REVIEW

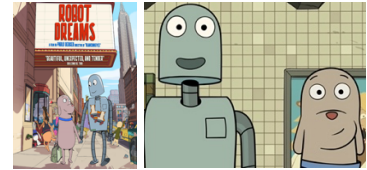## Review of Pablo Berger's *Robot Dreams*

2023, Arcadia/Noodles Production/Les Films du Worso, 102 min

Pete Peterson (Creative Writing Major)
Brigham Young University

Robot Dreams, adapted from Sarah Varon's 2007 graphic novel, is set in 1980s NYC. It follows Dog, a canine longing for companionship, and Robot, the robot he orders from a television ad he sees. Once Robot is assembled, the two are fast friends as Dog shows Robot the ropes of living in the Big City. They watch movies, go to Central Park, and go to the beach.

In fact, this late summer trip to the beach is where the narrative of the film actually begins, as Robot and Dog are separated after a nap on the sand. Robot's joints are so rusted by sea water that he cannot be physically moved, despite Dog's futile efforts to help him. Briefly leaving to try to phone for help, Dog returns to find the beach is closed and he has to wait another year to get Robot home. What follows is a quest to reunite these two best friends. It is a long journey for Robot, who still cannot move but constantly imagines his imminent rescue, and Dog, who has all the resources, yet everything remains just beyond his grasp.

What makes *Robot Dreams* so unique among its contemporary animated features is its attention to detail of 1980s New York City. This manifests itself in the presence of the World Trade Center, as well as Dog's collection of music (true to the time, he has vinyl LPs of the Talking Heads and R.E.M.). Another standout feature of *Robot Dreams* is that it contains no dialogue. Character interactions are conveyed through facial and body language, as well as their grunts and other non-verbal noises. In lesser hands, this approach would be comical and much more suited to a video game, where you can project your own emotions onto the characters. However, Pablo Berger had a clear vision when it came to this film. The animation is so smooth, and the character designs are so dynamic and unique that wordless interaction is sufficient. The viewer becomes wholly invested in the struggle of Dog and Robot, proving that sometimes no words are necessary.

Sharing similarities with *La Tortue Rouge* (Michaël Dudok de Wit, 2016), another film without dialogue, where emotions are conveyed powerfully through sheer human expression, gestures, and attention to detail, *Robot Dreams* may not feature human characters but the tragicomedy touches on essentially human emotions and experiences. Given his critical triumph on the festival circuit and with *Rotten Tomatoes* and *Variety*, it will be interesting to see if Berger decides to follow this success with future animated features.