Theses of the PhD Dissertation

Kin(e)ships:
Cinematic Traces and Transformations of The Human-Canine Bond

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1. The Aims and Subject of the Dissertation

The aim of the dissertation is to map the cinematic traces and transformations of the human–canine bond, that is, to explore how different interactions between dogs and people leave their material-semiotic marks on the representational space of cinema and how films may themselves contribute to shaping the social and cultural perceptions around human–canine relationships. The corpus comprises films spanning various styles, genres, cultural contexts and representational traditions, allowing the study to explore both the common aspects and the stylistic, generic, technological and cultural specificities of portraying human–canine exchanges on the screen. Due to their specific characteristics and the individual features of the portrayed subjects and cultural milieus, each film – in the order of analysis, *Turner & Hooch* (1989, dir. Roger Spottiswoode); *My Dog Tulip* (2009, dir. Sandra and Paul Fierlinger); *Los Reyes* (2018, dir. Iván Osnovikoff and Bettina Perut); *Stray* (2020, dir. Elizabeth Lo); *The Plague Dogs* (1982, dir. Martin Rosen); *Isle of Dogs* (2018, dir. Wes Anderson); *Heart of a Dog* (2015, dir. Laurie Anderson) and *This Darling Life* (2008, dir. Angie Chen) – represents dogs and the people interacting with them differently. However, while the selected films present cultural and formal particularities, together they also suggest that dogs may epitomise the material-semiotic complexity of cinema, where concrete animal presences coexist with abstract elements, irrespective of genre.

Focusing on how cinematic dogs embody the interplay of reality and representation, the dissertation explores how these figures simultaneously shape the cinematic space with their own perceptions and experiences, and how they are shaped by long-standing cultural traditions of canine symbolism. As the historical overview in the introduction suggests, dogs are persistently represented through a dual paradigm: on the one hand, as faithful companions epitomising loyalty, love, and harmony between species, and on the other, as despicable beasts embodying violence, deceit, or abjection. This ambivalence is rooted in the dog's liminal status between human and nonhuman worlds, simultaneously close to people and yet marked by their animal otherness. One of the dissertation's main hypotheses is that cinema inherits and intensifies this oscillation, featuring canine figures that constantly waver between anthropomorphic projection and irreducible creatureliness.

The study starts out from the assumption that no screen dog is ever fully contained by either paradigm: even the most anthropomorphised canine characters and most highly trained dog actors remain shadowed by the animal's wild spirit, which may be occasionally glimpsed through unscripted gestures or instinctive responses. An important proposition in the

dissertation is that these moments, rather than indexing ruptures in the field of representation, in fact signal the hybrid technophenomenological composition of the cinematic (canine) image, which is always part filmic construction and part embodied reality. By tracing this hybridity across the selected films, the dissertation examines how screen dogs both reflect and unsettle hierarchical distinctions between human and animal, nature and culture, fact and fiction.

The dissertation's second main hypothesis, closely related to the above outlined assumptions, is that the films under scrutiny also undermine hierarchical species relations by bearing the traces of human–canine coevolution. In this regard, the study relies on a posthumanist theoretical framework that draws in particular on Donna Haraway's notion of companion species and Giorgio Agamben's critique of the anthropological machine. Both thinkers question the humanist tradition of defining "the human" through opposition to "the animal": while Haraway emphasises the entanglement and co-constitution of species, Agamben exposes how the very mechanisms used to uphold human superiority continually reveal the artificiality of the divide. Their insights thus help unsettle the presumed schism and hierarchy between humans and animals by showing that what has been long considered uniquely human is in fact inseparable from shared creaturely realities. From this posthumanist perspective, dogs cannot be regarded as pure animals either but come to be perceived as hybrid beings shaped by millennia of shared histories with humans. Similarly to their real-life counterparts, cinematic canines bear the traces of human-canine coevolution, which therefore expose the constructedness of the distinctions Western humanism has drawn between "man" and "animal."

