

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON



ROBOT DREAMS
(Language: No dialogue)

Director: Pablo Berger

UK Release: 2024

Running time: 102 minutes

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 4 December 2024

“It’s an almost entirely dialogue-free animation, captured with pleasingly simple, almost naive 2D character design. The warm and disarming storytelling is bolstered by the film’s unassuming use of humour. But come to *Robot Dreams* well stocked with tissues: Pablo Berger’s exquisite, bittersweet, Oscar-nominated buddy movie about the bond between a dog and a robot matches Spike Jonze’s *Her* as one of cinema’s most devastating and profound studies of loneliness and the fragility of emotional connections. If any further evidence were needed to support the theory that we are enjoying a new boom time for quality animation, then this is it.

The appealingly clean, uncomplicated character design is based on that of the source material, a graphic novel by American author and illustrator Sara Varon. She has made something of a career from exploring odd-couple relationships: one of her other books, *Bake Sale*, is about the friendship between a cupcake and an aubergine. Another, *Chicken and Cat*, is playfully referenced in *Robot Dreams*, namechecked on the buzzer for the apartment below that of Dog.

Home for Dog is a modest third-floor apartment in New York’s East Village in the 1980s. It’s a solitary existence: the shelves are full of jigsaw puzzles and the freezer is well stocked with microwave macaroni cheese meals for one. But life in 80s New York City is not designed to be experienced solo. Bathed in the borrowed light from his TV screen, Dog slumps on his sofa and plays Pong against himself. Picking listlessly at his cheesy pasta gloop, he scrolls through the television channels for something to distract himself from the happy couple snuggling in the window across the street. And then he sees it: an advertisement for a robot companion, the Amica 2000. Pretty soon, accompanied by a jaunty, optimistic piano and xylophone ditty, Dog assembles his new flat-packed friend.

The bond is instant. Bucket-headed and wide-eyed, Robot approaches the city with a sense of wonder. And through his friend’s hunger for discovery, Dog starts to rediscover New York as a place to be embraced and experienced, rather than watched, wistfully, from his living room window. In a blissful montage set to Earth, Wind & Fire’s *September* (a recurring musical motif, used to increasingly wrenching effect), the buddies scoff down hotdogs from street

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vendors, watch an octopus busker bashing drums on the subway, roller skate together in Central Park. At the end of a fun-packed summer the pair venture to the beach at Coney Island, where Robot flings himself, literally, into the seaside experience.

Then disaster strikes. The saltwater short circuits his power bank and Robot is left, immobile, on the beach. Unable to lift his metal bestie, Dog returns the next day with his toolkit, only to discover that the beach has closed for the season and won't reopen until the following June. Rusting at the edges and exposed to the elements, Robot lies patiently in the sand. When he sleeps, he dreams of reuniting with Dog. The ache of enforced separation is dulled by brief connections - Robot with a family of birds that nest in his armpit; Dog with a cool female Duck, who rides a motor scooter, wears Air Jordans and knows how to fly a kite. But both Robot and Dog are counting the days until they can be reunited again.

There's such tenderness to the storytelling, such empathy and emotional depth, that it broadens the film's potential audience from kids, who will respond to the cute characters and gentle wit, to adolescents and adults, who will recognise the angst and awkwardness of trying to function alone once again. What is perhaps remarkable is that this is Berger's first animated film. The multi-award-winning Spanish director was previously best known for *Blancanieves*, a reimaging of the SnowWhite story set in 1920s Seville, and *Torremolinos 73*, a droll comedy about a struggling encyclopedia salesman who stumbles into the world of adult cinema.

What Berger has created with *Robot Dreams* is not just one of the finest animations of recent years; it's also one of the most persuasive love letters to the city of New York. The time and location are etched in affectionate details into every frame, from the period-specific graffiti to the cultural references (Dog is visited by a trick-or-treating sloth dressed as Freddy Krueger), to the East Village in-jokes (a rented VHS of *The Wizard of Oz* comes from Kim's Video, a now fabled video store that was run from the back of an East Village dry cleaners). It's a city that is vibrantly present in the film's evocative sound and meticulously captured in the background design. But, as Dog and Robot discover, it fully comes to life when it's shared.

Wendy Ide, *The Observer*, 24 March 2024

“*My Robot Friend*, also known by the English title *Robot Dreams*, is an animated film based on the comic of the same name by author Sara Varon. It marks the return to cinema of the Spanish filmmaker Pablo Berger, after an

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absence of six years that began after the premiere of the wonderful *Abracadabrain*, 2017.

