

***Aardman Animations: Beyond Stop-Motion*, edited by Annabelle Honess Roe. United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020, 274 pp.**

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Aardman Animation: Beyond Stop-Motion, edited by Annabelle Honess Roe, is the first scholarly text devoted to Aardman Animations. A studio worthy of study because of its longevity and significance to British cultural industries, animation and media production more widely (p.16). The text offers an extensive exploration of the studio and its work by taking the reader on a journey through establishing the studio's brand identity and its engagement with broader cultural traditions and contexts before focussing on the studio's production practices, including performance, surface and materiality. Consequently, the text successfully connects to more general developments that have shaped the studio and their creative works and demonstrates how Aardman's work extends beyond the stop-motion plasticine animation they have become famous for.

The text is edited by Annabelle Honess Roe, a Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Surrey and editor of two other books, including *Vocal Projections: Voices in Documentary* (Bloomsbury, 2018 - co-edited with Maria Pramaggiore) and *The Animation Studies Reader* (Bloomsbury, 2019 - co-edited with Nichola Dobson, Amy Ratelle and Caroline Ruddell). As a collection of edited essays, this book brings together writing from experts worldwide, including practitioners, program coordinators, independent scholars, lecturers and professors. The text is written well with varying levels of density and structural clarity. It is arranged into four cohesive sections composed of three to four chapters that provide a logical progression through discussions of the studio's identity and brand, cultural contexts, process and production, surface and performance. As Honess Roe explains, "the individually authored chapters included in this book engage with the depth and breadth of Aardman's work and activities to understand what 'Aardman'

means, both in terms of the content it has produced and as a cultural entity" (p. 3-4). Each contributing author draws upon a wide range of sources that are relevant to their chapter's discussion. Interviews, videos, published books, papers and articles make up the bulk of the material, all of which are documented and expanded upon at the end of each chapter as a collection of notes and references further supported by a select bibliography at the end of the text.

Section one comprises four chapters contributed by Malcolm Cook, Joseph Darlington, Paul Wells and Christopher Meir. According to the editor, these chapters address the "way Aardman has established its own brand identity and also how it has conveyed a sense of national and cultural identity in its work" (p. 14). This is achieved by taking the reader on a journey through the studio's early commercial and music video works that Cook argues provided financial stability and helped shape the studios brand identity. As Cook explains, "commercials, including music videos, have been vital to the formation and continued success of Aardman Animations, both economically as a studio and conceptually as a recognisable brand (p. 23). Darlington explores the "quintessentially" British identity of the studio by focussing on the music and sound of *Wallace and Gromit* (p. 39).

In contrast, Paul Wells focuses on the significance of Aardman co-founder Peter Lord's wit and literary background to shaping the studios brand. Wells concludes by stating that it is the privileging of the most precious things, the playing out of a knowing yet universal humour, and the 'impossible-to-know-or-possess' quality that defines beauty and emotion "that embodies Peter Lord and the significance of his work" (p. 68). Finally, turning to producer studies, Meir's chapter investigates the business practice of the studio and "the relationships between Aardman and its

financiers/distributors" for six of their feature films. Meir's focuses on the company's dealings with DreamWorks, Sony and Studiocanal and extrapolates that out to the broader context of British cinema. He argues that "Aardman's trajectory as a film producer might be able to help us imagine an outward-facing British cinema that is not beholden to the American market" (p. 71). Together, these chapters help to understand the development of the brand identity of Aardman as it has been shaped by people and processes internally and how the studio has managed to sustain its cultural identity in a global industry.

Four chapters make up the second section with contributions from Fatemeh Hosseini Shakib, Jane Batkin, Nicholas Andrew Millar and Alexander Sergeant. Together, the authors convey to the reader how Aardman's "work engages with the broader cultural traditions and contexts in which it can be placed" (p. 14). Hosseini-Shakib returns to the "pre-Nick Park phase" (p. 89) of Aardman with a detailed discussion of the short films made by the studio's co-founders Peter Lord and David Sproxtton in the period spanning from 1978 to 1989. Describing the ten films as "emulating the documentary form" of live-action (p. 89), Hosseini-Shakib's insightful discussion links the series' *Animated Conversations* (1978), *Conversation Pieces* (1983) and *Lip Synch* (1989) to the broader cultural discourse of British social realism. One of the most powerful aspects of this text is the light that the authors shed on lesser-known creative works from the studio's early years, which is a crucial focus of Jane Batkin's chapter titled "A Darker Heartland". Batkin focuses on works that juxtapose the well-known "warm, homely worlds of *Wallace and Gromit* and *Creature Comforts* (1989)" (p. 105).

