformations in the move towards the animatic apparatus. It historicizes the way in which the technologies of early cinema, including those of Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, which so often front-line introductory film textbooks, produce both

new forms and discourses of “life.” One example of this is the way that Marey’s technologies enabled a “machine-produced body” through the use of images to “reprogram bodies,” later employed, for example, by the “scientific management” of Frederick Winslow Taylor (10). The chapter also tracks the divergence of discourses which maintain organic metaphors in relation to cinema (e.g. Sigmund Kracauer, Terry Ramsaye) and those which emphasize representation/illusion (Lumière brothers). One of its most central and salient examples is Federico Fellini’s film *Intervista* (1987), in which two aging actors (Marcello Mastroianni and Anita Ekberg) watch themselves in Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita* made twenty-seven years earlier. Through a nuanced understanding of how the film manipulates and yet still indexes a pro-filmic real, *Intervista* is particularly emblematic of the way in which the cinematic apparatus produces new relations between life, death, and time. This assumption of an indexical reality informs both the discourses surrounding life within the cinematic apparatus and the resulting crisis in ontology: were film bodies “[p]resent or absent, [h]ere or there, [l]iving or dead?” (17)

Just as new forms of representation eventually begat new productions of life with regard to early cinema technologies, Levitt’s second chapter, “The Animatic Apparatus: Desiring Images” opens with a parallel development in biology, which likewise shifts from a mode of understanding and classification to a mode of production and engineering. The chapter tracks intensifications of the way in which living beings are read as images (vital tracking), images come to possess new forms of vitality and affect, and images can be translated *into* living beings (gene editing). Here, Levitt draws heavily from W. J. T. Mitchell’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction,” but expands its boundaries to allow a better account of the way that affect is intertwined with new ways of producing images/bodies. In particular, Levitt moves the site to the attention-screen nexus, in which neurocinematics and neuromarketing enable new forms of what Jonathan Bellow calls “attentional biopower.” Extending into the chapters that follow, Levitt seeks to both “break open the concept of attention” as well as to reconfigure some of the central con-

cerns and questions of “biopower” at a time when the “bio” refers instead to images/bodies that move in and out of existence (27).

In the third chapter, “Phantasmic Simulacra and Anti-Pinocchios,” Levitt historicizes “animating” narratives and aesthetics that artists have used to imagine the theme of coming to life through the figure of the simulacrum. Here, Levitt moves away from Jean Baudrillard’s more common theories, instead preferring Deleuze’s formulations in “Plato and the Simulacrum,” in which the simulacrum does not simply reflect the world. Levitt establishes a thought-provoking typology for the two diverging narratives of the simulacra: the Baudrillardian and Platonian “Pinocchios”, which position “human reality as a goal for artificial life”, and the Deleuzian “Anti-Pinocchios” that view “artificial lives as essentially different from—and often preferable to—human lives” (33). Levitt adds that the latter of these is more useful for thinking through life in the animatic apparatus. For Levitt, the archetypal example of the Anti-Pinocchio is the marionette of Henrich von Kleist’s 1811 work “On the Marionette Theater,” a unique “hybrid of essay, fiction, and dialogue” (35). Kleist’s marionette is “not a poor copy of a human, but a dazzlingly different kind of being,” one which is not “a perfectly autonomous puppet,” but instead “includes the perspective of the spectator” (35–38). What follows is perhaps Levitt’s most engaging analysis: the way in which the affective poetics of “On the Marionette Theater” return in its “remake,” Oshii Mamoru’s *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (41). *Innocence* is not just an incredibly thought-provoking “philosophical treatise on the animatic apparatus,” but it also positions itself, as an animated film, as a successor to the marionette, the automaton, and the doll that it theorizes. And as another Anti-Pinocchio, it questions the desirability of the state of human consciousness over the alternative of doll consciousness.

The fourth, and strongest, chapter, “The Doll Theme: Object Lessons in An-Ontology,” is where a bulk of the close-analysis of *Innocence* takes place. Levitt demonstrates that *Innocence* is not just resonant with an-ontological themes, but actively theorizes itself within a particular genealogy of animation. What Levitt deems *Innocence*’s greatest con-

tribution to the animatic apparatus is how it places itself, as an animated film, in a lineage of attempts to create artificial life (dolls, puppets, automata) rather than in a lineage of visual representation. In one of the film's most overt theorizations, a central point in Levitt's analysis, Oshii debates Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto," by representing the scholar directly in the film as a character. According to Levitt, Oshii updates Haraway's position by shifting the conversation from the cyborg to the doll, and consequently from ontology to an-ontology. What emerges is that the disparate figures of *Innocence*, "androids, gynoids, robots, dolls, animals, and humans" all exist on a continuum from animate to inanimate, but all are in-between the two poles: all exist between life and death (56). In addition to extending the logic of the animatic apparatus, *Innocence*, Levitt concludes, "provide[s] a distilled image of animatic logic," moving away from ontology and towards Haraway's ontological breakdown and an-ontology (56).

The very brief fifth chapter, "An-Ontology and Animatic Aesthetics," develops Levitt's definition of the animatic and how it relates to an-ontology. While the cinematic and animatic invade each other's spaces, the latter is generally characterized by the prioritization of the simulacral over the representational, the latter of which is cinema's domain. One of the central differences between these two modes is the way in which the cinematic posits a relationship between the time of capture and the time of projection that animation does not adhere to, as William Schaffer observes. In animation, "[t] here is no death" nor any "ontological tether", animated bodies are "always in a process of coming into and out of existence" (59–62). Levitt turns to animated films such as Chuck Jones' *Duck Amuck* (1953) which thematizes "the an-ontological nature of animation as a medium" by continually deconstructing and reconstructing its principal character, Daffy Duck. While animated films like *Duck Amuck* may employ realist codes, because they bear no direct relationship to a pro-filmic "real," they must to some extent implicitly thematize whatever realist mode they construct.