Due to the acclaim *My Robot Friend* has received since its premiere, I went to the film with strong expectations, thinking the film would be a unique phenomenon in animated cinema. But I soon realized that it is nothing more than an enormously boring, dormitive, unfunny animated film, which fills the streets of its zootropolis with hollow animals, and stretches the situations of its fable of friendship to the most ridiculous ends, so that within half an hour I had exhausted my quota of patience due to the film's deficiencies. I seriously think that the material could have made into a short film.

The plot is a fictional interpretation of Manhattan, New York, which is populated by animals of various species during the 1980s. The protagonist is Dog, a lonely animal who lives in the confined space of his apartment. Enslaved by consumer life and television images, he decides to buy a box of mechanical parts to build a robot that will be his friend. The formula used by Berger follows to the letter, I suspect, that type of narrative in which the characters are usually shown as simple puppets subordinated to a specific discourse.

On the surface, I believe that it speaks in metaphorical terms about the loneliness and isolation produced by the effects of agitated postmodernism that imprisons human empathy and reduces it to the consumerism of technological objects to find that supposed happiness they sell in commercial advertisements.

Basically, it uses the friendly bond between the gay dog and the trans-robot to respond to a comment aligned with that exacerbated wokism about cultural diversity, the fear of self-acceptance and gender identity numbed by the barriers of social otherness, as well as the dilemmas that arise from the "purchase of company" as a trap of artificial love and emotional dependence. Beneath the calculated innocence and the succession of parallel dreams, it hides all these clichés in a series of childish situations that are repeated over and over again without adding any significant impulse to the plot devices, leaving the hub bub in a predictable inertia that prevents sympathy for the innocent actions of the silent dog and the happy robot.

Everything is schematized in a way that is too clean, colourful, unnecessarily poetic, where more than half of the characters that fill this fabric of simplicity are redundant. In this way, it is easy for me to see the apathy, the inseparable ties that arise between the dog and the robot from walks through the streets of the metropolis; the dances of joy in Central Park; visits to the beach with the barbed wire fence; skating to Earth, Wind & Fire's *September*; the separation

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that forces them to take different paths; contact with different animal stereotypes; the acquisition of other robots to fill the emotional void.

On the technical side, the film is rescued by the animated textures that render in some detail the emblematic places of the eighties city of New York and to point out the existential dichotomies through the distanced spaces, as well as the use of the soundtrack and the diegetic sound of animals which appears among so much silence. This is the other thing, along with the design of those anthropomorphic caricatures that look like the product of an infantile Cartoon Network commercial, that I hope evaporates from my eyes when the credits appear. I think it's the worst movie I've seen from the director of *Snow White*.”

Yasser Medina, *Cinefilia*, 24 February 2024

Translated from the original Spanish by Google Translate.

“There’s sweetness, sadness and charm in this animated tale about the friendship – and possibly more – between a dog and a robot in 1980s New York. It’s a universe entirely populated by anthropomorphised animals; no humans and no dialogue. The director is Pablo Berger, working from a script he cowrote with Sara Varon, adapting her 2007 graphic novel. Their story is laced with comedy, tenderness, loneliness and friendship; in truth, it’s probably a bit too slow for most under-10s. The best thing about it will sail right over pint-sized heads, for sure: the lovingly realised old-school New York, scuzzy and ungentrified, with graffiti and trash, crackling with edge and energy.

In a New York apartment block, Dog spends solitary nights eating ready-meal macaroni for one. (Inside his microwave, thick globs of cheese spit like boiling hot lava; the animation is an absolute delight.) Dog’s lonely days are over when he buys a friendship robot, the Amica 2000. The pair become best pals (though the way they hold hands suggests there might be more to it). Robot’s lust for life is infectious: joyfully watching a busking octopus drumming in the subway; feeling the sand beneath his metal toes at Coney Island. (My favourite image of the movie is a rhino sunbathing in a bikini thong.)

What happens next at the beach explains the title. After paddling in the sea, Robot’s joints rust over; he can’t move. But it’s the final day of the season, and the beach is locked up, off-limits until next spring. So poor Robot lies all winter in the sand, his imagination wandering. And oh what dreams; in one, he pictures himself in *The Wizard of Oz*, with tap-dancing sunflowers right out of a Busby Berkeley routine. Meanwhile, back in the city, Dog tries his doggone best to

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liberate Robot from the beach. Then he pines, and then, slowly ... well, the question arises, when is it OK for the heart to move on?

This is a sweet, fuzzy movie, possibly a little soft-hearted. Still, I dare anyone to watch the final moments without a lump in the throat.

Cath Clarke, *The Guardian*, 19 March 2024

Dorchester Film Society hope that you are enjoying the films we have selected so far. If not, tell us at the AGM on 19 March 2025.

We wish you Season's Greetings and a Happy New Year!