Focussing on four films, *Babylon* (1986), *Going Equipped* (1990), *Stage Fright* (1997) and *The Pearce Sisters* (2007), Batkin demonstrates that the short films complicate Aardman's identity (established in earlier chapters) as they "depict fear of apocalypse and regret at a life of crime, insanity in a darkened theatre and dysfunctional island life among corpses" (p. 116). This exploration of Aardman's alternative "darker" side is continued with Nicholas Millar's chapter, where he offers a close analysis of *The Pearce Sisters* and its literary origins. Reintroducing notions of the "quintessentially British" (p. 149) identity of Aardman, Alexander Sergeant situates "some of the formal and stylistic conventions of the Wallace and Gromit universe within the broader traditions of British fantasy storytelling" (p. 149). He explains that the world of Wallace and Gromit is as much a fantasy as the worlds of C.S Lewis or J.R.R Tolkien and, in doing so, provides a well-rounded conclusion to the discussion of cultural contexts of the studio.

Section three comprises three chapters that delve into the creative practices of the studio by exploring the "way Aardman's productions get from idea to screen" (p. 15). In this section, we hear from Paul Ward, Linda Simensky and Richard Haynes. Ward does a fine job discussing Aardman's storyboarding process, and Simensky examines the challenges children's television programming presents to production. However, it was Haynes chapter that was of most interest to this reader. In addition to being a Senior Lecturer in Animation Production at Arts University, Bournemouth, Haynes is a professional stop-motion animator with experience working at Aardman. Haynes reflects upon his experience animating Shaun the Sheep to provide a unique insight into his performance as the animator of a silent character. In addition, Haynes "looks at common traits found in the characters of Shaun and [Buster] Keaton" (p. 181) to argue that *Shaun the Sheep* (2006-16) is a contemporary silent comedy and Shaun, a new silent star. The three chapters that

make up section three are keenly informative, providing a great deal of insight into the studio's process and production.

Building upon the momentum from the previous chapter, section four "explores further ideas around performance in and of Aardman's work and also the significance of the surface and materiality of their work" (p. 15). Contributing authors include Thomas Walsh, Laura Ivins, Christopher Holliday and Aylish Wood. Further building upon the notion of performance in animation, Walsh questions the extent to which a special effect may be considered a dramatic performance instead of just a simulation of natural phenomena while also considering the influence of the tactile nature of the materials being animated. This is a relevant question due to the somewhat different approach to special effects animation at the studio. As Walsh explains, at Aardman, "animators handle both characters and effects together on a shot-by-shot basis, with no distinct effects department" (p. 195). In contrast, effects are handled by a distinct department in other mediums such as hand-drawn and computer-generated animation. Walsh's conclusion on the use of physical materials allowing for the "preservation of 'surface contact' and a greater sense of 'handmade imperative'" (p. 207) provides a clear link to Laura Ivins' discussion on the "cluster of meanings created by the physicality of clay in the Wallace and Gromit films" (p. 211).

Ivins reminds us that Nick Park's creative touch is evident in the visible fingerprints found on the surface of Wallace and Gromit's clay limbs and that these marks "serve as metonymy for authenticity in Aardman Animations" (p. 211). Interestingly, Ivins acknowledges that authenticity in Aardman films is both genuine and constructed despite Aardman films being "posited as more genuine than US commercial animation" (p. 220). This notion is picked up in Christopher

Holliday's chapter, where he "identifies how *Flushed Away* (2006) and *Arthur Christmas* (2011) compliment their digital aesthetic with gestures to the more physical form of stop-motion animation" (p. 223). Aylish Wood's chapter flows nicely from where Holliday finishes via a discussion of the hybridity of *The Pirates! In an Adventure with Scientists!* (2012). Taking an entanglement perspective borrowed from quantum physics, Woods considers both the animation and the publicity materials accompanying the film's release. The entanglement approach works well in this chapter to paradoxically detangle a complicated relationship between the hidden digital elements within the films made public via various marketing materials. In doing so, Woods chapter contributes to understanding how Aardman are reconciling their legacy of a handmade craft approach and aesthetic with modern digital workflows and processes.

Aardman Animation: Beyond Stop-Motion offers a long-overdue scholarly work on one of the most influential animation studios in the world. As a collection of essays, the text provides the reader with an opportunity to selectively focus on separate chapters or sections while also providing an engaging read from cover to cover. The studio's longevity and adaptability to changing markets, workflows, and technologies are reflected in this text. Therefore, it offers an account of contemporary animation history very much still in the making. As the first volume to devote scholarly attention to Aardman Animations, the text successfully enriches our understanding of Aardman and their works while offering the field of animation studies a foundational text to stimulate and support further scholarship on Aardman.

References

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