One of the aims of the analyses is to shed light on how the films make these artificial boundaries visible by highlighting aspects of human–canine entanglement and revealing the zone of indifference at the centre of the anthropological machine, where the borderlines between the human and the animal are blurred. The filmic depiction of encounters between dogs and people often stages such moments: affective bonding, interspecies play, (in)voluntary mimicry, shared suffering, violence, as well as the above-mentioned unscripted gestures, which often expose how impulses considered "animal" persist within humans. In this light, the dissertation sets out to examine both affirmative depictions of multispecies companionship (mainly – but not exclusively – the films examined in the first chapter, which focuses on representations of interspecies love) and those in which the human–canine bond becomes threatening (most prominently, the films discussed in chapter two, examining portrayals of multispecies vulnerability and violence), thereby aiming to expose the instability of species boundaries from multiple perspectives.

Building on posthumanist and animal studies discourses, the study further situates cinematic canines within broader debates about interspecies relationality. Rather than viewing species as separate and autonomous, posthumanist thought underscores the shared, symbiotic, and hybrid nature of existence. Concepts such as "humanimal" – coined by Haraway and employed as part of the dissertation's terminology used to describe both dogs and people – foreground this entanglement by stressing that bodies, behaviours, and worlds are always shaped through interspecies encounters. In this sense, humans and dogs emerge through mutual domestication and feralisation, each encounter leaving material and affective traces on both partners. The dissertation aims to demonstrate that cinema, as a medium that registers creaturely presences, can make interspecies entanglements especially perceptible.

Furthermore, the employed posthumanist perspective highlights not only evolutionary histories but also the everyday intersubjective exchanges between people and companion dogs. In this regard, the dissertation also draws on ethological studies on the physiological effects of human–dog interactions, which show how companionship shapes both species, underscoring the ongoing co-constitution of human and canine life. These embodied relatings become central in cinematic depictions, where gestures, gazes, and affects exchanged across species lines carry both symbolic and creaturely weight. The dissertation therefore explores how films register these encounters as sites of both meaning and material exchange, challenging anthropocentric systems and opening possibilities for reimagining human–animal relations. By tracing such filmic inscriptions of coevolution and continued co-shaping in the present, the study ultimately aims to contribute to a poetics and politics of human–canine relationality in cinema.

At the same time, while the posthumanist approaches employed in the dissertation are valuable tools for challenging anthropocentric notions and practices, it is also important to note that these perspectives emerge largely from Euro-American intellectual traditions and often carry with them universalist assumptions, white middle-class sensibilities, and Western cultural reference points. It is recognised and reflected on that such orientations may not fully capture the ways in which people from other sociocultural contexts conceptualise or experience relations with dogs, nor do they account for the plurality of interspecies histories and practices beyond the West. Acknowledging these limitations is essential not only for situating the study within its own epistemological lineage, but also for recognising that the human–animal interrelatedness theorised in the dissertation is as culturally and historically specific as the relationships portrayed in the analysed films.

In a certain sense, the stance taken in the study also diverges from such posthumanist approaches, for example the one propagated by Matthew Calarco, that stress an onto-politics of

indistinction, that is, which aim for setting aside the traditional human–animal divide altogether rather than refining, diversifying, and complicating the notion of difference. The dissertation recognises that, despite the continuities and connections between human and nonhuman animals, the latter retain essential differences, a certain degree of unknowability, and an element of strangeness. As already suggested, the sense of the uncanny can be particularly powerful in our relations with dogs because their exceptional state of familiarity collides with the more primal and instinctive aspects of their nature. Since the oscillation between *canis familiaris* and *canis unfamiliaris* also seems to seep into the cinematic representations of dogs, the dissertation construes the depictions of human–canine interrelatedness most importantly through Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of "strange kinship," a concept he develops in *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France* (1957-1960), which accounts for the contiguities between human and animal lives while also acknowledging the differences between them. This notion allows for exploring the cinematic portrayals of dogs from a relational perspective without the risk of overemphasising the connections or falsely assuming a homogeneity between human and nonhuman lifeforms. A marked aim of the dissertation is to address the sense of strangeness permeating the representations of our non-genealogical kinships with dogs due to the latter's strong oscillation between familiarity and unfamiliarity.

