

“Full of Steam: Work, Agency, and Technological Determinism in Disney’s Tall Tales”

From Watty Piper’s *The Little Engine that Could* to Virginia Lee Burton’s *Mike Mulligan and the Steam Shovel* to myriad stories about *Thomas the Tank Engine*, steam technology plays a surprisingly outsized (and recurring) role in popular children’s popular literature. Steam is also a common element in many stories in the tall tale tradition: John Henry and the steam hammer, Paul Bunyan and the steam saw, Old Stormalong and the steam ship, and Mike Fink and the steam riverboat. In all of these cases, steam is a technology intimately tied to ideas of work in America. As such, examining how steam is deployed as a force of work can illuminate what these stories say about labor, human agency, and technology’s relationship to culture.

In this presentation I examine the role of steam in two Disney animated retellings of stories about Paul Bunyan (1958) and John Henry (2000). Though separated by over 40 years, these two films offer strikingly similar narrative structures. At the center of each is a winner-takes-all contest between the hero and his traditional tool of choice (for Bunyan, the ax; for Henry, the hammer) and a capitalist invention that threatens our hero’s lives and the livelihoods of those they represent. In both cases, the loss is total: steam technology ultimately wins and a previously celebrated lifeway — along with its hero — vanishes.

While in true American fashion these stories celebrate Henry’s and Bunyan’s agency (their skill, efficacy, hard work, and the way they find meaning in their tools), that agency dissolves completely in the face of that other American reality, capitalist innovation. Here steam is not simply a convenient nostalgic technology used to safely explain the past. Instead, I will show that it is put to work in a dangerous technological determinist argument that encourages viewers to acquiesce to the inevitability of automation and their place within a deskilled workforce. In making this case, I advocate for further attention to the ways in which stories for children employ technologies of work.