

BOOK REVIEW

Karel Čapek (ed. Jitka Čejková), *R.U.R. and the Vision of Artificial Life*

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Each year, the UCL Department of Science and Technology Studies chooses a major issue in contemporary society to act as the focus of its core course for first-year undergraduates. Staff from historical, philosophical and sociological traditions bring their respective expertise to bear on the year's 'big problem'. It won't surprise readers to know that recent years have seen us feature AI in the curriculum, and this year chatbots – essentially AI again in a more focused form. Society's current obsession with artificial intelligence has, however, arguably obscured another – older – 'big problem' which concerns the artificial creation of life more generally. Today the fields of artificial life (ALife) and synthetic biology operate somewhat in the shadow of their more Turing-ish disciplinary cousin. The relation between ALife and synthetic biology is contested; broadly speaking, synthetic biology aims to re-create biological *entities* (from the subcellular to the organismic) in novel form, while ALife concerns itself with studying and making *processes* inspired by those of nature (and thus, in a sense, defining life as systems-based).

Karel Čapek, the literary creator of the first 'robot' in 1920, was peeved to have his creation swept up in the craze for metallic gizmo-men, the twentieth century's answer to the apparently thinking automata of the eighteenth century. He was thinking, he later explained of his play *R.U.R.* (Rossum's Universal Robots), 'about biological chemistry': 'The author of the robots would regard it as an act of scientific bad taste if he had brought something to life with brass cogwheels ... the way he imagined it, he created only a new foundation for life, which began to behave like living matter' (p. 266). This, perhaps, sounds more like synthetic biology than ALife, which makes it all the more interesting that Čejková, the editor of this collection, has chosen to make him an intellectual ancestor of the latter, her own field. (The book's contribution by Lana Sinapayen in fact interrogates the way in which 'the science of *R.U.R.* is at odds with the philosophy of current artificial life research' (p. 153)). Even if the fit isn't perfect, it's no surprise that Čejková finds her fellow Czech's classic to be such a fertile public-engagement tool for her research, but still, it made me wonder whether there's a disciplinary turf war somewhere in the background of this book. There are PhDs to be written.

R.U.R. and the Vision of Artificial Life came out of a Czech-language book published to mark the centenary of Čapek's celebrated play. Three years later – a similar lag to the translation of the original play – here is an English version. There are fewer essays than in the Czech edition, selected for their focus on ALife, and a brand new translation of the original play in its entirety.

The translation of the play, by Štěpán Šimek, is a revelation. *R.U.R.* is great to use in teaching themes of modernity, labour, bodies, even animal studies, but the stilted English of Paul Selver's 1923 translation, the most widely adopted version until now, can obscure the zingy humour of the plot, and make heavy weather of the philosophical and political readings of the text. Šimek's rendering is light on its feet; it avoids overtly contemporary idioms and looks like it won't age nearly so badly. Not only this, but also it restores features of the text that Selver had, unbeknownst to at least this English reader, seen fit to alter. Šimek restores a number of passages and returns the structure of the play to the original. He reintroduces the character of Damon (one of the robots); returns 'young Rossum' to the status of nephew, not son, of the robot factory's boss; and tones down Rossum's romantic conquest of the visiting activist, Helena. The book is well worth buying and adding to reading lists on the basis of Šimek's achievement.

The essays that follow the retranslation are a more mixed bag, being the thoughts mostly of scientists trying their hands at philosophy. They ask questions about the differences between humans and machines, the possibility of artificial consciousness, the mind-body problem, likely futures, ethics and so on. They are intelligent and thoughtful but they do not necessarily engage the layers of scholarship that those of us working in HPS and STS contexts might expect. Moreover, despite the proclaimed focus on ALife, many of them edge back into AI. One stand-out essay is the piece by Jana Horáková on the semiotics of the 'robot'. (An expert in new-media art, Horáková is one of a handful of non-scientist contributors). Not only does she give valuable historical depth to the oft-cited fact of Čapek's introduction of the term into English, but she also focuses on the robot as performed upon the stage, rather than as an abstract concept. Hiroki Sayama gives a brief and normative description of ALife and its history (a starting point for that PhD...) and George Musser contributes a brief meditation on the liveliness of machines, potentially intersecting with more formal scholarship on the topic.

Fans of Čapek, and proponents of the possibilities of literature for investigating histories and philosophies of science (I am both of these), should be grateful to Jitka Čejková and Štěpán Šimek for introducing his wonderful work to a new generation.