While the notion of "strange kinship" also allows the dissertation to reflect on the systemic power relations governing interspecies relations – an aspect that, albeit in different contexts, appears in all films selected for analysis –, it also seeks to trace the heterotopic potentialities of our everyday lives with dogs, where moments of connection alternating with moments of disconnection create openings for alternative ways of being together. To clarify, the aim is not to diminish the importance of inequalities within multispecies companionship, but to recognise that such structural imbalances coexist with, and are sometimes challenged by, the lived realities shared with dogs, whose radically different perceptions and behaviours continuously challenge our fixed, anthropocentric views of the world. The films examined in the dissertation tap into both the intimacies and strangeness of our everyday interactions with dogs, highlighting how these encounters generate shifting constellations of affect, perception, and embodiment that question taken-for-granted humanist perspectives. Consequently, the represented relations are also theorised, besides the notion of "strange kinship," through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *assemblages*: temporary, heterogeneous configurations in which diverse agencies interact without erasing each other's differences.

The last but most important hypothesis of the dissertation is that cinema itself is part of these multispecies assemblages. On the one hand, with its capacity to capture material reality

and evoke embodied experiences, film provides a unique medium for representing the lived entanglements between humans and dogs, whose encounters leave their marks – an overlay of creaturely sensoria – on the flesh of cinema. Films like *The Truffle Hunters* (2020, dir. Michael Dweck and Gregory Kershaw), discussed in the introduction, illustrate this phenomenon by immersing viewers in multispecies cartographies shaped simultaneously by human memory and canine perception, thereby transforming the screen itself into a heterotopic space co-created by humans, dogs, and technology. Through techniques such as canine-mounted cameras, the film destabilises the hierarchy of the senses, integrating smell, movement, and sound into cinematic perception and showing how embodied exchanges between species impress themselves both on lived environments and on the medium of film.

On the other hand, as the example of *The Truffle Hunters* illustrates, cinematic representations are not simply sites where the inter-relatings between humans and dogs play out but, using the strategies within their means, they can also facilitate relational encounters. Recognising this, the dissertation proposes that cinema can be considered as an active agent in the assemblages of dogs and humans. This formation is referred to throughout as the anthrokynematic assemblage, a neologism that combines the Greek word for human and the etymologically similar roots of the words *dog* (κύων [kuōn]), *doglike/canine* (κυνικός [kunikos]), and *cinema* (from κίνημα [kinēma], meaning movement, hence the phrase moving image). This concept is intended to imply that visual technologies such as cinema are important parts of concrete humanimal kinships, since they allow us to open toward, relate to, and, by doing so, engage in generative becomings-with other-than-human creatures.

The notion of the anthrokynematic assemblage acknowledges how films often exert their own effects on the human–canine bond. For example, as the historical overview of canine representations in the introduction demonstrates, the filmic projections of unconditional love and loyalty on dogs not only result in anthropocentric fictions with human interests, intentions, and meanings in the centre of the portrayed universe, but may also lead to unrealistic expectations towards dogs in reality. At the other end of the spectrum, films projecting humanity's fears and anxieties onto canine figures often contribute to perpetuating negative stereotypes, discrimination, and violence against dogs. The films constituting the corpus of the study offer more nuanced views, highlighting the ambiguities inherent even in the most intimate human–canine relationships (apparent in *Turner & Hooch* and *My Dog Tulip*, analysed in the first chapter), the potentially empowering aspects of even the most vulnerable or biopolitically fraught dynamics involving people and dogs (foregrounded in *Stray*, *Los Reyes*, *The Plague Dogs* and *Isle of Dogs*, analysed in the second chapter) and the hybridisation of creaturely

realities and techno-cultural constructions even in what seem to be either exclusively fictional (e.g. *Turner & Hooch*) or documentary portrayals (e.g. *Stray*, *Los Reyes*, *Heart of a Dog*, *This Darling Life*). In other words, the selected films not only reflect but also reinforce the ambivalent mixture of intimacy and alterity characterising our relationships with dogs, thereby contributing to rather than simplifying the complexities of the human–canine bond.

