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[Smith on Telotte, 'Replications: A Robotic History of the Science Fiction Film'](#)

Review published on Monday, April 1, 1996

J. P. Telotte. *Replications: A Robotic History of the Science Fiction Film*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995. 222 pp. \$37.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02177-0; \$19.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06466-1.

Reviewed by Anne Collins Smith (Austin Community College, Austin, Texas) **Published on** H-PCAACA (April, 1996)

Robots as Other in Science Fiction Films

The title of *Replications: A Robotic History of the Science Fiction Film*, is more restrictive than the book's actual content: the book is not a simple history of the genre, but an intensive analysis of selected works. In addition, the author, J. P. Telotte, does not restrict the discussion to robots, but extends it to a variety of depictions of artificial humanity. Indeed, the analysis shines when it addresses not only the robot Maria of *Metropolis* or the pleasure androids of *Westworld*, but also the monster of *Frankenstein* and the organic replicants of *Blade Runner*.

What these beings have in common is that they are constructed by man rather than nature; and in observing their construction we are reminded that we, ourselves, are also in some fashion constructed. We may embrace the artificial being as a human ideal or shrink from it as an eerily humanlike monster, but at some level we always identify with it and the ideals or horrors that are acted out are our own. Telotte argues that this exploration of the constructed self through the constructed Other is one of the central themes of science fiction in general and the science fiction film in particular.

The first chapter is quite dense with theory, but it is important for what follows. Telotte draws on an eclectic mix of sources--film critics, cognitive scientists, sociologists, engineers, philosophers, and others in order to set up the theoretical framework concerning the construction of the self within which each work is contextualized. The following chapters examine specific science fiction films in chronological order--from *Metropolis* to *Terminator 2*.

Each chapter is solid; some stand out as especially penetrating. I particularly enjoyed the chapter on *Metropolis*, where Telotte relates the film's theme of the seductiveness of technology to the seductive surface of the film itself. Not only are the characters in danger of being distracted from their own humanity by the glittering appeal of powerful machinery, but the audience--and, Telotte argues, even the creators of the film--are in danger of being distracted from its humanitarian message by its gleaming cinematography.

I was also impressed by the author's ingenuity in filling the apparent gap between the 1930s and 1950s, a time when few science fiction movies were made. Telotte points to popular series of the time, such as *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers* as carrying on the enterprise of science fiction in general and the motif of artificial humanity in particular. Unlike earlier films like *Metropolis* and later

films such as *Forbidden Planet*, these serials were not made with pretensions of artistry or apparent intentions of conveying significant messages about the nature, constructed or not, of humanity. Telotte ingeniously uncovers hidden subtexts in these serials, hidden messages which are all the more interesting for being unintended.

While Telotte is careful always to address the robotic aspects of these films, other aspects are sometimes addressed even better. The strength of the chapter on *Forbidden Planet*, for example, lies not in its analysis of Robby the Robot, which I found acceptable but unexceptional, but rather in its discussion of the id-monster unleashed by Dr. Mobius, which contains multi-layered insights. Similarly, the analysis of *Total Recall* briefly addresses the token robot appearance (a cybernetic costume used by the hero in his attempt to reach Mars undetected), but is particularly good when it addresses the protagonist's construction, discovery, and reconstruction of himself.

Two minor stylistic notes. The author tends to use the expression "begs the question," a logical term which means to assume as a premise a conclusion that has yet to be proven, when the author really means just "raises the question." This inexactitude is irritating. Telotte also tends to use "schizophrenic" in the casual metaphoric sense of holding two incompatible positions, as if one had a dual personality. This use of "schizophrenic" is now being actively discouraged by the mental health community. The metaphor is imprecise; as it is a serious and potentially disabling condition, the metaphor is insensitive. Telotte demonstrates a concern for sensitivity in other areas, both in style and content, and I wish that sensitivity had been shown in this area as well.

This book would make an excellent textbook for an undergraduate course on science fiction films. Students in an introductory course could be put to using the extensive bibliography to research and better understand Telotte's theoretical background; upper-level students could have the further opportunity to research alternate viewpoints and critique some of Telotte's conclusions. In either case, if one had the right video equipment and access to the movies, one could show some or all of the films analyzed in the book, using Telotte's commentary to spark valuable and rewarding classroom discussion.

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