Levitt returns to a close analysis of *Innocence* in the sixth chapter, "Animatic Aesthetics, Part 2: Affects, Anagrams, Simulacra." Dedicating a

bulk of the chapter analysis to a scene where the cyborg protagonist Batou and his human partner Togusa visit the mansion of master hacker Kim, the chapter explores the way that *Innocence* formally disrupts perceptual stability. The film, Levitt maintains, is anti-anthropocentric not only in its themes and narrative, but also in its composition, such as its continual refusal to place its "camera" at eye-level. The mansion scene in particular enacts a "perceptual disarticulation" that refuses the spectator any ontological anchoring point, including knowledge of what objects in the film are biological or artificial, alive or dead, animate or inanimate (71). Of particular interest for Levitt is *Innocence's* characteristically explicit invocation of German Surrealist artist Hans Bellmer, known for his photographs of seemingly dis-articulated and re-articulated dolls, which Levitt calls "doll-body anagrams" (75). Bellmer, Levitt notes, draws on Austrian psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Paul Schiller's concept of "body schema," which is always "intersubjective and intercorporeal," rethinking "gaze" and the "screen" in terms of a relay between different bodies (75). Consistent with the framing of *Innocence* as artificial life, Levitt claims that Oshii does for "the film as doll" as Bellmer does for the doll-body, through his particular anagrammatic use of montage (76). Levitt concludes the chapter by pointing to the transformation of Oshii's way of thinking from the production of the first *Ghost in the Shell* to its sequel. In the first *Ghost in the Shell*, their "ghost" that defines the body is the brain and memories. In *Innocence*, what defines the body is itself in its entirety, and in its relation to other bodies. There is no ontological tethering for either the human or doll, they both "belong to the void" (82). In contrast to the connotative meanings of such a formulation however, Oshii seems to suggest that this is actually a site of potential for new types of connections, echoed by the second film's concern with the "reconfiguration" of the human.

The seventh chapter, "Animatic Pop, Body-as-Image, Image-as-Body," takes a broad view of the manifestations of the animatic apparatus across contemporary cultural phenomena: cosmetic surgery, virtual idols, image editing, and reality TV shows focused on transgender persons. The first section addresses media that transform the body

into the image, such as the Facebook partner site where users can “animate themselves” (which here effectively means to render oneself in cartoon style), an Esurance series of “get animated” commercials, and the cosmetic surgery of Valeria Lukyanova, or the “Human Barbie.” The second section explores the reverse transition from image to body, through AnnLee, a stock anime character given a “life she never would have dreamed of” by two French artists, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, and the incredibly popular and iconic virtual idol Hatsune Miku (87). Much of the chapter, however, is dedicated to an analysis of the reality TV series *I Am Jazz* (2015–present), which follows the life of a young transgender girl named Jazz Jennings. In particular, Levitt argues that there are “two different kinds of narrative lines” occurring simultaneously in the series, one which reinforces normative binary gender roles, positioning transition “teleologically rather than as ongoing process,” and the other which is dedicated to the ethos of what Nikolas Rose calls “somatic individuality”—the reconstruction of identity occurring at the level of the body (98, 103). Both of these threads, Levitt argues, are different responses to the “novel potentials for corporeal transformation in the animatic apparatus” (98).

The conclusion of the book asks how to develop what Levitt calls a “how-ethics.” According to Levitt, ethics have been approached ontologically, which tend to become unsettled in the animatic apparatus. So, how then does one drive that scenario towards its “positive possibility” (109)? For Levitt, the two options are what-ethics and how-ethics: “back toward ontology” or “further into the virtualization of life” (109). In the age of Trump, what some have termed the “post-truth” moment, we see the dark potentiality of this further virtualization, where the correspondence between images and reality has been entirely unsettled. At the same time, the success of Trump is simultaneously attributable to the drive to move in the opposite direction, towards ontology, to establish stronger borders. Through both threads, Trump’s success can be seen as a symptom of the animatic apparatus. Following Giorgio Agamben, Levitt embraces the how-ethics. Agamben notes that one of possibilities of the society of the spectacle, which Levitt equates with the

animatic apparatus, liberates the individual from a biological or theological essence. For Agamben then, gesture, which “is what takes place when all definitive locations...are suspended,” provides the launching point for his particular conception of ethics, what Levitt calls “how-ethics” (117).

While bold, provocative, and enlightening, Deborah Levitt also ends *The Animatic Apparatus* on a cliffhanger. Both the final chapter and the conclusion introduce so many more conceptually rich topics for detailed analysis that it could almost be the introduction to another book. Nevertheless, *The Animatic Apparatus* does two things exceedingly well: it successfully demonstrates the pervasiveness of its premise, and through Levitt’s nuanced analysis argues for the value of *Innocence* as treatise on the animatic apparatus and the filmic “body.” Levitt also leaves the concluding prospect of “how-ethics” up in the air, admitting that the conceptual challenges in developing such an ethics seems rather daunting. *The Animatic Apparatus* demonstrates the shift from ontology to an-ontology, but how exactly to make sense of the an-ontological remains hazy. Nonetheless, *The Animatic Apparatus* buttresses animation scholarship that seeks to forge connections between animation and the sphere of biopolitics.

References

- Levitt, Deborah. 2018. *The Animatic Apparatus: Animation, Vitality, and the Futures of the Image*. Winchester, UK: John Hunt Publishing.