2. An Outline of the Employed Methods

The dissertation offers a close reading of the representational techniques and cinematic technologies employed by the selected films in the attempt at mapping the intimate yet strange, constantly evolving configurations between humans, canines, and cinema. In exploring how the films incorporate the embodied realities of humans and dogs, including the species-specific experiences of the latter, the dissertation heavily draws on the creature-conscious interpretational methods provided by Jonathan Burt's and Anat Pick's approaches to film animals. While acknowledging that film animals are often burdened with metaphorical significance, Burt emphasises that they also exceed these associations, as the cinematic image always carries traces of the material, embodied creature. Similarly, Pick argues that – while literary texts have techniques of their own – due to its immediacy and embeddedness in material reality, cinema is especially capable of evoking embodied states and processes, which Pick calls cinema's "corporeal zoomorphic quality" (*Creaturely Poetics* 106). In this view, cinema is not just a cultural apparatus that reinforces the hierarchical distinction of humans and animals through, for instance, the objectification of the latter before the "human gaze." It can also act as a zoomorphic space that transforms all living beings, including people, into creatures, thereby highlighting aspects of human–animal continuity. From this perspective, the cinematic representation of human and canine bodies is not completely different; although each is, of course, conditioned by distinct, historically developed technical, narrative and other strategies (e.g. particular story types, casting, training/rehearsing methods, makeup, camera angles, compositions and editing), some of which are mentioned at relevant points in the analyses, they all appear as material beings subjected simultaneously to representational mechanisms and the contingencies of biological life that cinema is particularly able to incorporate into its own world.

While in *Creaturely Poetics*, Pick focuses on cinema's capacity to foreground shared creaturely conditions, in "Animal Life and the Cinematic *Umwelt*," she suggests that films can also feature species-specific perceptions, thereby becoming capable of questioning the human–animal divide not only in terms of embodiment but also in terms of subjectivity, that is, by

showing the different yet equally meaningful interactions that animals carry out with their environments. In this respect, Pick draws on Estonian-German biologist Jakob von Uexküll's concept of *Umwelten*, which refers to the lifeworlds created by all creatures on earth, albeit depending on their own sensorial capacities. In other words, each animal carves its own subjective reality out of the larger, objective environment, a microcosm made up of objects and signs that are meaningful to it. As Alexandra Horowitz – a researcher specialised in canine cognition – highlights, while human sensory experience is dominated by sight, a dog's *Umwelt* is predominantly a world of smells, which carry much more meaning and serve more diverse functions than they do in our lives. Combining Uexküll's *Umwelt*-theory with Bazinian realism, Pick suggests that films can foreground distinct creaturely realities, thereby enabling viewers to come into contact with the perceptual, behavioural and ontological specificities of life.

While Bazin reserves the notion of zoomorphic realism to live-action films, Pick asserts that the capacity of engaging with creaturely realities is not limited to a particular cinematic practice but emerges through visualising the material conditions of life cinematically. In this sense, even animation films – normally associated with artifice and anthropomorphism – can foreground both shared and subjective aspects of the material world by, as Pick proposes, using tools within their means in creative, creature-conscious ways. Similarly to Burt, Pick thus emphasises that regardless of the style or genre of the film in which they appear, animals are always more than spectral objects exposed to the representational mechanisms of cinema; in fact, both researchers underline the medium's inherent hybridisation of technological artifice and phenomenological reality. Burt's and Pick's theories provide the foundations of the dissertation's main approach towards screen dogs, who are perceived throughout the dissertation as complex combinations of anthropogenic representation and creaturely reality. Consequently, each analysis aims to tease out the traces of both shared and species-specific creaturely experiences, exploring how cinematic language can simultaneously bring about connections and clashes between human and canine worlds, thereby reflecting and reinforcing the ambiguous mixture of familiarity and unfamiliarity at the heart of the human–canine bond.

