

Book Review

Book Review: Annett, S. (2024). *The Flesh of Animation: Bodily Sensation in Film and Digital Media* (273p). University of Minnesota Press. ISBN 978-1-5179-1159-1

Yowei Kang

Department of Communication and Theatre, Auburn University at Montgomery, Montgomery, AL 36117, USA

1. Introduction

Sandra Annett's book, *The Flesh of Animation: Bodily Sensation in Film and Digital Media*, is a highly anticipated work that examines the phenomenological embodiment of animation and digital media art forms. Sandra Annett made a compelling demonstration of why it is critical to study contemporary digital media by exploring the phenomenology of animation.

2. Summary

Sandra Annett's book begins in the introduction chapter with an impressive over-arching proposition to investigate "how bodies—including human, animal, object, and virtual bodies—are evoked, experienced, and perceived through animated media" (Annett, 2024, p. 1). Based on a phenomenological approach, Annett provides a subjective, immersive, and personal analysis of her viewing experience watching Jérémy Clapin's *I Lost My Body* (2019), a Japanese 2D anime, as well as hybrid and multidimensional media installations available on Netflix. Her analyses and interpretations of the films and other digital forms are based on the phenomenological contestation between "immersion" (Annett, 2024, p. 4) (in the film's artistic "incitement" of creative forms [Annett, 2024, p. 5]) and viewers' "internal physical experiences" (Annett, 2024, p. 5). Developed from the embodiment theory in film research, Annett produces an array of five solidly argued chapters to persuade readers of what she means by the "flesh of animation" (Annett, 2024, p. 34), after thoroughly examining the "chiasmatic interrelation" among the animators, "the technical apparatus of animation", "the platforms of media ecology", and viewers' perceptions and embodied experience (Annett, 2024, p. 34).

Contemporary scholarship for "digitally generated actors" and "animated characters" emerged in the 1990s (Annett, 2024, p. 6). Several influential works have been published in animation, including Li's (2024) *Anime's Knowledge Cultures*, which examines the intersections of culture, digital, and media research in East Asia. While Li (2024) focuses on the concept of the "cybernetic affect" fans have experienced while reading anime and manga as Japanese cultural artifacts, Stevie Suan's book on *Anime's Identity* (2021) raises an important question of globalization, transnational labor, and cultural identity when Japanese animes are not produced in Japan.

Digressing from extant scholarship examining animation and "digital formats" (Annett, 2024, p. 6) as cultural, economic, and societal phenomena, Annett's book takes a unique stance by following Scott Balcerzak's (2009) argument that "the physical reality of the body" is removed by digital technology by replacing "it with something or someone digital" (cited in Annett, 2024, p. 6). Treating the viewing and consumption of films, animation, moving images, and hybrid digital arts, among other traditional and emerging platforms, opens up this book to a new approach to studying viewing experience as "phenomenological, narrative, and visual" (Annett, 2024, p. 7). Additionally, Annett's approach to studying the embodiment of viewers' interactions with "animated characters" and the "sensuous experience of living in a fantastic world full of colorful creatures" (Annett, 2024, p. 7) helps connect the production of animation, though "partially mechanical and inhuman" (as Merleau-Ponty argues) (Annett, 2024, p. 12), with actual human experience. Annett provides a well-documented elaboration of phenomenological scholarship (including Deleuze, Guattari, Merleau-Ponty, and Richmond, among others) to situate her research.



Chapter One compares variations in evoked “sensory experience” between “styled”, “flat”, “2D, hand-drawn cel animation”, and fully animated “realistic” and “cinematic” styles in Japanese anime (Annett, 2024, p. 30). Annett studies various coming-of-age fantasy films from East Asia, including *Howl’s Moving Castle*, *A Letter to Momo*, and *My Beautiful Girl Mari* to demonstrate how the evoked sensation of “falling”, “floating”, and “physical transformation” (Annett, 2024, p. 31) can differ when viewers consume “fantastic” or “unreal” animated or digital images to generate “embodied experiences” (Annett, 2024, p. 31).

Chapters Two and Three examine contemporary hybrid films that combine both live-action and animation films, characteristic of their “heterogeneous or hybrid styles” to “create a sense of corporeal engagement between animal cartoon characters and human characters” (Annett, 2024, p. 31). Annett derives from Sinne Ngai’s concept of “ugly feelings” that represent “ambivalent and highly embodied affects like envy, irritation, and ... animatedness” (Annett, 2024, p. 31) to further examine the social impacts of these visual effects in live-action remakes of animation films on viewers in the American and Japanese contexts. In her daring analyses of Disney’s live-action remakes, *The Lion King* (2019) and *Mulan* (2020), or Japanese adaptations of *Pokémon*, Annett introduces her concept of *phenopower* that describes the creation of “diegetic worlds in which there is no ontological difference between cartoon bodies and the bodies of live-action actors” (2024, p. 32).

Chapter Four extends Annett’s analytical approaches to examining the electro swing music video genre, known for its “layering imagery from different eras” (Annett, 2024, p. 33). The combination of 2D and 3D animation with the dimension of time contributes to the formation of “time-image” (as proposed by Deleuze) that could “evoke the past, the present, and the future” by “the layering and folding of time” in films and animation works (Annett, 2024, p. 33).

In addition to introducing the time dimension, Chapter Five examines the “multidimensional media experience” by studying Japanese virtual idols, such as 2D Hatsune Miku, Vocaloids, or 3D holographic arts, as well as Lu Yang’s *Uterus Man* (2013) (Annett, 2024, p. 33). The interactive co-creation of viewers’ lived experiences is affected by viewers’ participation, digital technology, and artists’ creativity.

3. Discussion

Annett’s timely exploration of viewers’ “animated experience” (2024, p. 30) as the key theme of this book, along with her approach, is truly transnational, multi-platform, cross-genre, and multimodal. Her book, which studies the expressions of animated embodiments in East Asia, North America, and French-speaking European countries, examines them as a transnational phenomenon. Additionally, her book also examines emerging 2D images, 3D modeling, and even the innovative “holographic” and “2.5 dimensional” virtual idols (Annett, 2024, p. 30). The depth and scope of this book offer readers a rigorous analysis of the emerging animation genre as part of the contemporary human experience. The phenomenological approach the author has adopted is innovative and useful in closing the gap between “virtual and lived experience” that viewers would have perceived with animation (Annett, 2024, p. 36). At the end of the book, Annett boldly claims that “digital animation is not a purely virtual or disembodied medium but possesses a body of its own” (Annett, 2024, p. 34).

Annett’s book offers an innovative approach to examining the crucial role of viewers in these emerging digital forms. Despite enjoying reading Annett’s book, my interactions with her rich experiential narratives and theory-grounded interpretations make me wonder if non-academic viewers could have the same evoked viewing experiences. The animation scholarship will benefit from future investigations of what layman viewers (or the general public) may feel about these “digitally generated actors” and “animated characters” (Annett, 2024, p. 6).

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.