Besides the creature-conscious interpretational methods provided by Burt's and Pick's approaches, the dissertation also employs phenomenological film theories, most importantly, those of Vivian Sobchack and Jennifer Barker, which help detect the effects of canine presences, perceptions, and expressions on both the human subject and the flesh of cinema without assuming an over-identification or assimilation of different creaturely sensoria. While tracing the subjective phenomenological experiences of dogs is an aspiration running through the entire dissertation, Sobchack's and Barker's theoretical insights are called upon specifically

in chapter two, which is dedicated to exploring the cinematic portrayals of creaturely vulnerabilities. This chapter examines not only how canine bodies leave their traces on filmic bodies but also how the latter – through their multisensory qualities, stressed by phenomenological film theory – also transfuse those creaturely experiences (back) to the viewer's world. This process is an important aspect of how the analysed films confront the spectator with the facts of human–animal continuity not only on but also vis-à-vis the screen. In general terms, the use of phenomenological film theories aids the exploration of how the analysed films carry the traces of the strangeness inherent in human–canine kinships.

3. Chapter Outlines and Results

Hoping to highlight the trans-generic hybridity of cinematic dog representations, the range of the analyses from a mainstream Hollywood production to realist and art films is intended to show that even the most "traditional" representational orders contain creaturely elements and, vice versa, even documentaries and aesthetically "radical" films include anthropocentric tendencies. Apart from this non-teleological logic, the order of the main chapters loosely follows the common course of a person and a dog's shared life in a chronological-thematic sense, beginning with representations that record the formulation of co-constitutive ties and ending with films portraying how these become undone by the pet's untimely death. By mirroring this life course, the dissertation's structure reflects both posthumanist notions of interspecies entanglement and human(ist) tendencies toward narrativisation, anthropomorphisation, and sense-making, thereby, in a sense, also embodying the complexity of our relationships with dogs – kinships shaped simultaneously by canine agency, the shifting flows of multispecies conviviality, and the inevitable framing of the human perspective.

The analyses begin with the discussion of a mainstream Hollywood production, the 1989 buddy cop-dog movie *Turner & Hooch*, which dramatises the complex, often abrasive feelings that characterise the affective bond between people and their dogs, thereby providing a thematic transition from the introduction – theorising the fluidity of human–canine relations in general – to the first chapter, which explores representations of interspecies love particularly between people and companion dogs. Furthermore, *Turner & Hooch* confirms the assumption that the creaturely side of dogs is captured not only by documentaries and realist depictions but is also present in such conventional representational forms as classical narrative cinema, which otherwise oversaturates the appearances of screen dogs with the constructions of cuteness or, conversely, monstrosity, as well as the abstract meanings of unconditional loyalty or, again

depending on the genre, uncleanliness, unpredictability, and moral corruptibility. The analysis of *Turner & Hooch* therefore both sets up the thematic arc of the dissertation and substantiates the hypothesis that all cinematic canines are essentially hybrid entities, mixing constructions and creaturely realities.

Thematically, the first chapter, "Strange Love Affairs," focuses on cinematic enactments of what Haraway refers to as "becoming-with-companions" through gestures of love across species lines. Since the two films selected for analysis – *Turner & Hooch* and *My Dog Tulip* – represent very different styles, genres, and cultural contexts, the chapter offers a comparative analysis of the representational strategies used by each to evoke the specific kind of affective bonding that arises between people and dogs, a process where the partners become intimate in both emotional and bodily terms but still remain strangers to each other. Although the uncanny element is generally part of our relationships with dogs, the first chapter examines how this strangeness manifests itself in the love affairs emerging between people and dogs in the private sphere of the home. Closely connected to the films' poetic qualities, the chapter also explores the political implications of representing interspecies intimacy, a phenomenon approached through – among others – Dominik Pettman's concept of "creaturely love," which helps identify and appreciate the subversive forces born out of the queer human–canine romances.

The second chapter, "Creaturely Vulnerabilities," examines how the states of embodiment – theorised through Pick's concept of "creatureliness" – shared by humans and dogs hold potential powers to challenge anthropocentric ideologies and practices of exclusion. This theme is explored through two documentaries, *Los Reyes* and *Stray*, portraying the parallel precariousness of urban stray dogs and marginalised human groups; and two animation films, *The Plague Dogs* and *Isle of Dogs*, which problematise the violent reactions to canine-borne zoonotic diseases. Drawing on the biopolitical theories of Giorgio Agamben, Zygmunt Bauman, and Judith Butler, the chapter explores how the analysed films explore the mechanisms that transform politically, legally, ethically valuable lives into disposable lives, only to reveal the inherent connections between humans and animals, humanity and animality, self and other, individual and community. Providing different versions of a poetics of creaturely vulnerability, which highlights the fragility of the excluded subjects and the violence of the perpetrators, the four films outline the need for an alternative biopolitics and ethics where all lives are treated with respect and dignity, irrespective of species identity.

In this regard, the films analysed in the second chapter project views similar to those represented by the works dissected in the last main chapter, "Cinematic Paw Prints," which

focuses on two dog mourning documentaries: *Heart of a Dog* and *This Darling Life*. Both films express a deep sense of loss for canine companions, thereby questioning the ambiguous status of pets' grievability and, by extension, the idea of the human–animal divide. Chen's work offers a particularly sensitive and anthropologically informed representation of animal death, carefully attending to the lived realities of the dogs and their human partners, and capturing grief in ways that foreground the intersubjective and interspecies dimensions of mourning. In contrast, *Heart of a Dog*, despite its aesthetic originality, appears less as a reflection on the death of the filmmaker's dog Lolabelle than as an aestheticised overflow of the implied author's mind, in which the grief for the dog is only one of several elements in a broader personal collage, paradoxically giving centre-stage to the human self rather than to the human–canine relationship. By comparing and contrasting *Heart of a Dog* and *This Darling Life*, the chapter thus reinforces one of the dissertation's key arguments: that all cinematic dog representations are marked by hybridity, with creaturely elements surfacing even in mainstream works, while even formally "radical" films may be informed by anthropocentric tendencies.

The dissertation ends with a coda revolving around an analysis of *Space Dogs* (dir. Elsa Kremser and Levin Peter), a 2019 documentary that records the lives of street dogs in present-day Moscow, emphasising the mysteriousness of the animals' perceptions, experiences, and actions, thereby ensuring that their phenomenal worlds remain inaccessible to and uncontrollable by both the filming apparatus and the human viewer. In other words, the study ends with the discussion of a film that renders the portrayed dogs into elusive shadows, entities living in a parallel, to us only partially perceptible universe. Yet, as the analysis reveals, not even this creature-conscious documentary is free from abstraction and anthropomorphisation. The discussion of *Space Dogs* thus confirms the hypothesis that all filmic representations of human–canine kinships emerge through multiple material-semiotic mechanisms, including both the incorporation of creaturely realities and the projection of abstract notions on the animal.

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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (1)

1. **László, B.**: Kutyák a hollywoodi filmes konstrukciók küszöbén.
In: Tanulmányok az ember és állat kapcsolat értelmezéséhez I. Szerk.: Lovas Kiss Antal, Debreceni Egyetem, Antrozoológiai kutatócsoport, Debrecen, 144-160, 2023, (Antrozoológia könyvek ; 1) ISBN: 9789634905264

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2. **László, B.**: Introduction: Multispecies Perspectives, Communities and Ethics.
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